



Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology

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The First World War produced an extraordinary flowering of poetic talent. Its poets mark the conflict in ways that are both intensely personal and as enduring as any monument. Their lines have come to express the feelings of a nation about the horrors and consequences of war.

This new anthology provides a definitive record of the achievements of the Great War poets and offers a fresh assessment of the work on the centenary of the Great War's outbreak. Focusing on the poets themselves, the book is organized by writer, not theme or chronology. It offers generous selections from the celebrated soldier-poets, including Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke, whilst also incorporating less well-known writing by civilian and women poets. It also includes two previously unpublished poems by Ivor Gurney.

A general introduction charts the history of the war poets' reception and challenges prevailing myths about the war poets' progress from idealism to bitterness. The work of each poet is prefaced with a biographical account that sets the poems in their historical context.

Although the War has now passed out of living memory, its haunting of our language and culture has not been exorcised. Its poetry survives because it continues to speak to and about us.

Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology Details

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From Reader Review Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology for online ebook

Grady McCallie says

My rating is not a reflection on the quality of the anthology, which seems excellent. I don't know the period well enough to judge the choice of poets, and the book provides very helpful introductions to each of the poets, setting their work in the context of their lives and wartime experiences. But I was reading not for historical study, but for the emotional experience of reading the poems, and on that level, the collection is inevitably hit or miss: some really skilled and moving poets - both their better and more obscure poems - and some heavily sentimental poets. In a nice touch, and surely very helpfully for a social or literary historian, the anthology includes a number of music hall and trench songs.

Julieann says

The poets of WWI were very good, very sad, very startled by the violence of war. This group contains some of the very best poets on the subject of war - Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, for example.

What surprised me were some of the poets included. Somehow, I never thought of Housman or Kipling as being WWI poets. Or Thomas Hardy.

At the end, the book includes 15 sings of the music-hall and trenches. I only wish it had included the music?

Keith Currie says

This is a splendid anthology of poetry and lyric born of the experience of war: the selection covers those who participated as soldiers, officers and enlisted men, those who observed because of age or because of gender; thus it promotes a varied range of viewpoints and experiences, of suffering, both physical and emotional, but also of courage in all its forms.

Almost every poem I expected to read is in this volume and almost every poet. There are some pleasant surprises - I did not expect to read Housman's Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries, as I did not realise that it explicitly applied to the First World War. Its inclusion is important, I think, in recognising the sacrifice of brave men. Other such poems include Binyon's For the Fallen. Idealism is represented by the selection from Brooke and I was especially pleased to read Patrick Shaw Stewart's [I saw a man this morning], his only poem, written on the back fly-leaf of his copy of A Shropshire Lad, and discovered after his death in action. This poem contains the lines, poignant in their irony, "Was it so hard, Achilles/so very hard to die?/ Thou knewest, and I know not/ so much the happier I". The Homeric references are apt, I think, and I was constantly reminded of the Iliad as I read the selection, many poems by women, focusing on their losses, as in May Wedderburn Cannan's Lamplight, "We planned to shake the world together, you and I/ Being young and very wise", poems by older men, for example Kipling's My boy Jack, but always the focus on the reality of war itself from Sassoon, Owen, Graves and many others. Isaac Rosenberg and David Jones represent 'other ranks' and some powerful, original work of theirs is included. W B Yeats provides another perspective, "I think it better that in times like these/ A poet keeps his mouth shut".

The introduction is informative and interesting, the biographical synopses valuable, the notes always useful. Attention is drawn to recent studies and critical arguments, such as Elizabeth Vandiver's Stand in the Trench, Achilles. The inclusion of Music Hall and Trench songs adds perspective. An excellent anthology, highly recommended.

Amber says

A good mixture of male and female poets. I generally hate the long winded intros that compilers put in anthologies but these were short, to the point, and had valuable knowledge that pertained to the theme of the anthology. My only complaint is the notes being in the back of the book rather than in the bottom margins so that reading was interrupted if I wanted to see the explanation for a specific nuance.

Michael says

I'm very glad I read these. The collected authors here lived through the war. Their poetry speaks the reality of it, the drama of it, the glory of it, the results of it. It is a wonderful collection. It took me awhile to enter it. But once I did it was not very far from my thoughts. The images and power of the words to speak to the violence of our hearts and our nation states was dramatic.

