



WHILE THE

MAD GUNS

# POETS AT THE SOMME

CURSE

11

There were numerous poets and writers posted to the Somme during the Offensive - here is a list of the better known ones –

**Those killed in action during the Somme** – Tom Kettle, Reinhard Sorge, H.H. Munro (Saki).

**Wounded and/or involved in the Somme** - J.R. Ackerley, A.A. Milne, Max Plowman, Ford Madox Ford, J.B. Priestly (wounded on the Somme in June 1916 before the Offensive began), Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Cecil Lewis, Edmund Blunden, Guillaume Apollinaire, Laurence Binyon, A.P. Herbert, Wilfrid Owen, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Isaac Rosenberg, Frederic Manning and Ernst Jünger.



Isaac Rosenberg  
(1890-1918)



Siegfried Sassoon  
(1886-1967)

Rosenberg was born in Bristol of Lithuanian Jewish parents and grew up in poverty, unlike a lot of his contemporary fellow poets. He showed an aptitude for art early on and later became interested in poetry and with his artistic ability began to produce drawings and illustrations for his own poems and that of others. In 1914 he travelled to South Africa and while there, as a reaction to the outbreak of WW1, composed the poem *On receiving news of the war!* When he returned to England he enlisted in the army and was sent to France in June 1916 in preparation for the Somme Offensive. His most significant poems include *Break of day in the trenches*, *Dead man's dump* and *Returning we hear the larks*, all written while serving in the trenches.

Rosenberg's poetry is brutally realistic about the realities of war and shares none of the romanticism of some of the earlier work of the other English war poets. The reference to the rat in the first stanza of his most famous poem *Break of day in the trenches* explores the notion that nature (in this instance the rat) is indifferent to nationality and this demonstrates Rosenberg's less idealized view of war. He had a different perspective (i.e. less nationalistic) on the war from his fellow poets. This could be the reason why Rosenberg's poetry was subsequently overlooked.

## BREAK OF DAY IN THE TRENCHES<sup>1</sup>

The darkness crumbles away.  
It is the same old druid Time as ever,  
Only a live thing leaps my hand,  
A queer sardonic rat,  
5 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  
10 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,  
15 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  
20 At the shrieking iron and flame  
Hurled through still heavens?  
What quaver—what heart aguish?  
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins  
Drop, and are ever dropping;

## DEAD MAN'S DUMP

The plunging limbers over the shattered track  
Racketed with their rusty freight,  
Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,  
And the rusty stakes like sceptres old  
5 To stay the flood of brutish men  
Upon our brothers dear.

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead  
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,  
Their shut mouths made no moan,  
10 They lie there huddled, friend and foe,  
Man born of man, and born of woman,  
And shells go crying over them  
From night till night and now.

*Dead man's dump* - Part of Rosenberg's work in the trenches involved delivering and erecting barbed wire which inspired this poem - it is very descriptive and details the brutality of life in the trenches as one can almost experience being in the battle field with the poet as he does his work.

Rosenberg was killed in Arras in France in April 1918 having posted his last poem (*Through these cold days*) with a letter to England just a week earlier.

In 1915 Sassoon was posted to the Western Front and saw service during the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. He was noted for his bravery, earning the nickname "Mad Jack" for his near-suicidal actions. During periods of convalescence in Craiglockhart Hospital Sassoon met fellow poets Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen, on whom he had a great influence, and poet, novelist and memoirist, Robert Graves. In July 1917, his intense anti-war feelings prompted him to write to his commanding officer asking him to be relieved of his war duties. This letter became known as *"Finished with the war: A soldier's declaration"*. In it he conveys his disgust and disenchantment with the war and cites the terrible suffering of the troops. He faced a court martial as a result but his friend Robert Graves intervened and successfully persuaded the authorities that Sassoon was suffering from shell shock and he was placed in hospital for the remainder of the war.

*Does it matter* - In this poem Sassoon explores the theme of the physical and psychological effects of war on soldiers, the futility of war and challenges the notion that war is glorious.

