for chat club Clark Master April 2016 Extra copy

Elegy for a Generation

As the 20th Century approached, there was a feeling among Europeans born in the 1880's and 1890's that they were on the eve of enormous change. Societal values and the structure of their lives were being eroded by influences such as the rise of Socialism and class tensions. Many felt that they were about to witness the dawn of a new and better age. Some who felt trapped by the dullness of their lives welcomed the adventure of the unknown, including conflict and war. In the words of the English poet Rupert Brooke, "Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour."

In the same vein is his well-known poem written in 1914, entitled "The Soldier."

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Have, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness;
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Brooke died of illness on his way to Gallipoli in 1915 and was buried on the Greek island of Skyros.

The poet Philip Larkin captured the innocence of the time as men enlisted for the army in his poem "MCMXIV."

Those long uneven lines
Standing as patiently
As if they were stretched outside
The Oval or Villa Park,
The crowns of hats, the sun
On moustached archaic faces
Grinning as if it were all
An August Bank Holiday lark;

And the shut shops, the bleached
Established names on the sunblinds,
The farthings and sovereigns,
And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,
The tin advertisements
For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
Wide open all day;

And the countryside not caring:
The place-names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheat's restless silence;
The differently-dressed servants

With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word – the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.

At the outset of war in August, 1914, most thought it would be over by Christmas but by the Fall the struggle on the Western front had turned into trench warfare stretching 400 miles from the North Sea Coast of Belgium to the Swiss border in Alsace.

The sadness as casualties and loss quickly grew is portrayed by Katherine Mansfield in her remembrance of her brother, killed in 1915, in "To L.H.B."

Last night for the first time since you were dead
I walked with you, my brother, in a dream.
We were at home again beside the stream
Fringed with tall berry bushes, white and red.
'Don't touch them: they are poisonous,' I said.
But your hand hovered, and I saw a beam
Of strange bright laughter flying round your head

And as you stooped I saw the berries gleam –
'Don't you remember? We called them Dead Man's Bread!'
I woke and heard the wind moan and the roar
Of the dark water tumbling on the shore.
Where – where is the path of my dream for my eager feet?
By the remembered stream my brother stands
Waiting for me with berries in his hands…
'These are my body. Sister, take and eat.'

An American somewhat cavalier treatment of the horror of the fighting was captured in "Buttons" by Carl Sandberg.

I have been watching the war map slammed up for
Advertising in front of the newspaper office.
Buttons – red and yellow buttoms – blue and black buttons –
Are shoved back and forth across the map.

A laughing young man, sunny with freckles,
Climbs a ladder, yells a joke to somebody in the crowd,
And then fixes a yellow button one inch west
And follows the yellow button with a black button one inch west.

(Ten thousand men and boys twist on their bodies in a
Red soak along a river edge,
Gasping of wounds, calling for water, some ratline death
In their throats.)
Who would guess what it cost to move two buttons one

Inch on the war map here in front of the newspaper office
Where the freckle-faced young man is laughing to us?

And a rather removed view of the war's impact was set forth by Thomas Hardy in his 1915 poem "In Time of the Breaking of Nations."

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by;
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

As the war progressed on the Western Front tedium, as well apprehension, grew in the trenches. Isaac Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" expresses this well.

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 sympathies.
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.
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver – what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;

But mine in my ear is safe –
Just a little white with the dust.

Rosenberg was killed on April 1, 1918 just after his regiment returned to the trenches.

In the beginning of my essay I spoke of those who welcomed conflict and war as an adventure into the unknown. Such a person was the young American poet, Alan Seeger, who enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. In contrast to the justified apprehension of many others, he actively sought danger and was exalted at the idea of death in combat. This feeling was set forth in his poem "I Have a Rendezvous with Death."

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple blossoms fill the air –
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath –
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On same scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

God knows 'twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,

Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear . . .
But I've a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

True to his pledge, Seeger was killed in battle in 1915.

Perhaps the best English poets who actually served in the front lines were Siegfried Sasson and Wilfred Owen. Sasson gradually developed extreme cynicism about the war and how it was being conducted. This point is dramatically set forth in his 1916 poem "The Hero."

'Jack fell as he'd have wished,' the Mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.
'The Colonel writes so nicely.' Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. 'We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers.' Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought 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.

This theme is reiterated in "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!'

In the 1917 haunting poem "Dulce et Decorum Est," Owen attacked the view that it was noble to die for one's country.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime …
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Sadness is repeated by Owen in "Anthem for Doomed Youth."

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, --
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Sasson sought to bring closure to the tragedy of the First World War in his 1918 poem "Reconciliation."

When you are standing at your hero's grave,
Or near some homeless village where he died,
Remember, through your heart's rekindling pride,
The German soldiers who were loyal and brave.

Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done;
And you have nourished hatred harsh and blind.
But in that Golgotha perhaps you'll find
The mothers of the men who killed your son.

Finally, Rudyard Kipling, whose only son was killed at the Battle of Loos in 1915, struck a bitter note in "Epitaphs of the War"."

COMMON FORM
If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our father lied.

A DEAD STATESMAN
I could not dig: I dared not rob:
Therefore I lied to please the mob.
Now all my lies are proved untrue
And I must face the men I slew.
What tale shall serve me here among
Mine angry and defrauded young?

In closing, as so many of you know, Sasson and Owen turned openly against the war and were put in the Craiglockhart military hospital in Edinburgh since the belief was that no officer in his right mind could oppose the war and must be suffering from shell-shock. From the hospital Sasson continued his anti-war activity and poetry while Owen eventually returned to his regiment and was killed on November 4, 1918, only a week before the war ended.