

U

WHILE THE

MAD GUNS

CURSE

11

WRITERS &
THE SOMME

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IT SEEMS
HISTORY
IS TO
BLAME

Ireland
1913-1923

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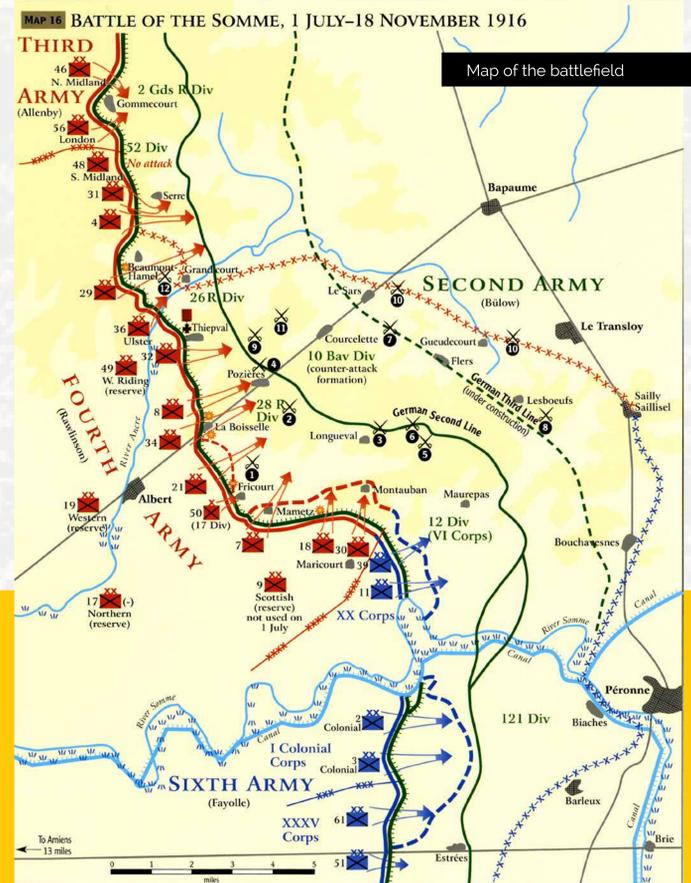
"While the mad guns curse" is taken from a poem by Tom Kettle, written for his daughter Betty on 4 September 1916, just five days before he was killed.

WRITERS & THE SOMME

CURSE

World War I – the War to end all Wars as it was initially touted – saw many dreadful battles with unimaginable loss of life and injury: Ypres, Gallipoli, the Tannenberg marshes, Verdun. The Battle of the Somme, which began on 1 July 1916 and carried on until 18 November of that year, was one of the worst.

The Somme offensive was fought on both sides of the upper reaches of the River Somme, on French territory near the Belgian border. It was intended to hasten a victory for the French and British armies, and was the largest battle of the First World War on the Western Front. It was at the Somme that military aircraft and tanks first demonstrated their potential. It was, however, primarily a battle fought in and from the trenches. More than one million men were wounded or killed, making it one of the bloodiest battles in human history. The British Army suffered 481,842 casualties at the Somme. Included in that number were thousands of Irishmen, many of whom were from Cork.



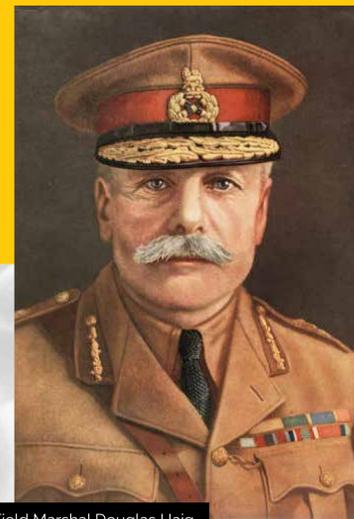
German Army trenches

The Somme also stands out for its literary significance: more writers and poets fought in it than in any other battle in history.

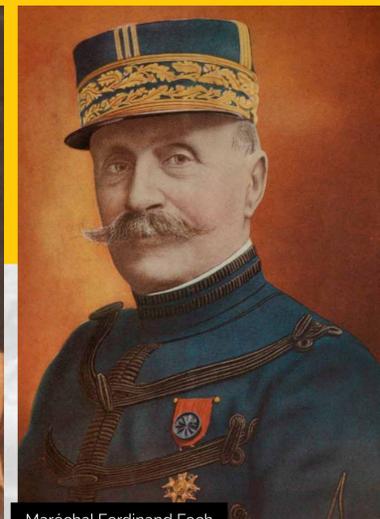
While the offensive began on 1 July, September 1916 has great resonance for Irish involvement in the Somme: it was in this month that Tom Kettle died, it was in this month that the 16 (Irish) Division, including two Battalions of the Royal Munster Fusiliers, was moved to the Somme theatre.

After five months of fighting, after all the lives lost, British and French forces had penetrated just 10 km into German-occupied territory. For most of the century since, no battle has better exemplified the view that in World War I it was a case of

'lions led by donkeys', brave and resilient soldiers led by incompetent and uncaring generals. In recent years, however, historians have taken a somewhat different view: the Somme was a new form of industrialised warfare, a forewarning of what was to come in the 1939-1945 conflict, and in such fighting mass slaughter is unavoidable.



Field Marshal Douglas Haig
British commander



Maréchal Ferdinand Foch
French commander

For Irish people, North and South, and for the British, the Somme continues to evoke the agonies of war at its most merciless. It is the writers – Owen, Sassoon, Kettle, Tolkien – who first gave these agonies a voice, and it is through the prism of these writers that we view the Somme today.

