

Poets of the Great War

Wilfred Owen • Siegfried Sassoon • Isaac Rosenberg
Richard Aldington • Edmund Blunden • Edward Thomas
Rupert Brooke • and many others

POETRY

Read by **Michael Maloney • Jasper Britton**
Michael Sheen • Sarah Woodward



ANTICIPATION

- | | | |
|------------|--|------|
| [1] | Rupert Brooke (1887-1915): The Soldier* | 1:33 |
| | A classic statement of patriotic idealism which perhaps reveals the fact that the poet never experienced the horrors of the Western Front. | |
| [2] | Edward Thomas (1878-1917): This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong# | 1:49 |
| | A more subtle treatment of ideals – Thomas already sees the falseness of unthinking nationalism in his hatred of one fat patriot – his father. | |
| [3] | Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918): The 'Dead Heroes'* | 1:17 |
| | An ecstatic celebration of martyrdom – very different from his later poems. | |
| [4] | Edward Thomas: There Was a Time* | 1:06 |
| | Thomas was almost forty when he went on active service, and this poem in part reflects this fact. | |
| [5] | Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967): The Kiss# | 0:48 |
| | A disturbing celebration of the power of the bullet and the bayonet: is the poet using irony? | |
| [6] | Julian Grenfell (1888-1915): Into Battle* | 2:16 |
| | The poet looks forward with passionate fatalism to the coming battle. | |
| [7] | Charles Sorley (1895-1915): All the Hills and Vales Along# | 2:39 |
| | 'So be merry, so be dead': the poet seems to rejoice at the prospect of a sacrificial death. | |

THE TRENCHES

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|-------------|---|------|
| [8] | Wilfred Owen (1893-1918): Exposure* | 3:35 |
| | Owen begins to question the purpose and meaning of the suffering war demands of its participants. | |
| [9] | Isaac Rosenberg: Louse Hunting# | 1:10 |
| | The poet's training as an artist is evident in the bold strokes with which he paints this frantic scene of trench life. | |
| [10] | Richard Aldington (1892-1962): Trench Idyll# | 1:36 |
| | The ironic title prepares us for a grimly understated anecdote. | |
| [11] | Isaac Rosenberg: Break of Day in the Trenches* | 1:19 |
| | The rat glimpsed by the poet might wonder at what he sees man doing to his fellow-men. | |
| [12] | Siegfried Sassoon: The Redeemer# | 2:52 |
| | Men suffer, Christ-like, in a cause which Sassoon still describes as valid. | |

BATTLE

- [13] **Robert Nichols (1893-1944):
Battery Moving up to New Position from Rest Camp: Dawn*** 4:17
The writer pleads that the worshipping congregation will pray for the soldiers who pass by.
- [14] **Richard Aldington: Bombardment#** 0:53
The serenity of the sky is incomprehensible to men who have been through the hell of a prolonged bombardment.
- [15] **Wilfred Owen: The Chances•** 1:00
Owen borrows Sassoon's colloquial style for this evaluation of a soldier's chances of survival.
- [16] **Wilfred Owen: Spring Offensive*** 3:05
The poet wonders why men who have come through the horrors of battle unscathed are unable to speak of their comrades who were less fortunate.
- [17] **Wilfred Owen: The Sentry#** 2:24
A graphic and shocking story, closely based on an experience Owen also described in a letter home.
- [18] **Siegfried Sassoon: Counter-Attack•** 4:14
A fast-moving, vividly concrete account of a failed counter-attack.

THE DEAD

- [19] **Robert Nichols: Casualty#** 2:19
How can the poet help the wounded man whom he pities?
- [20] **Wilfred Owen: Anthem for Doomed Youth*** 1:00
Traditional funeral rites will no longer serve to mark the passing of those 'who die as cattle': only the personal memories of those left behind have meaning.
- [21] **Charles Sorley: When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead#** 1:02
The dead should not be sentimentalised.
- [22] **Isaac Rosenberg: The Dying Soldier#** 0:47
England seems unable to help its 'dying sons'.
- [23] **Edward Thomas: A Private•** 0:42
The grave of 'this ploughman' is unknown.
- [24] **Wilfred Owen: Futility†** 0:53
What meaning can the gift of life bear if man destroys man?

