

The Literary War

From Patriotism to Cynicism

When Rupert Brooke set sail for North America in May 1913, few realized that the world was about to be embroiled in a brutal conflagration. Ten million people died in combat; seven million civilians perished, and 50 to 100 million others died in the influenza epidemic that began to spread around the globe even before the Armistice was signed.

The Great War began in a world where values, class, gender, and racial distinctions were clear, stable, and accepted. By its end, that old order was destroyed, and political grievances were established that continue to plague us. As the late Paul Fussell, that erudite hater of war and lover of irony, points out in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, “Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honour meant. The war blasted those ideals and certainties to bits.” More than a decade after the Armistice, Ernest Hemingway wrote in *A Farewell to Arms* that “Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage ... were obscene beside the concrete names of villages ... the numbers of regiments and the dates.”

The First World War is often called the literary war because of the flood of poetry, memoirs, and novels that it has engendered – both then and now. Why did that happen, and how did the writing change so radically from patriotism to cynicism? The answers lie in cataclysmic upheavals in society and in the horrific experiences of soldiers in the trenches on both sides of the conflict, traumas that continue to haunt and inspire writers today.



Rupert Brooke

BEFORE HIS CANADIAN SOJOURN, Brooke, that heart-throbbingly beautiful graduate of Rugby and Cambridge, was best known as the author of nostalgic lines about his university days. “Stands the Church clock at ten to three? / And is there honey still for tea?” he asked wistfully about the nearby village of Grantchester.

At the time he was more interested in recouping his stamina after a series of emotional breakdowns than in writing poetry. Canada was meant to toughen him up. And it did, as he travelled from east to west recording his impressions in articles for the left-leaning *Westminster Gazette*.

Inevitably, international and military affairs intruded upon his trip. He came with a letter of introduction to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, then Leader of the

Opposition. They had lunch in Ottawa and talked about the naval question, the arms race that had preoccupied Britain and Germany, its chief imperial rival, for more than a decade.

Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, wanted Canada to supply money to build massive battleships called dreadnoughts for the Royal Navy; Laurier wanted to create a Canadian Navy that in wartime would come to the aid of the Imperial fleet. When Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, Canada was automatically part of the Imperial initiative, contributing an expeditionary force that eventually numbered more than 600,000 out of a population of 8 million people.

Two years after Brooke's Canadian tour, he was famous because of five patriotic war sonnets, especially "The Soldier," which he wrote late in 1914, after he had enlisted in the Royal Naval Division. His lines, "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England ..." helped to rouse public sentiment for the war. When Brooke died several months later of septicemia from an infected mosquito bite, he was en route to the Dardanelles in an ill-fated campaign against the Turks at Gallipoli – one of the worst Allied defeats in WWI. Churchill himself wrote Brooke's obituary, declaring him to be "joyous, fearless, versatile," and with "classic symmetry of mind and body."

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For weeks thereafter, Brooke's name was heard from pulpits, spoken in the streets, and paraded in newspapers and magazines. Byron and Shelley suddenly had company; the poet soldier would remain the dominant impression of Brooke until the end of the war. One soldier dead, in a war that claimed millions, and from an insect bite rather than enemy fire, is not the stuff of myth. But the atmosphere of 1915 demanded heroes, and Brooke, with his youth and his beauty and his poetry, was a symbol that everyone could grasp. He became the Known Soldier.

The most enduringly popular poem of the war, however, was not "The Soldier," but "In Flanders Fields," written by Canadian John McCrae in May 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres. The contrast between the poems and the poets shows how attitudes had changed in six months.

Brooke was writing in England at a time when most were persuaded that the boys would be home by Christmas. He speaks in the first person about a possible, but not inevitable, fate. McCrae, on the other hand, was writing from the battlefield. He speaks in the plural voice of the already

dead: "In Flanders Fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row / That mark *our* place." (My emphasis.)