POETS AT THE SOMME

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 TRENCHES¹

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 British 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,
Mats born of man, and horn 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.

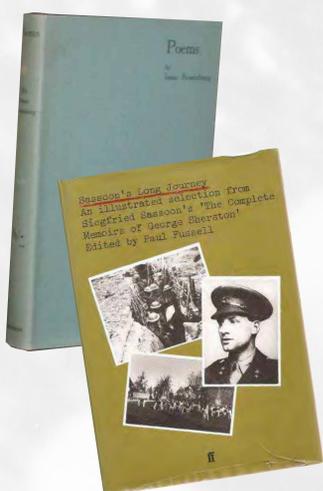
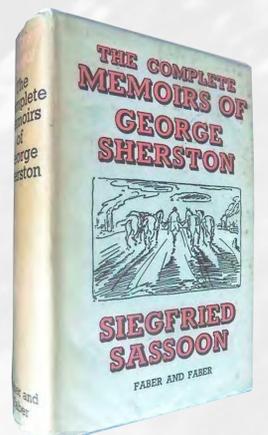
DOES IT MATTER?
Does it matter?—losing your legs? . . .
For people will always be kind,
And you need not show that you mind
When the others come in after hunting
To gobble their muffs and eggs.
Does it matter?—losing your sight? . . .
There's such splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be 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.

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 clumsy
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*.

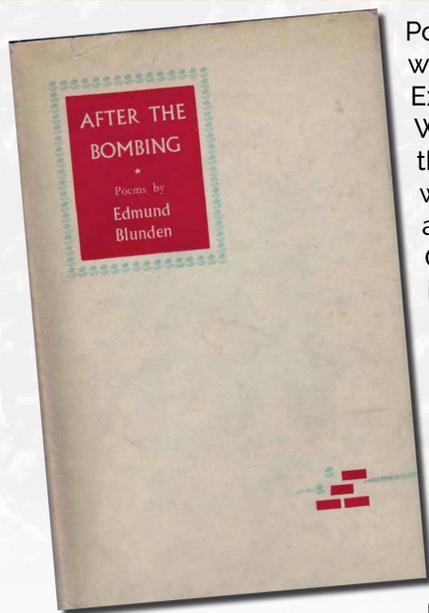




Edmund Blunden
(1896-1974)



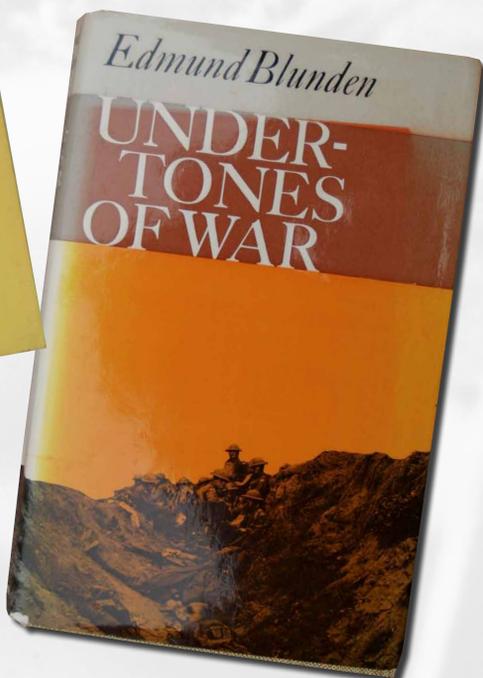
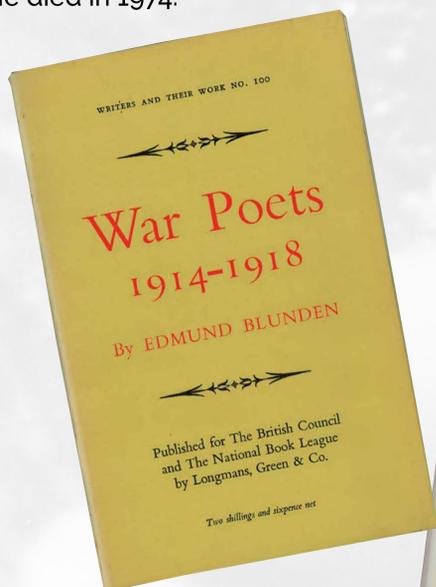
Wilfred Owen
(1893-1918)



Poet, journalist and literary editor Blunden was the longest serving war poet. Experiencing continuous service on the Western Front he served for two years in the trenches in Ypres and the Somme. He was a close friend of Siegfried Sassoon and a contemporary of Robert Graves at Oxford after the war. Blunden's war poetry is concerned more with the psychological effects of war. Even though he survived the war without being physically wounded he nevertheless suffered from the psychological effects for the rest of his life. His war experiences are recounted in his autobiography *Undertones of war* published in 1928. In it he describes his terrible ordeals in combat in the Somme, Ypres, and Passchendaele, describing them as "murder, not only to the troops but to their singing faiths and hopes."

As the literary critic Desmond Graham writes "he [Blunden] is concerned overall with 'war's haunting of the mind'; his collected war poems bear this out and if we want an idea of what it was like to fight and survive WW1 then we can go to Blunden to give it to us." His poem 1916 seen from 1921 describes the psychological price exacted by war.

Blunden enjoyed a very distinguished post-war academic career. He had a special interest in war poetry editing Wilfred Owens's poetry collections and writing a foreword to Brereton's *Anthology of war poems* (1930). He died in 1974.