25	Richard Aldington: Soliloquy 1 & 2*	1:37
	Two contrasting views of the dead. 1: Veterans are hardened to the sight of 'carriion'. 2: Dead men may have a certain beauty.	
26	Robert Graves (1895-1985): Sergeant-Major Money#	1:25
	A brutal disciplinarian suffers the consequences of his policy.	
27	Siegfried Sassoon: Suicide in the Trenches#	0:51
	War makes intolerable demands.	
28	Siegfried Sassoon: The Hero•	1:15
	The truth of war is more than a bereaved mother would be able to bear: her 'heroic' son was in fact a 'cold-footed, useless swine'.	
29	Isaac Rosenberg: Dead Man's Dump*	4:23
	Earth seems to welcome back her decaying sons.	
30	Wilfred Owen: Strange Meeting#	3:04
	The poet meets his German counterpart, his 'doppelganger' perhaps, whose visionary power to 'tell the truth' and save the world will never now be expressed.	
31	Rupert Brooke: The Dead*	1:55
	Brooke softens the impact of death.	
PROTEST		
32	Wilfred Owen: Dulce et Decorum Est•	3:12
	Owen forces his 'friend' Jessie Pope (a writer of crudely patriotic poems) to see the consequences of her propaganda.	
33	Siegfried Sassoon: Base Details*	0:46
	The poet attacks the comfortable senior officers who 'speed glum heroes up the line to death'.	
34	Siegfried Sassoon: The General#	0:31
	The general – a 'cheery old card' – does not have to suffer the terrible results of his incompetence.	
35	Mary Postgate Cole: The Veteran†	0:53
	The writer redefines our concept of a 'veteran'.	
36	Edmund Blunden (1896-1974): Concert Party – Busseboom•	1:23
	After the entertainment, the soldiers become aware of 'another matinee' – a bombardment to the south, with sound and music...	

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- 37 Arthur Graeme West (1891-1917): God! How I Hate You#** 2:10
A furious attack on those who idealise the war.
- 38 Edith Sitwell (1887-1964): The Dancers†** 1:34
The poet comments bitterly on the continuation of social life at home while the troops are dying at the front.

PASTORAL

- 39 Laurence Binyon (1869-1943): Fetching the Wounded#** 5:16
Some wounded French soldiers are treated by British Red Cross volunteers.
- 40 Richard Aldington: Field Manoeuvres*** 1:26
The soldier neglects his offensive duty, held in thrall by the beauty of his surroundings.
- 41 Isaac Rosenberg: Returning, We Hear the Larks#** 1:07
Instead of the expected death raining from the skies, 'song only dropped'.
- 42 Rose Macaulay (1881-1958): Picnic†** 2:44
The poet reflects on the protected status of those who remain at home.
- 43 Edmund Blunden: The Sentry's Mistake•** 1:34
The sentry treats his guard duty more as the task of a gamekeeper than a soldier.
- 44 Edward Thomas: As the Team's Head Brass•#** 2:11
England seems lonely in the absence of its fighting sons, but at least the ploughing and the lovers suggest continuity.
- 45 May Sinclair: Field Ambulances In Retreat†** 2:18
The poet finds a terrible beauty in the emergencies of war.
- 46 Edmund Blunden: The Zonnebeke Road*** 2:54
The picture of a landscape dreadfully transformed by war.

LOVED ONES

- 47 Herbert Read (1893-1968): My Company*** 3:45
The intense bond which has formed between an officer and his men is described.
- 48 Edward Thomas: The Sun Used to Shine*** 1:45
Thomas recalls the conversations he enjoyed with fellow-poet Robert Frost when war seemed 'remote'.

49	Edith Nesbit (1858-1924): Spring in War-Time†	0:52
	Spring will never be the same now that her beloved will not be there to share it.	
50	Ivor Gurney (1890-1937): To His Love•	0:57
	The poet remembers 'his love' in terms of the places they knew.	
51	Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1965): Easter Monday†	1:20
	Written in memory of Edward Thomas, the poem focuses on the letters he will never now receive.	