Jan Chlapowski Söderlund says

* * * * ½ - *I more than liked the book, but it was not perfect (therefore just below 5*).*

Why I read this anthology

The poems collected in this book by Tim Kendall concern the epoch which interests me most in history (at the moment) - World War I and the fundamental changes it brought about to society (at least Western culture). I have read several books on the topic, portraying this epoch from various historical viewpoints. And works of fiction set in this era. It was time for me to try to glimpse the *feelings* this conflict evoked in people. Since I believe poetry to be the closest we can get to communicate emotions between each other (when it comes to written art), an anthology of this kind was the next step.

My subjective opinion

Now a problem looms in front of me. How do you rate and review an anthology of poetry? Since it is a collection of poetry by various authors, my subjective opinion will be of even less value than usually. Although I will give it nonetheless; I was captured by the wide range of emotions and thoughts which this conflict evoked in people, both during and after. While reading the various poems, I soon realised I wanted to read more accounts of how it was to actually *be in the trenches*. The fear, anger, boredom, sadness, helplessness, or courage that filled people. Or just how the mud felt, what the food tasted like, or how the cold bit. Now after finishing this anthology, I still feel I have not read enough such accounts. The 4-and-a-½ stars I feel the anthology is definitely worth, reflect this incomplete satisfaction (otherwise it would have been 5) - not a reflection on the quality of the poems themselves.

My "objective" opinion

So much for my subjective opinion. The closest I can come to an objective description, is to say I believe T.K. has gathered a very varied and rich collection of poems, representing authors of all kinds of backgrounds. I found the introduction to each author informative and interesting, giving additional depth to the following poems. I do not know; but my dissatisfaction regarding descriptions of "trench life", might be due to the fact there simply are not that many such poematic depictions.

If I may venture so far as to **highlight some poems** I found moving.

My personal favourite (which I returned to several times), was "*Unidentified*" by Mary Broden. The common man is depicted as a soldier-symbol. While war and strife makes all pretentious "wise men" and their pompous thinking pointless. How life is reduced to the bare basics by this. It is unfortunately too long for me to write here.

"*Only a Boche*" by Robert Service was "professionally" interesting, since it was the only poem to come anywhere close to describe the work I might have been doing myself - serving at a dressing station.

"*Dulce et Decorum Est*" by Wilfred Owen describes in vivid detail a gas attack.

*I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell,
Like a Sun, in his last deep hour;
Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,
Clouding, half gleam, half glower,
And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.
And in his eyes
The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,
In different skies.*

A poem by Wilfred Owen I found movingly mysterious and full of intimate emotion.

I will end this review with the most beautiful (and bitter-real) hymn to the dead:

*When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you'll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,
"Yet many a better one has died before."
Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
Great death has made all his for evermore.
By Charles Sorley.*

Nooilforpacifists says

Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries, A.E. Houseman (out of copyright)

These, in the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth's foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended,
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.

Rudyard Kipling, For All We Have And Are (1914) [last stanza]

There is but one task for all--
One life for each to give.
Who stands if Freedom fall?
Who dies if England live?

The Verdicts
(Jutland) [first & second stanzas]

Not in the thick of the fight,
Not in the press of the odds,
Do the heroes come to their height,
Or do we know the demi-gods.

That stands over till peace.
We can only perceive
Men returned from the seas,
Very grateful for leave.

W.B. Yates

An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere in the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross
My countryman Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.

Laurence Binyon

For The Fallen

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We shall remember them.

Siegfried Sassoon

A Night Attack

He was a Prussian with a decent face,
Young, fresh and pleasant, so I dare to say.
No doubt he loathed the war and longed for peace,
And cursed our souls because we'd killed his friends.

The General

"Good-morning; Good-morning!" The General said
When we met him last week on the way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
"He's a cheery old card" grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

Karen Wellsbury says

Great anthology, so moving and, in many ways shocking, most of these boys did not survive, and even at the beginning they knew it.

Jamie Dougherty says

4.5 stars. It wasn't just the war that changed poetry forever, it was a generation of poets.