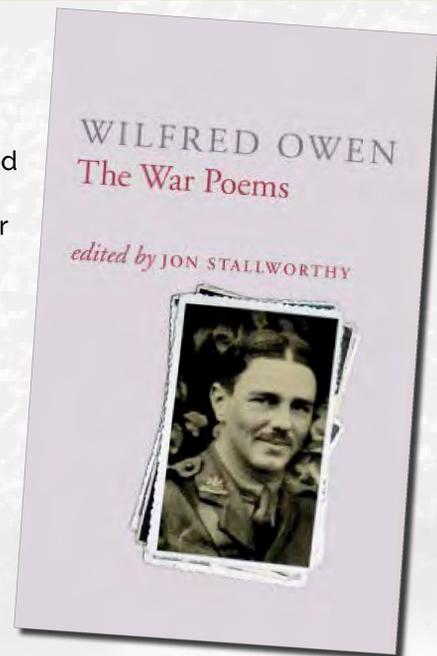
Festubert, 1916

Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,
I sit in solitude and only hear
Long silent laughers, murmurings of dismay,
The lost intensities of hope and fear;
In those old marshes yet the rifles lie,
On the thin breastwork flutter the grey rags,
The very books I read are there – and I
Dead as the men I loved, wait while life drags

Its wounded length from those sad streets of war
Into green places here, that were my own;
But now what once was mine is mine no more,
I look for such friends here and I find none.
With such strong gentleness and tireless will
Those ruined houses seared themselves in me,
Passionate I look for their dumb story still,
And the charred stub outspeaks the living tree.

Often regarded as the greatest of the war poets Wilfred Owen was of mixed Welch and English ancestry. He was working as a teacher in France when war broke out but returned to England in 1915 where he joined the Artists Rifles Officers' Training Corps. He was commissioned into the Manchester Regiment in June 1916 but didn't leave for France until December of that year. Although the Somme Offensive was over by that time Owen served there with the Manchesters in January 1917. He fought on the front line at Beaumont Hamel but was wounded and was taken to Military Hospital where he wrote the poem *Hospital Barge*. Throughout 1917 and 1918 he was on active duty but had periods in hospital recovering from war wounds and suffering from shell shock. It was at Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh that he met Siegfried Sassoon and it was under his influence that he wrote some of his best poetry, especially his war poems such as *Anthem for doomed youth*, *Futility* and *Dulce et decorum est*.

Anthem for doomed youth was written in Craiglockhart in 1917 - Sassoon helped with the revision of the poem and suggested the title. In August of 1918 he was back on the front line in Amiens, was wounded again and awarded the Military Cross. He was killed in action on Nov 4 1918 one week before the signing of the Armistice.



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.
5 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.
10 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 goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

HOSPITAL BARGE

Budging the sluggard ripples of the Somme,
A barge round old C erisy slowly slewed.
Softly her engines down the current screwed,
And chuckled softly with contented hum,
5 Till fairy tinklings struck their croonings dumb.
The waters rumpling at the stern subdued;
The lock-gate took her bulging amplitude;
Gently from out the gurgling lock she swum.
10 One reading by that calm bank shaded eyes
To watch her lessening westward quietly.
Then, as she neared the bend, her funnel screamed.
And that long lamentation made him wise
How unto Avalon, in agony,
Kings passed in the dark barge which Merlin dreamed.



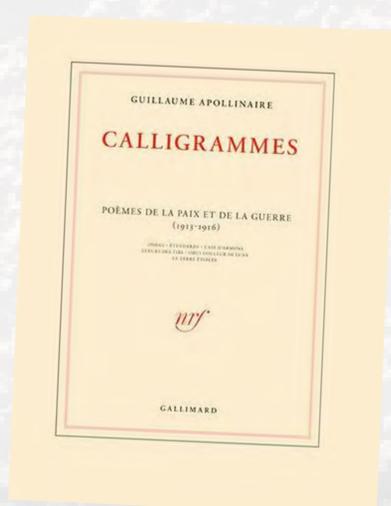
Reinhard Sorge
(1892-1916)

Sorge was born in Berlin and brought up in a strict Lutheran household. As an act of rebellion he immersed himself in the artistic and literary life in Berlin at the time becoming part of the German Expressionist movement. Both a playwright and poet he is probably best known for his drama *The Beggar / Der Bettler*. He was one of the first winners of the Kleist Prize awarded annually from 1912 for German literature. Conscripted into the German army in 1915 he was mortally wounded on July 20th during the Battle of the Somme, dying at a field dressing station near Ablaincourt. His most famous poetry collection is "*Mutter der Himmel*" published in 1917. He is buried in a communal German war grave in Vermandovillers along with his compatriot the anti-war German poet Alfred Lichtenstein who also died on the Somme (but earlier, in 1914).



Guillaume Apollinaire
(1880-1918)

Born in Rome, of Polish descent, and raised in France, poet, novelist, playwright and journalist Apollinaire was very much part of the Parisian artistic scene at the turn of the century and counted among his friends Matisse and Picasso. He joined the French army and fought on the Western Front serving on the front line between Verdun and the Somme. He suffered severe shrapnel wounds to his head in 1916 and was invalided out of the army. His landmark experimental poetry collection *Calligrammes: poems de la guerre 1913-1916* features poems dealing with the excitement and intoxication of war on the one hand and the loneliness, longing and war weariness on the other. Even though he survived the war he died in the influenza epidemic of 1918 and is buried in the Père Lachese cemetery in Paris.



Note - Calligramme was a form of poetry invented by Apollinaire in which words are written or typed to form drawings.