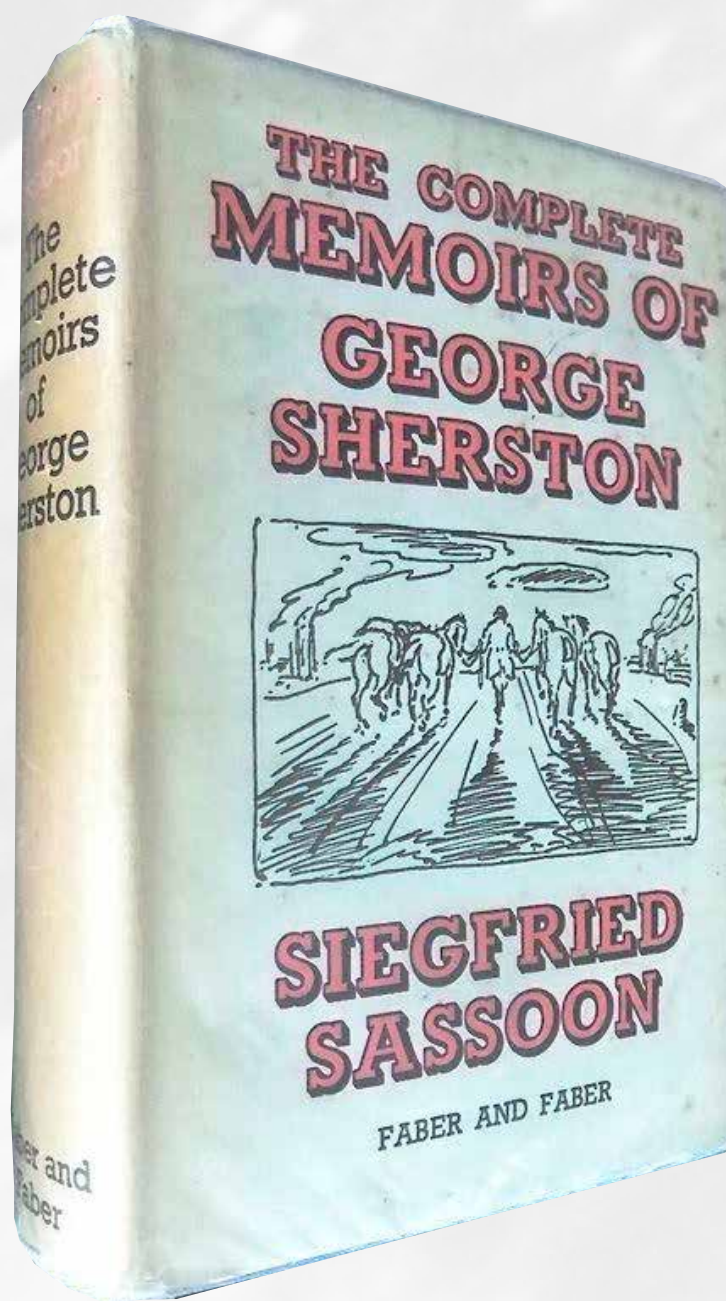
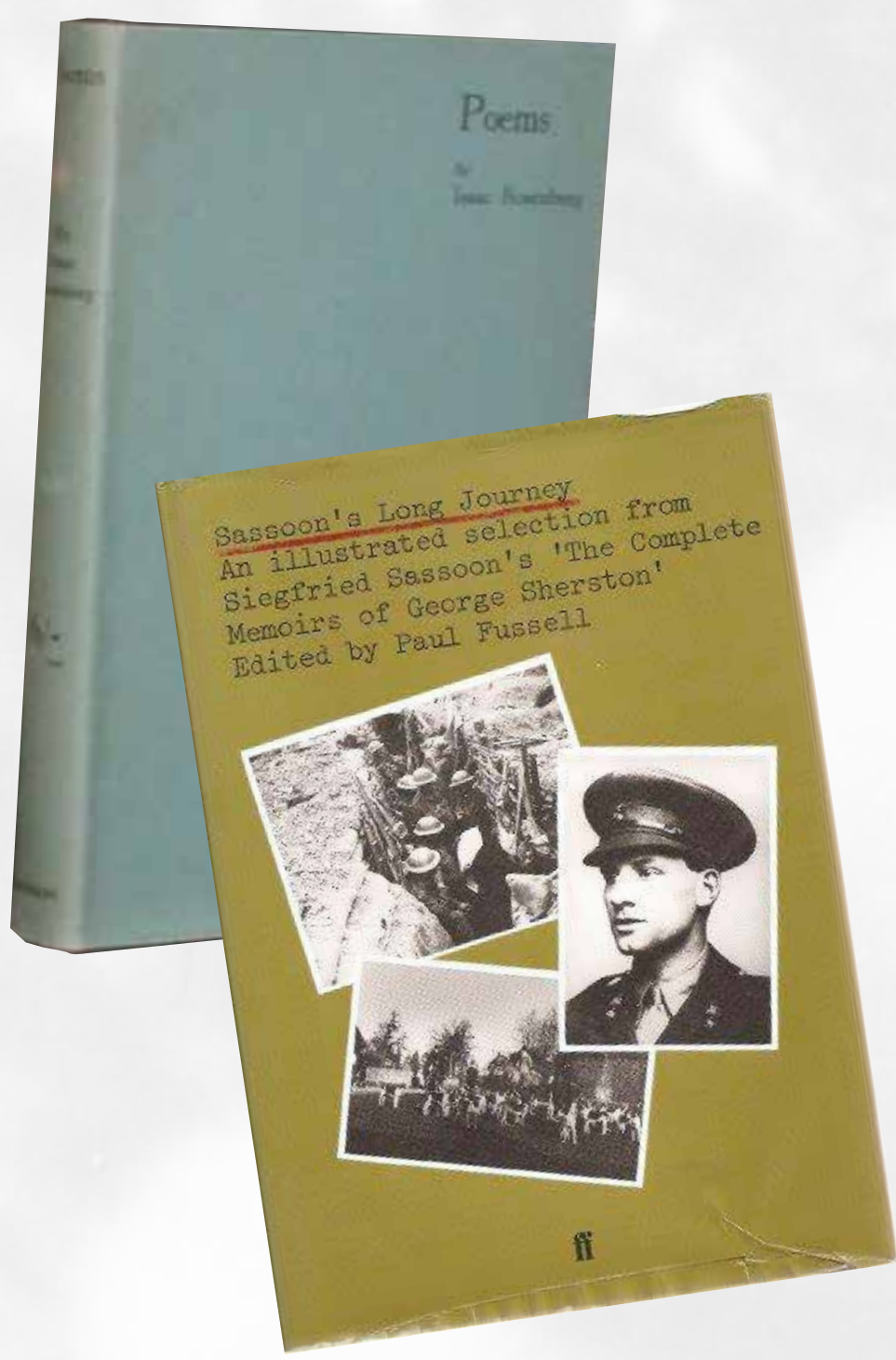
## COUNTER-ATTACK