AFTERWARDS

52	Robert Graves: Two Fusiliers#	1:41
	Two comrades express their bond in terms of the filth and misery of war.	
53	Siegfried Sassoon: Everyone Sang*	0:52
	An ecstatic celebration of the war's end.	
54	Vera Brittain: The Lament of the Demobilized†	0:53
	How can the war's sacrifices be justified?	
55	Edmund Blunden (1893-1970): Can You Remember?#	1:10
	The poet muses on the different ways in which he remembers the war, years later.	
56	Richard Aldington: Epilogue to Death of a Hero*	2:11
	Veterans recall the war 'eleven years after the fall of Troy', but find that the younger generation have no interest in an old quarrel.	
57	Ezra Pound (1885-1972): Extract from Hugh Selwyn Mauberley•	2:12
	The poet looks at the war with a jaundiced eye – 'a war fought for an old bitch gone in the teeth,/ For a botched civilization'	
58	Wilfrid Wilson Gibson (1878-1962): Lament#	0:40
	For those who have served and survived, beauty and happiness inevitably suggest 'the heart-break in the heart of things'.	
59	Walter de la Mare (1873-1956): Peace*	1:07
	The 'bright dews' of a summer night are set against the 'bloody sweat' of the soldiers' sacrifice.	
60	Osbert Sitwell (1892-1969): The Next War*	1:45
	A bitterly ironic attack on 'the kindly old gentlemen' who send 'brave lads' to death.	

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- 61 **Thomas Hardy (1840-1928): In Time of the Breaking of Nations** • 0:47
The unemphatic landscape bears witness to hope for the future: the harrowing of the fields and the pair of lovers. (Compare Thomas's *As the Team's Head Brass*.)
- 62 **Laurence Binyon: For the Fallen*** 4:31
Those of England's 'children' who died in the war will always be remembered.

Total time on CDs 1-2: 1:52:21

*** Read by Michael Maloney • Read by Jasper Britton**
Read by Michael Sheen † Read by Sarah Woodward

Poets of the Great War

It is perhaps ironic that a period of such intense suffering and destruction as the Great War should have produced such a remarkable body of great writing – writing that has helped to change the way people think of armed conflict, and to diminish (though not entirely destroy) the myth of war as glamorous and heroic.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, British writers were little different from their compatriots in the excitement they felt – ‘Now God be thanked who has matched us with His hour’, wrote Rupert Brooke, and even poets like Sassoon and Owen, who were later to be so savage in their condemnation began by expressing an equally passionate idealism – one of Sassoon’s earlier responses is entitled *Absolution*. The sense of religious fervour suggested by that title did not last very long, as the fighting men began to realise that trench warfare – a war of attrition – could hardly be quickly concluded, and left little scope for glory.

These poets had grown up in a tradition even then characterised as ‘Georgian’ – a mode of writing which laid stress on a lyrical and pastoral tenderness set in well-crafted

but unadventurous forms. What happens to the lyrical impulse is one of the most interesting aspects of First World War poetry: Edmund Blunden, for instance, is often compelled to a kind of inverted pastoral, as in *The Zonnebeke Road*:

‘The wretched wire before the village line
Rattles like rusty brambles or dead bine,
And then the daylight oozes into dun;
Black pillars, those are trees where
roadways run.’

Something similar happens in Wilfred Owen’s *Exposure*, where the men’s frozen dreaming transmutes the snowflakes into poignant memories of Spring:

‘We cringe in holes, back on forgotten
dreams, and stare,
snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we
drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where
the blackbird fusses.
Is it that we are dying?’

Edward Thomas, on the other hand, retains much of the outward form of pastoral and, writing in a deceptively simple, conversational style, exposes through suggestive contrast the poignant losses of war:

'Only two teams work on the farm this year.

One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in
March,

The very night of the blizzard, too...'

As the Team's Head Brass

The experience of war, in other words,
forges a new poetic, whether it be the
Imagist sparseness and flexibility of Richard
Alington's *Trench Idyll*:

'The worst of all was

They fell to pieces at a touch.