A POET AGAINST THE WAR



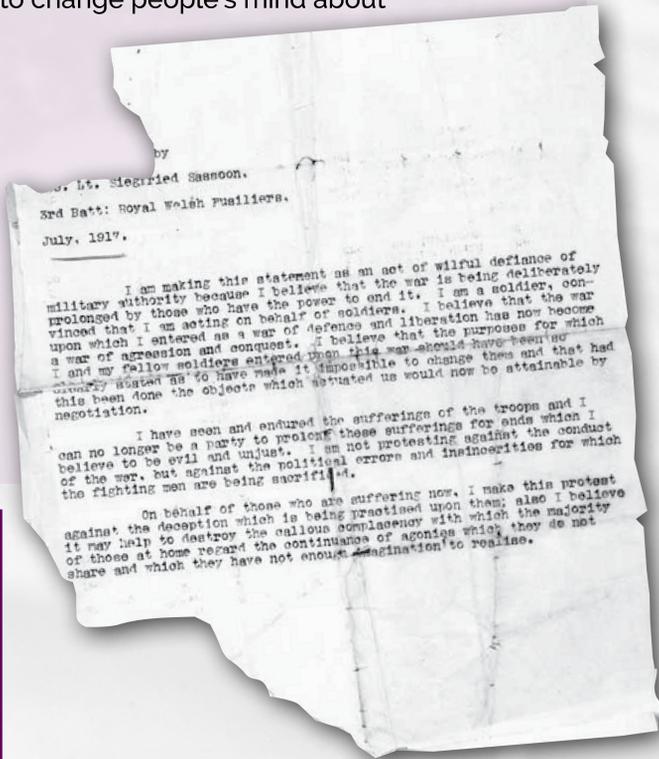
Sassoon had just published his anti-war document *Finished with the war: A soldier's declaration*, and, in danger of being tried for treason, he was admitted to Craiglockhart thanks to the intervention of his friend Robert Graves. Even though both Graves and Rivers sympathised with Sassoon's anti-war stance they didn't really agree with it - both regarded it as their patriotic duty to serve no matter what.

"... the way I see it, when you put the uniform on, in effect you sign a contract. And you don't back out of a contract merely because you've changed your mind. You can still speak

up for your principles, you can argue against the ones you're being made to fight for, but in the end you do the job. And I think that way you gain more respect. Siegfried isn't going to change people's minds like this. It may be in him to change people's mind about the war but this isn't the way to do it."

Graves commenting to Rivers on Sassoon's position on the war. taken from *Regeneration* by Pat Barker

See also The Somme & Memory panel



Extract from *Wonder of war / Merveille de la guerre*

-But I have flowed into the sweetness of this war with my whole company along the long trenches
A few cries of flame keep announcing my presence
I have hollowed out the bed where I flow and branch into a thousand small streams going everywhere
I am in the front line trenches and I am everywhere or rather I am beginning to be everywhere
For it is I who begin this affair of the centuries to come
It will be longer to realize than the myth of soaring Icarus
I bequeath to the future the story of Guillaume Apollinaire
Who was in the war and knew how to be everywhere
In the lucky towns behind the front lines
In all the rest of the universe
In all those who died tangled in barbed wire
In women in cannons in horses



WHILE THE

MAD GUNS

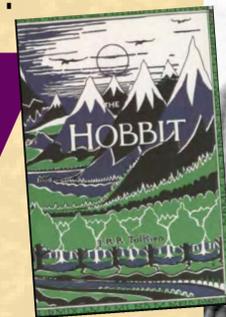
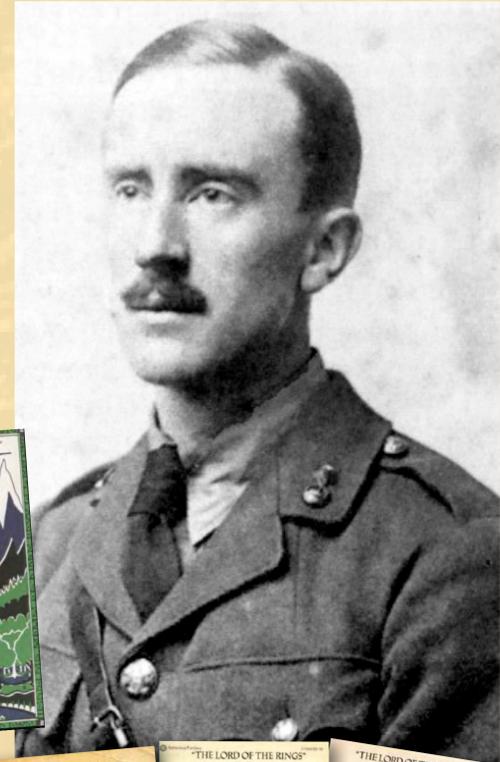
NOT ONLY POETS ...

CURSE

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J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), the author of the *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, and an acclaimed academic and scholar, spent most of the Somme campaign at the front. This experience clearly made a deep impression on him, and the experience shaped his writings for the rest of his life.

Tolkien was of German ancestry, although his family had been in England since the late 18th century.



"One has personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead." - **J.R.R. Tolkien**

The Fall of Gondolin (from *The Book of Lost Tales Part Two* and *The Silmarillion*) is the first traceable story of Tolkien's legendarium. It was written on the back of military music sheets while Tolkien recovered from trench fever.

"Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again."
- **Gandalf the Grey** *Fellowship of the Ring* "The Shadow of the Past"

"It was Sam's first view of a battle of Men against Men and he did not like it much. He was glad he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies and threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not rather have stayed there in peace."

The Two Towers "Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit"

"They lie in pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water. I saw them: grim faces and evil, noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead."