We'd gained our first objective hours before  
While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes,  
Pallid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke,  
Things seemed all right at first. We held their line,  
With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,  
And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench.  
The place was rotten with dead; green slummy  
legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the  
saps;  
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking  
mud.  
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;  
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,  
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering  
slime.  
And then the rain began,—the jolly old rain!

*Counter attack*– Sassoon examines the dehumanisation of dead soldiers and refers to the powerlessness of the soldier in the trenches.

Despite his ordeals during the war Sassoon lived until the age of 80 becoming a prolific writer of prose the most significant of which is the fictionalised semi-autobiographical Sherston Trilogy, which describes a soldier's experiences in the war and his stay in a military hospital. The trilogy bears a marked similarity to Sassoon's later real autobiographical trilogy ----- *The old century*, *The weald of youth* and *Siegfried's journey*.

DOES IT MATTER?  
Does it matter?—losing your legs? . . .  
For people will always be kind,  
And you need not show that you mind  
When the others come in after hunting  
To gobble their muffins and eggs.  
Does it matter?—losing your sight? . . .  
There's such splendid work for the blind;  
And people will always be kind,  
As you sit on the terrace remembering  
And turning your face to the light.  
Do they matter?—those dreams from the pit? . . .  
You can drink and forget and be glad,  
And people won't say that you're mad;  
For they'll know that you've fought for your  
country.  
And no one will worry a bit.



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