Julie says

For the most part, an interesting collection of writers and poems. This collection is limited to English and Irish poets. Some really didn't catch my interest, though many did hold my attention. The biography at the beginning of each poet's section was great since I was unfamiliar with some of them. I do wish the notes had been included within the section as well. Flipping back and forth between the section I was reading and the notes at the very back was tiresome!

Plan to read again!

Karen says

This is an anthology of the poetry by World War One soldiers including well-known Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen & Siegfried Sassoon. It, also, includes poetry by civilian and women poets. Music hall and trench songs are provided, too. Before each poet's selections a short biography of the poet and their poems historical context is included.

Joseph says

They shall grow not old, as we that are left to grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.
– “For the Fallen”, Laurence Binyon

Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology edited by Tim Kendall is a collection of British poems on the First World War. Kendall is Head of English at the University of Exeter and former editor of the poetry journal *Thumbscrew*. He has served as a lecturer and has published two collections: one of poetry and the other of essays.

Anyone who has read my reviews knows my position on World War I. It was the starting part of the twentieth century. Mechanized warfare, air-power, armor all saw their start as tools of war. Alliances that started the war would become alliances that kept the peace in the Cold War. Empires fell and communism rose. It would directly contribute to the start of World War II and indirectly to the Cold War. It was the decade the world lost its innocence. War lost its romance. World War I was the last war where poets wrote songs to support the war. It was the last war that the poets would honor.

Each poet's poems begin with a short biography of the poet. The poets come from all walks of life -- from landed gentry to a tailor's son. Kendall, in his introduction, goes into other aspects of the war like the change from youthful idealism to bitterness of the technological slaughter on the grandest scale. The writing of the poems range from 1914 to 1966. The poets are all from Britain or Ireland. Some lived long lives and some did not make it home from the war. There has never been a war like World War I and never one like it since. Wars have been more violent, more technological, more devastating, but never more critical in changing mankind's view of war and of man himself.

The poets had different views. Yeat's wanted to see Germany defeated, but was hesitant to throw his support behind an imperialist empire that had not given his home country of Ireland Home Rule. May Sinclair was a volunteer in an Ambulance corps in Belgium. She felt betrayed and expressed her betrayal in her poem "Journal" after finding out she was no longer welcome in the ambulance corps. Thomas Hardy only wrote three patriotic poems because he claimed he did not write patriotic poems well; most of his poems were darker and much sadder. Kipling recalled and compared the war to the Boer War and expanded to "Tin Fish" (submarines) and the well known poem "My Boy Jack."

Wilfrid Gibson manages to capture life of the front line soldier in "Between the Lines" although he only drove trucks in the war, in London. Margaret Postgate Cole wrote the moving "The Falling Leaves" far removed from the war. Wilfred Owen experienced the war first hand. "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Disabled" show the realities of the war. That reality is reinforced by the fact that Owen was killed one week before the armistice.

Kendall combines some well known wartime poets with some obscure poets. Not every poet is in this collection, but the range and variety are very well done. This collection is an excellent reference for anyone interested in World War I or poetry of the early twentieth century. This is a book worthy of any bookshelf.

Larry says

This collection is limited to British poetry, but it contains a meaningful introduction to the war's impact on articulate men. Take an Army of Mercenaries by A.E. Houseman:

These, in the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth's foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended,
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.

Houseman wasn't a participant, but his poem captures the sacrifice of the BEF in the first months of the war. There are dozens of poems as good in this collection, maybe more. It is heartbreaking to read about disillusionment.

Ely says

Review as part of Books about WWI

I'm not super well-versed (see what I did there?) in poetry, but I knew a few of these poets before reading the collection—from authors like Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling, to poets like Wilfred Owen. The thing with poetry collections is you're not going to love every poet or poem, but I enjoyed the vast majority of these. The best thing about this book is the fact that there is a little background on each poet—it tells you

where they grew up, where they fought, what happened to them etc. I really, really liked that because I felt like I could understand the poems better. I would most definitely recommend this, whether you like poetry or not. It's incredible.

Cathleen Bonville says

Such moving works. I am not very good at understanding poetry, but these....one could feel the words.