The Two Towers "The Passage of the Marshes"

PTSD ~ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

"Even the stout-hearted would fling themselves to the ground as the hidden menace passed over them, or they would stand, letting their weapons fall from nerveless hands while into their minds a blackness came, and they thought no more of war, but only of hiding and of crawling, and of death."

The Return of the King "The Siege of Gondor"

"But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them."

The Return of the King "The Grey Havens"

"The Dead Marshes owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme." - **J.R.R. Tolkien**

"My Sam Gamgee is indeed a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself." - **J.R.R. Tolkien**

Mûmakil were large creatures resembling elephants, often used in battle by the Haradrim and ascribed all kinds of strange powers. **Oliphant** was the more familiar name given to them by the Hobbits. Described as a "grey-clad moving hill" the Oliphant mows down everything in its path like a tank, with the horses of the Rohirrim afraid to go near them.

"Grey as a mouse,
Big as a house,
Nose like a snake,
I make the earth shake,
As I tramp through the grass;
Trees crack as I pass.
If ever you'd met me
You wouldn't forget me.
If you never do,
You won't think I'm true;
But old Oliphant am I,
And I never lie."

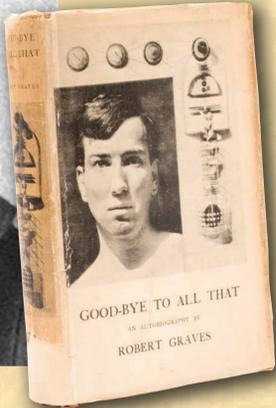
- **Samwise Gamgee to Gollum as they and Frodo Baggins rested in the dell before the Morannon**



NOT ONLY POETS ...



ROBERT GRAVES
(1895-1985)



Robert Graves was born to an Irish father and German mother in Wimbledon, London. His father Alfred Perceval Graves was a Gaelic Scholar and poet, his mother Amalie von Ranke Graves was a relation of Rupert von Ranke, one of the founding fathers of modern historical studies.

In August 1914 while studying at Oxford, he enrolled in the British Army and fought in the Battle of Loos. He was injured during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. He was a close friend and fellow-officer of the poet Siegfried Sassoon. He began writing poetry while at school and continued while serving as a British officer on the Western Front. He produced three books of poetry during 1916/1917 – *Over the brazier* (1915), *Goliath and David* (1917) and *Fairies and fusiliers* (1917). However, during the late nineteen twenties he set his poetry aside and it was not published again during his lifetime.

In addition to his poetry he was also a critic, historical novelist and biographer.

World War I, more than any other event changed Grave's life. His memoir *Goodbye to all that* (1929) included a damning account of his World War One experiences. The horror of trench warfare was a crucial experience in his life and he remained deeply affected by the war for at least ten years after its end. Poetry became his substitute for the orthodox religion of his parents and he believed that he had been spared during the War to fulfil his destiny as a poet.

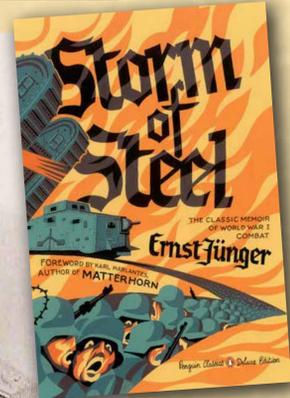
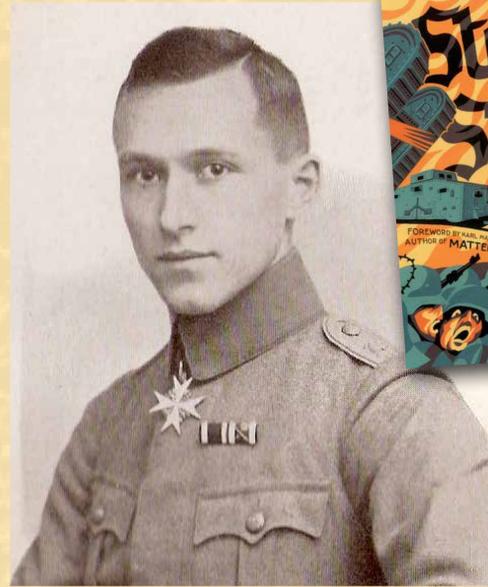
A Dead Boche – here a British soldier (Graves himself) is trying to get across the notion that the product of war is not glory or victory instead it is death and destruction. The second stanza begins with a horrific description of a dead German soldier. He describes him as sitting against a shattered tree:-

*He scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-harried,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard."*

It's a Queer Time – this poem describes the atmosphere in the trenches, he is writing of the sounds and images of battle:-

*It's hard to know if you're alive or dead
When steel and fire go roaring through your head.
Traversing, mowing heaps down half in fun
The next, you choke and clutch at your right breast—*

He made the island of Majorca his home and lived there until his death in 1985.



Ernst Jünger
(1895-1998)

Ernst Jünger was a German novelist and essayist, an ardent militarist who was one of the most complex and contradictory figures in German literature. The son of a successful businessman and chemist, Jünger rebelled against his affluent upbringing and in 1913 joined the French Foreign Legion. His father had him brought back to Germany where he joined the German army in 1914 at the outbreak of war. He served as an officer on the Western Front throughout the war.

As a soldier Junger was conspicuous for his bravery and wounded at least seven times. An ill-fated German offensive in 1918 ended his career with the last and most serious of his many woundings. He was awarded the Pour Le Merité medal – Germany's highest military honour in 1918, its youngest ever recipient.