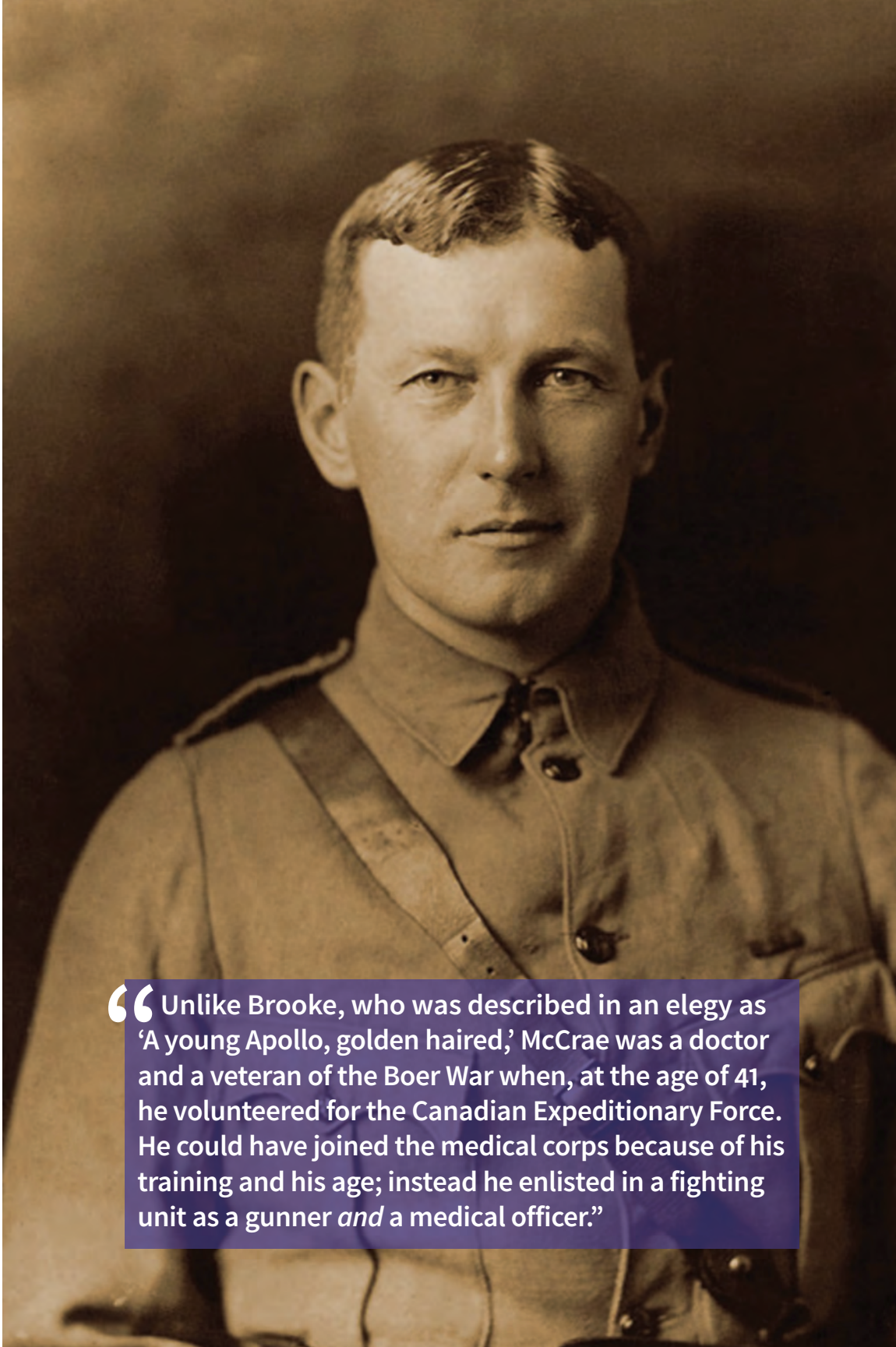
There is a huge difference between the idealistic declarations of the uninitiated and murmurings of the collective dead, a gulf that invariably separates not only the fallen but all combatants from the rest of us. Unlike Brooke, who was described in an elegy as "A young Apollo, golden haired," McCrae was a doctor and a veteran of the Boer War when, at the age of 41, he volunteered for the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He could have joined the medical corps because of his training and his age; instead he enlisted in a fighting unit as a gunner *and* a medical officer.

In a letter home to his mother, he described the fighting at Ypres as "a nightmare." For "17 days and 17 nights none of us have had our clothes off, nor our boots even.... And behind it all was the constant background of the sights of the dead, the wounded, the maimed, and a terrible anxiety lest the line should give way." After burying a close friend, McCrae sat in the back of an ambulance and wrote his poem, which was first published in *Punch* in December 1915.

Speaking to the living, McCrae exhorts: "Take up our quarrel with the foe: / To you from failing hands we throw / The torch; be yours to hold it high." And he warns: "If ye break faith with us who die / We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders Fields."