Thank God we couldn't see their faces;

They had gas helmets on.'

– or the visionary intensity of Owen, with his
disturbing half-rhymes and ability to set the
concretely immediate in a context which on
occasions approaches the epic, as in *Strange
Meeting*:

'It seemed that out of battle I escaped

Down some profound dull tunnel, long
since scooped

Through granites which titanic wars
had groined...'

Sassoon, to an extent Owen's mentor but
perhaps not ultimately his equal, developed
a line in devastating ironic realism, where a
savage anger is resolved into telescoped
brevity – poems like *The General* and *Base*

Details occupy as few as seven or ten
lines each.

Isaac Rosenberg still perhaps awaits the
recognition he deserves for his extraordinary
originality. His uncompromising style is
modernist in its suppressed lyricism and
sharpness of focus, his tone by turns tender
and ironic:

'Droll rat, they would shoot you if
they knew

You cosmopolitan sympathies.

Now you have touched this English hand

You will do the same to a German...'

The contribution made by women writers
has only quite recently begun to be
appreciated. Women were involved in the
war as nurses and ambulance drivers, as well
as having to endure the waiting at home for
news of loved ones, and both these aspects
are represented in this selection. If their
poetry lacks the urgent directness of the
men's, this is hardly surprising – the tone is
more usually pastoral and elegiac, as in Edith
Nesbit's *Spring in War-Time*:

'Now the sprinkled blackthorn snow
Lies along the lovers' lane

Where last year we used to go –

Where we shall not go again.'

The themes of these poets, then, given
their overriding need to tell 'the truth

untold,/ The pity of war, the pity war distilled', inevitably focus on despair, death, mutilation both physical and mental, the saving strength of comradeship – and, crucially, protest, ranging from Owen's agonised cry:

'O what made fatuous sunbeams toil

To break earth's sleep at all?' *Futility*

to Sassoon's bluntly satirical one-liners:

'– But he did for them both by his plan of attack.' *The General*

I have attempted to suggest something of the ways in which the writers dealt with these and other themes by dividing the poems into sections: Anticipation, The Trenches, Battle, The Dead, Protest, Pastoral, Loved Ones and Afterwards (see track listing, pages 2-7).

Notes by Perry Keenlyside

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Michael Maloney has worked extensively for the RSC, the Royal National Theatre, and in the West End, taking leading roles such as Romeo, Prince Hal in *Henry IV Parts 1 & 2*, *Peer Gynt* and *Hamlet*. He is also active in film, and is known for his roles in *Truly, Madly, Deeply* and Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*, *Henry V* and *In the Bleak Midwinter*.



Jasper Britton took the lead in the Regents Park Open Air Theatre production of *Richard III* and has also worked for the Royal National Theatre and the RSC. His television appearances include *The Bill* and *Peak Practice*. He also reads *Treasure Island* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Michael Sheen has appeared at Manchester's Royal Exchange in *Look Back In Anger* and *Romeo and Juliet*, in London's West End in *Peer Gynt*, *Moonlight* and *Ends of the Earth*. He also directed and starred in *The Dresser* and has appeared in the films *Mary Reilly* and *Othello*. He also reads Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Sarah Woodward joined the RSC after leaving RADA and has since appeared in many Shakespearean roles including Juliet. Other theatre credits include *The Sea* and *Kean*, directed by Sam Mendes, as well as the applauded Royal National Theatre production of *Wild Oats*. She also reads *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Great Narrative Poems of the Romantic Age* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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'The truth untold,/ The pity of war, the pity war distilled...'

Here are the extraordinary writings of a generation who fought through a war of unprecedented destructive power, and who had to find new voices to express the horror of what they discovered. The great names – Owen, Sassoon – are fully represented, but there are also many poems by lesser-known or unexpected figures, ranging from serving soldiers like Isaac Rosenberg and Richard Aldington to women such as Edith Nesbit and Vera Brittain. The poems are arranged by theme to give a sense of how the writers' feelings and attitudes evolved.

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