After the war his memoir, based on his handwritten diaries, *Storm of steel* (1920) was published. It is a notably unconstructed book which sets no context for the author or his experiences. There is nothing in it about the politics of the war, nothing even on the outcome. However, it contains vivid recollections of his life in the trenches and his experiences in combat as a company commander.

An entry on August 28, 1916, written during the Somme battle, reads:

"This area was meadows and forests and cornfields just a short time ago. There's nothing left of it, nothing at all...

And everything full of corpses who have been turned over a hundred times. Whole lines of soldiers are lying in front of the positions, our passages are filled with corpses lying over each other in layers."

In a dispassionate, matter-of-fact voice, Jünger describes the heroism and suffering displayed by himself and his fellow soldiers in the brutal fighting on the Western Front.

"And still, the heroic, grand impression given by this endless passage of death uplifts and strengthens us survivors. As strange as it may sound, here you become reacquainted with ideals, the total devotion to an ideal right up to the gruesome death in battle," he wrote on July 3, 1916.

In it he attempts to make sense of his war experiences but he also glorifies war as a purifying test of individual and national strength.

The Storm of Steel was a success with critics and public alike in Germany and other countries.

He was discharged from the army in 1923 and went on to study zoology and botany at the Universities of Leipzig and Naples. He continued to publish further memoirs of his war experiences, *The Grove* (1925) *Fire and blood* (1925). This writing, with its attack on bourgeois culture and "civility," played into the prejudices of the Nazis. However, he rebuffed repeated wooing by Hitler's party, refusing the offer of a seat in the Reichstag in 1927 and, after Hitler seized power in 1933, membership in the Nazified German Academy and he lived until 1998.

IRISH WRITERS

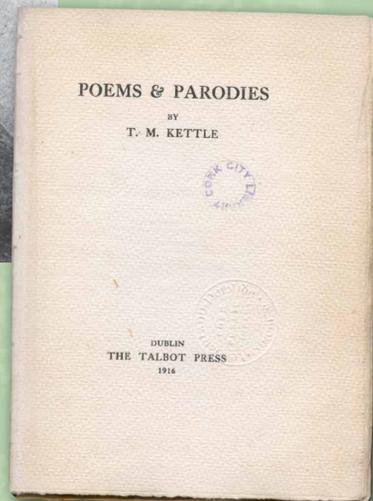
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& THE SOMME

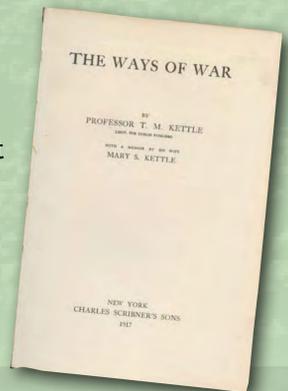


Tom Kettle
(1880 - 1916)



Poet, essayist, soldier, journalist, barrister, professor, politician (MP for East Tyrone 1906-1910), Tom Kettle was an ardent nationalist (joining the Irish Volunteers in 1913) who nevertheless, like many others at the time, joined the British Army to serve in World War I. He counted among his friends Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh and he was closely related to the Sheehy-Skeffingtons. He was co-secretary of the Peace Committee with Joseph Plunkett and Tom Dillon during the Dublin Lock-Out Strike of 1913. While in Belgium buying arms for the Volunteers in 1914 he witnessed the outbreak of WWI. Attracted to journalism and horrified by German atrocities in Belgium he reported on them during his time as war correspondent for the *Daily News*. As a result of what he witnessed in Belgium he backed John Redmond's support for the British war effort. He joined the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and applied to be sent to the Western Front. Because of ill-health he wasn't dispatched to the front line until 1916. Up to this time Kettle continued to publish newspaper articles, pamphlets, essays, poetry and essays. He served with Emmet Dalton in the same battalion – the 16th (Irish) Division of the 9th Battalion of the RDF. His health deteriorated in the trenches but he refused to take leave of absence and abandon his comrades.

Kettle wrote chiefly on the war in the last two years of his life much of which is contained in his collection of essays *In the ways of war*, published after his death and edited by his wife Mary. The critic Robert Lynd called it "the most attractive and eloquent book of prose... written by a soldier during the ...war" *Studies* Dec. 1931 pp 608. Four days before he was killed Kettle wrote a poem for his young daughter titled *To my daughter Betty, the gift of God*. One can already sense disillusionment and impending death in the poem.



Observe the sons of Ulster

Frank McGuinness' play *Observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme* was first performed in February 1985 in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin. It quickly caught the imagination of audiences in Ireland, Britain, the USA, and other parts of the world, and has been performed countless times since. Frank McGuinness is a native of Buncrana, just a few miles from the border between Donegal and Derry.

Nowhere in Ireland was more affected by the tragedy of the Somme than the towns and rural areas of Protestant Ulster. "This powerful and subtle play" (*Times Literary Supplement*) centres on the experience of eight men who, like so many of their workmates, had volunteered to serve in the 36th (Ulster) Division when World War I broke out. While the Battle of the Boyne is nowadays commemorated on the 12th July, the actual battle took place on the 1st July 1690 in the old, Julian, calendar. The climax of the play sees the men in the trenches don their Orange sashes as they prepare to go over the top at the Somme on 1 July 1916.

The claustrophobia and group-think of the trenches echoes the narrow ground of the northern part of the island of Ireland in 1916, riven by sectarian bitterness.