Decades after the war, "In Flanders Fields" was criticized as a jingoistic recruiting anthem. I don't think that is fair. McCrae was an amateur poet and a professional soldier – the opposite of Rupert Brooke – who scribbled his lines almost like a dispatch from the horror and chaos of the battlefield. He was looking for something to hold on to, some rationale for continuing the struggle. He is invoking the living to keep faith with the sacrifice of the dead, in order to justify the brutality and the mounting casualties.

THE GREAT WAR was Britain's first major military confrontation since Waterloo, a century earlier, and the largest European engagement since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. The generals were rusty and ill-prepared for modern industrial warfare. They should have paid more attention to the graphic lessons provided by the American Civil War and the Boer War, confrontations in which citizen armies had been engaged in bloody, protracted, and entrenched combat using rapid-fire weapons and incendiary devices capable of inflicting destruction on massive scales. Their trust in sabres, cavalry charges, and brightly costumed soldiers marching in formation was dashed by artillery and machine guns. Instead of a regimented field of battle, troops swarmed through barbed



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wire and over terrain that had been hollowed out by shells, leaving craters full of water, corpses, and enemy snipers.

Poetry and memoir had a changing impact as the war stretched from a quick and glorious skirmish into attrition and devastation. Literacy was a huge factor. Reading and writing, once the exclusive domain of the elites – aristocrats, clerics, and professionals – filtered down to the masses, creating a rapidly expanding reading audience. Martyn Lyons argues in “New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers” that by the 1890s close to 90 percent literacy had been achieved in Western Europe. “This was the golden age of the book in the West: the first generation which acceded to mass literacy was also the last to see the book unchallenged as a communications medium by either the radio or the electronic media of the twentieth century.”

By the late 1880s, primary education was free, widespread in rural areas as well as urban, and mostly compulsory. Technology made the printing and distribution of newspapers not only possible but widely and cheaply available. As well, the working day had grown shorter – to about nine hours – which gave the working classes more leisure to read newspapers and novels and join circulating libraries. Efficient postal service made it possible to write, post, and receive letters several times a day.

All of these factors meant that while class distinctions separated officers from enlisted men, both upstairs and downstairs shared the ability to read and write, and they mixed it up in the trenches in a way they never would have at home. They shared a sense of sacrifice and moral values in the beginning and a poignant attitude of resignation and cynicism as the war dragged on, and the casualty lists stretched longer and longer.

As Modris Eksteins writes in “Memory and the Great War,” a chapter in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, “The literate classes, and by then they were the literate masses – teachers, students, artists, writers, poets, historians, and indeed workers of the mind as well as the fist – volunteered *en masse*. School benches and church pews emptied.”

Life in the trenches – which tended to be nasty, brutish, and short – was also monotonous when it wasn’t deadly. Yes, there was a lot of work to be done digging and shoring up trenches and tunnels and burying the dead, but there was also time in between to write letters or poetry on scraps of paper, as McCrae did with “In Flanders Fields.”

The men were forbidden to keep diaries for fear they might fall into enemy hands, but many did so anyway. “Words, literary words, visible on the page, flowed as they had never flowed before, in the trenches, at home, and across the seven seas,” writes Eksteins, who cites the Berlin critic Julius Bab who estimated that 50,000 poems were being written a day by German soldiers alone in 1914.

THOSE WHO WERE PAST the age of military service put their pens to work on the home front writing propaganda. Literary lions including Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells, John Buchan, John Masefield, and J. M. Barrie put the power of their reputations and their talents into the war effort under the direction of Charles Masterman, head of the War Propaganda Bureau.

At the time it was considered patriotic. Later it would seem like a betrayal to the thousands of young men who felt duped into fighting and dying for an empty shell of an imperialist ideal. One of the men in charge of recruiting writers on both sides of the Atlantic was Sir Gilbert Parker, a

Canadian elocutionist, ardent imperialist, and the author of bestselling romantic novels, including *The Seats of the Mighty* about Wolfe's victory over Montcalm at the conquest of Quebec.

For writers who had celebrated the glory days of Britain's mercantile, political, and military hegemony, strategic and tactical blunders and the slaughter of thousands were impossible to stomach, so they obfuscated, camouflaged, and even lied. The two most egregious examples came from John Masefield and John Buchan.

Masefield whitewashed the Gallipoli disaster, an ill-fated campaign to establish a lifeline to Russian allies and push Turkey out of the war. The battle, which turned into a stalemate, culminated in huge losses for Australia and New Zealand and ended in a British retreat. Buchan used Houdini-like magic to turn the battle of the Somme, with its first-day toll of more than 60,000 British casualties, from the worst defeat in British military history into a victory.