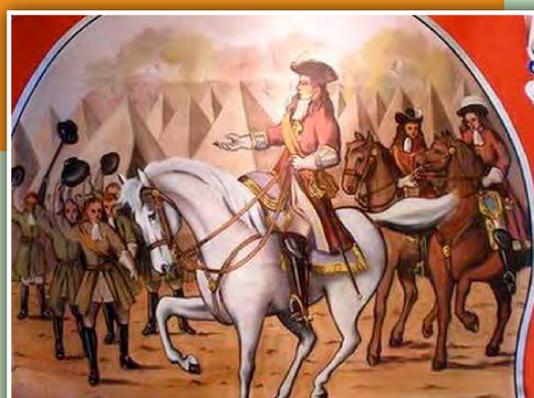
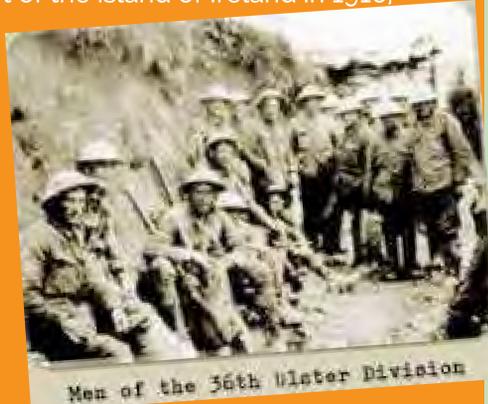
ANDERSON: We've noticed something missing from your uniform. Something important. We think you should do something about it. It might get you into trouble.

PYPER: What's missing?

ANDERSON: Your badge of honour. (Anderson hands out an Orange sash to Pyper).
Well?

PYPER: It's not mine.

ANDERSON: It is now. It's a gift. From us."



TO MY DAUGHTER BETTY,
THE GIFT OF GOD
(ELIZABETH DOROTHY)

In wiser days, my darling rosebud, blown
To beauty proud as was your mother's
prime,
In that desired, delayed, incredible time,
You'll ask why I abandoned you, my own,
And the dear heart that was your baby
throne,
To dice with death. And oh! they'll
give you rhyme
And reason: some will call the thing
sublime,
And some decry it in a knowing tone.

16 PERSONAL POEMS

So here, while the mad guns curse
overhead,
And tired men sigh with mud for couch
and floor,
Know that we fools, now with the foolish
dead,
Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor,
But for a dream, born in a herdsman's
shed,
And for the secret Scripture of the poor.

In the field, before Guillemont, Somme,
September 4, 1916.

His collection of poetry *Poems and parodies* published shortly after his death in 1916 includes *On leaving Ireland*: July 14 1916 which evokes a sense of pathos and poignancy –

In this collection are four war poems – *Paddy*, *Sergeant Mike O'Leary*, *A nation's freedom* and *A song of the Irish armies*.

In his introduction to the collection William Dawson describes Kettle "A genial cynic, a pleasant pessimist, an earnest trifler, he was made up of contradictions. A fellow of infinite jest and infinite sadness".

He was killed on 9th September 1916 leading his men at Ginchy during the Battle of the Somme.

ON LEAVING IRELAND
(July 14, 1916)

The pathos of departure is indubitable.
I never felt my own essay "On saying Good-Bye"
so profoundly *aux irlands du coeur*. The sun was a
clear globe of blood which we caught hanging over Ben
Bolar, with a trail of pure blood vibrating to us across the
waves. It dropped into darkness before we left the deck.
Some lines came to me, suggested by a friend who thought
the mood cynical.

As the sun died in blood, and hill and sea
Grew to an altar, red with mystery,
One came who knew me (it may be over-
much)
Seeking the cynical and staining touch,
But I, against the great sun's burial
Thought only of bayonet-flash and bugle-
call,
And saw him as God's eye upon the deep,
Closed in the dream in which no women
weep,
And knew that even I shall fall on sleep.

(D 821)

THE SOMME & MEMORY

CURSE



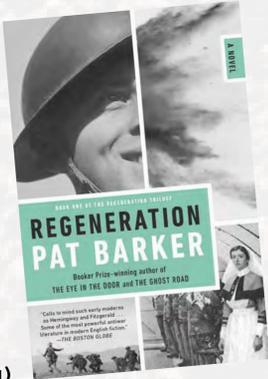
Pat Barker

Barker features real people in her novel, *Regeneration*, most notably Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and their psychiatrist Dr. William Rivers. Dr. Rivers was a pioneering doctor in the field of treating shell shock or neurasthenia through "nerve regeneration" which inspired the title of the novel.

Barker based her fictitious characters on those soldiers who were patients in Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh where much of the novel takes place. Craiglockhart treated army officers suffering from shell shock and it is here that we encounter the poets Sassoon and Owen in 1917, the Somme Offensive being over a few months earlier.

One of Barker's more interesting fictitious characters in the novel is Billy Prior – "Prior is a working-class officer from the north of England, intelligent, ambitious, and above all, awkward... Prior is not cut from the same cloth as aristocratic Sassoon or middle-class Wilfred Owen. His England is not the England of rolling green hills and honey still for tea, but a place of crowded streets, grey skies, and grim poverty. This alone makes him stand out in the pantheon of First World War popular characters, real and fictional"

(Dr Tracey Loughran, *Reviews in History* December 2011)



Regeneration – Pat Barker. (1991)

"Our understanding of the first world war has been shaped by these men [Sassoon and Owen] and their poetry. By bringing them to life in her novel it feels as if Barker is taking on a necessary challenge".

(Prof. John Mullan, *The Guardian*, Aug. 24 2012.)

Quote from Pat Barker on Sassoon and Owen-

"I'm more and more interested in the way his poems and Owen's poems both claim a special status for the combatant and set out to be antiwar poems, because, as I mentioned before, it seems to me that there is a very important internal contradiction there. Sassoon himself became very dissatisfied with the kinds of poems he was writing. He didn't want to write angry poems anymore. But he never really found any other way of writing about the war other than through anger. And I think that he quite rightly saw that Owen was capable of another way of writing about it."

Excerpt from An interview with Pat Barker by Rob Nixon in the *Journal of Contemporary Literature* no. 45, March 2004.

Regeneration was the first of Barker's celebrated World War 1 war trilogy of the same name, the others being *Eye in the door* (1993) and *The ghost road* (1995).

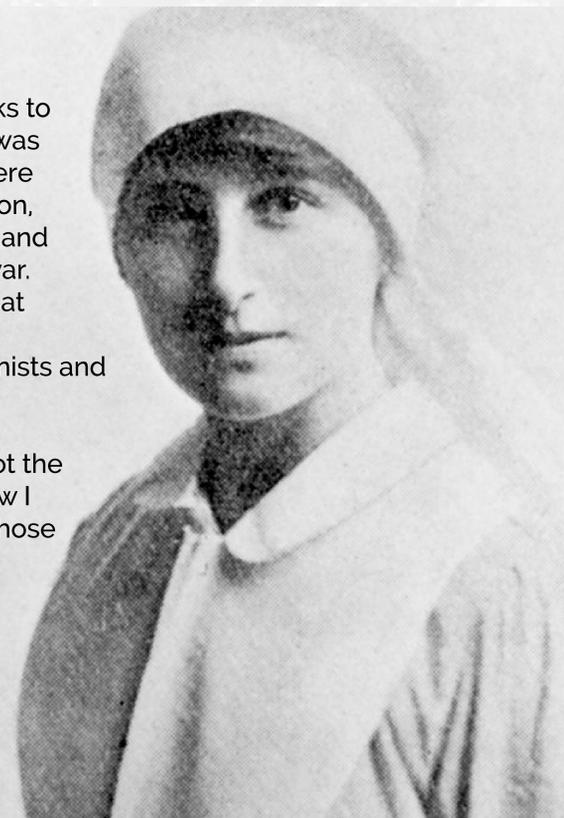
Vera Brittain (1893-1970)

Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* is one of the great books to emerge from the pain and slaughter of World War 1. She was only 20 when the War broke out. Her family and friends were quickly caught up in the conflict - her fiancé Roland Leighton, close friends Victor Richardson M.C. and Geoffrey Thurlow, and her brother Edward Brittain M.C. were all killed during the war. She herself joined up as a nurse in 1915, leaving her studies at Oxford University to do so.

She lived until 1970, one of England's foremost writers, feminists and pacifists.

"It looked like a regular rot and I can't remember just how I got the men together and made them go over the parapet. I only know I had to go back twice to get them, and I wouldn't go through those minutes again if it meant the V.C.... They'd followed me across the open for about seventy yards when I got hit the first time; that was in the thigh. I fell down and got up, but fell down again; after twice trying to go on I gave it up and crawled into a shell hole. I was lying there with my arms stretched out and my head between them, as we'd been told to do, when a huge beast of a shell burst quite close to the hole. A splinter from it went through my arm; the pain was so frightful- much worse than the thigh- that I thought the arm was gone, and lost my nerve and began to scream. Then I saw it was still there and managed to pull myself together; and after I'd been in the hole about an hour and a half, I noticed that the hail of machine gun bullets on the British trenches seemed to be slackening..."

An extract of a verbal account given by Edward Brittain to his sister Vera, of injuries he sustained in the Battle of the Somme, as documented in her book, *Testament of youth* (p256).

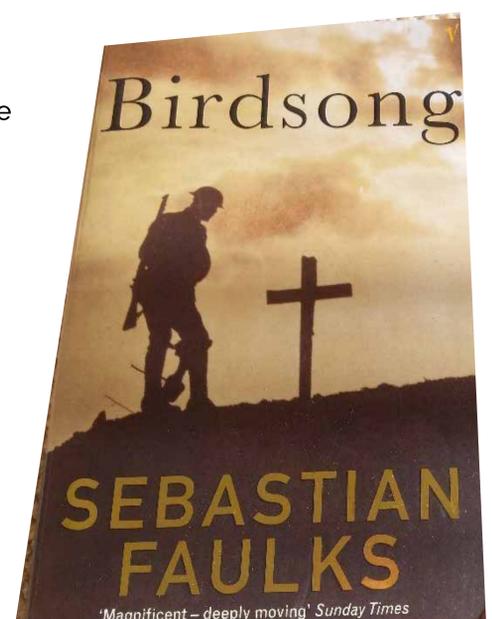


Sebastian Faulks

Birdsong is comprised of seven parts ranging from pre-war 1910, the war itself (particularly 1916-1918) to 1979.

The book starts before the war in 1910 when the main character, Stephen Wraysford, a young Englishman, arrives in Amiens, France. There, he experiences a doomed love affair. The story moves back and forth from the war to 1978 where we meet Stephen's granddaughter who finds his war diaries. She delves into Stephen's experiences in the war and talks to his war comrades.

Quote from Faulks when doing research for the book in France – "In April I went to the Somme frontline with a battlefield map from the Imperial War Museum. I had long been interested by what infamous places were like before they acquired their terrible names...What had the Somme been like before it became 'the Somme'?.... I spent some days walking the length of the British line along the Ancre and across the pathetically small distance of the advance, bought at the cost of 60,000 casualties in a single day. I sat for hours in some small cemeteries. I didn't quite know what I was looking for; I was just immersing myself in this world, hoping, I suppose, to acquire the authority to write about it."



Birdsong – Sebastian Faulks, (Hutchinson, 1993)