With their slurs about the Hun and their fabrications about the Germans boiling corpses to render fat, these famous writers hoodwinked the general public and betrayed the soldiers volunteering to fight for King and Country. But the propagandists also betrayed themselves. Never again would the prestige and opinions of writers be held in such high esteem.

Some of them couldn't stomach their own lies. Ford Hermann Hueffer, son of a British mother and a German father, was a distinguished literary editor when he was co-opted by his friend Masterman into the propaganda racket. By 1915 he had had enough. He enlisted at age 41 in the Welch Regiment and was shipped to France during the Battle of the Somme. After the war he used his experience at the front to write *Parade's End*, one of the best British novels about the war. He also changed his name to Ford Madox Ford and went into self-exile in the US and France.

NOBODY ESCAPED the wrath of this terrible war. As the late critic Peter Buitenhuis writes in *The Great War of Words: British, American and Canadian Propaganda and Fiction, 1914–1933*: “The best-known literary consequence of the Great War is the literature of disillusion, the work of a generation of young men, most of whom had served in the trenches or in some other branch of front-line service.” Indeed, Buitenhuis continues, “the literature of that war has become almost synonymous with the names of those whose novels and poems were cries of anger, repudiation, anguish, cynicism or despair: Wilfred Owen, David Jones, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Richard Aldington, Ernest Hemingway, e.e. cummings, John Dos Passos, Charles Yale Harrison, Henri Barbusse, and Erich Maria Remarque.”

BRITAIN · NEEDS



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Wilfred Owen:
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One of the best of those disillusioned war poets, Wilfred Owen, was a Shropshire lad, born in 1893 to a family of modest means. Owen failed to win a scholarship to university and instead taught English at Berlitz in France – not so different from many young people who go abroad for the same reasons today. He sailed back across the Channel in October 1915, signed up, and after rudimentary training returned to France in December 1916 as a junior officer with the Manchester Regiment.

What he experienced destroyed his faith in the church and in authority. He loved the physical beauty of young men, and he was devastated by the way bodies were wantonly mangled and destroyed. Then in April 1917 he suffered a series of traumas, including being stuck under fire for days in a forward position with the diced and splattered remains of one of his fellow officers. He survived but was badly shell-shocked and was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland.

There he met another patient, Siegfried Sassoon, seven years his senior and a decorated officer who was flamboyantly heroic – his men called him “Mad Jack.” Sassoon was wealthy, aristocratic, and well educated, unlike Owen, but both were gay, poetic, dedicated to the men in the line and disillusioned with the war and all it represented.

In fact, Sassoon made headlines when his “Soldier’s Declaration” of 1917 was read out in the House of Commons. “I believe that the war upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation has now become a war of aggression and conquest,” he wrote and insisted that he would not go back to the front. Normally such defiance would be condemned as cowardice, followed by a court martial and possibly a firing squad.

Instead, Sassoon was diagnosed with shell-shock and sent to Craiglockhart. There he became Owen’s mentor, reading his verses, encouraging him to write more, and editing early versions of poems such as “Anthem for Doomed Youth.”

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Both men felt obliged to go back to the front, not for England but for the men in the trenches. Owen tried to explain in a letter to his mother. "I came out in order to help these boys – directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can." He didn't get the chance because he was killed by machine gun fire on November 4, 1918. The news reached his parents as church bells pealed the Armistice.

Sassoon survived the war and, along with his friend Robert Graves, another soldier poet and author of the dyspeptic memoir *Goodbye to All That*, worked hard to attract an audience for Owen's poetry. Only four of Owen's poems were published in his lifetime, but they have guaranteed his legacy, especially lines such as: "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."

OWEN WAS 25 when he died. He was two years younger than Rupert Brooke, but a lifetime older in the atrocities he had witnessed – and recorded. It became Owen's version of the war that prevailed, extended by the avalanche of anti-war fiction and memoir that began in the late 1920s and continues to this day. Lions led to slaughter by donkeys was the prevailing theme, although as time passed and research deepened, it became clear that the generals did learn strategic and tactical lessons and thereby became less wasteful of the lives of the men who served under them. But nothing, not even the best poems, memoirs, and novels, can assuage the tragedy and the waste that the Great War still conjures a century after the guns began firing.

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OPPOSITE:

Siegfried Sassoon, war hero, poet, and finally pacifist.

