

# Education Pack 2018

## *Not About Heroes*

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At **Flying Bridge Theatre Co.** we spend a lot of time exploring ways we can use drama to enrich the experience of learning, and to encourage young people to enjoy and engage with theatre either in their school or in a theatre local to them.

We know that young learners often find accessing texts, poetry and literature difficult or unexciting and irrelevant but for us theatre-makers, this material is as exciting and as relevant as it's possible to be. In creating this production of *Not About Heroes*, we hope to pass on our own enthusiasm for the words, the history and the relationship between the two celebrated war poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.

It is our aim to reach many young people with an accessible production that will enrich any classroom experience when teaching Drama, Poetry or History.

This pack has been designed to enhance your experience of seeing *Not About Heroes* and we welcome any feedback.

Don't forget that we offer workshops on most aspects of drama and visit many schools in the surrounding area to work with students and teachers. For an informal discussion about how we can support your learners, please get in touch via [info@flyingbridgetheatre.com](mailto:info@flyingbridgetheatre.com). Our workshops can be tailored to suit your needs.

[www.notaboutheroes.info](http://www.notaboutheroes.info)

[www.flyingbridgetheatre.co.uk](http://www.flyingbridgetheatre.co.uk)

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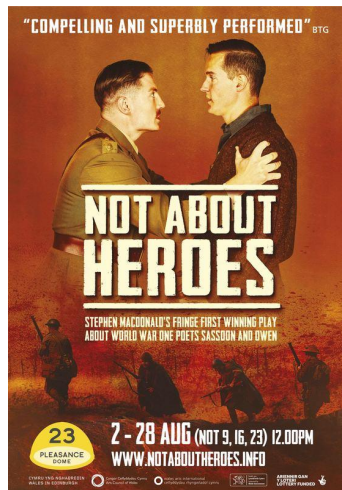


### **The Playwright: Stephen MacDonald**

Stephen MacDonald was a British actor, dramatist, novelist and director. He was brought up and educated in Birmingham where he trained as an actor, and subsequently worked extensively as a theatre director, beginning his directorial career at Leicester Phoenix Theatre. He was later instrumental in reviving the fortunes of Dundee Repertory Theatre, and in 1976 was appointed Artistic Director of the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh.

His other plays include *All Ayre & Fire*, *Billy Budd*, *Jungle Book* (all with the Royal Lyceum Edinburgh Company) as well as an adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, which toured the UK in 1990.

Stephen MacDonald died in 2009.



### The Production: Not About Heroes

***Not About Heroes*** is a drama by Stephen MacDonald about the real-life relationship between the poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, first performed in 1982 at the Edinburgh Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The play has only two characters: Owen and Sassoon. The story of their friendship is told in a series of flashbacks, narrated by Sassoon who survived World War I (in which Owen was killed). Most of the scenes take place during their time as patients at Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh in 1917.

The title is a quotation from the preface Wilfred Owen wrote in preparation for the publication of his collected poems:

*"This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity."*

## Synopsis

The action is replayed through the eyes of an older Siegfried Sassoon, as he recalls his relationship with Wilfred Owen, beginning some fourteen years earlier.

Owen introduces himself hesitantly to Sassoon when the latter arrives at Craiglockhart in 1917, having been diagnosed as suffering from "war neurosis" because of his protest against the war.

The course of their friendship is shown through extracts from the real diaries and letters of the two men, right up to their last meeting at the Chelsea Physic Garden, when Sassoon was recovering from the head wound that would end his military career, while Owen waited to return to the Western Front, where he would be killed shortly afterwards.

## Themes

### Truth in War

1. 'The First Casualty of War is the Truth', attributed to Johnson see [https://en.m.wikiquote.org/wiki/Hiram\\_Johnson](https://en.m.wikiquote.org/wiki/Hiram_Johnson)

2. In *Not About Heroes*, Sassoon at one point says; "If they know the truth, the killing will have to stop!" to which Owen replies: "Will you teach me the words?" - the implication (and indeed the theme of much of the play) being that the truth is being hidden from the public, and that potentially the clearest expression of the truth, the reality that men face (reference particularly the Somme and Passchendaele here) is in poetry, not bare facts.

3. When he rallied against the true motives of the war, Sassoon was deemed (ironically from the perspective of today) by the medical board to be "suffering from the effects of a passing nervous shock" and sent to Craiglockhart Hospital.

4. Sassoon's critique of the war includes the lines "I believe that this war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. The war upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest... I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolonging those sufferings for ends, which I believe to be evil and unjust... Fighting men are being sacrificed, and I make this protest against the deception which is being practised upon them." - meaning that the truth was not only being concealed from the public, but from the soldiers themselves.

5. Art does not necessarily have a prominent role in social justice - or it is deemed dogmatic - but it has a deep relationship with truth and authenticity, "showing the world as it is", and this is why Owen talks about - "I shall never be sure unless I know what... what happens. What it feels like when the bullet hits you. What you feel when you think you're dying. I've got to know that and face it" — and the experience of Owen and Sassoon, their dialectic, which ironically reasons itself, in pursuit of truth, to Owen's death, so fittingly also makes a great play.

## PTSD

1. Prior to WW1 there was little knowledge of PTSD. The phrase 'Shell Shock' was coined during the latter stages of the war. All treatment for said condition were, to that point, treated as external affectations, brought about by some unknown 'physical' trauma within the brain, possibly due to the loud noises. Treatment was therefore, in line with the surgical understanding of the time, physical; electro therapy, bloodletting, physical restraint, heat, cold, and lobotomy. Not until Doctor Rivers was anyone aware of the effect that counsel had on the condition. The catharsis of discussion and purging of trauma through a mental process was pioneered by Rivers at Craiglockhart hospital, where Sassoon and Owen met.

2. History of Shell Shock [http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/extra/series-1/shell\\_shocked.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/extra/series-1/shell_shocked.shtml)

3. Policy of silence. Both politically and socially there was an embargo on men talking of their experiences in the Great War. Due to censorship, the soldiers were conditioned to discuss only the mundane in their letters home; food, horses, boredom (which was indeed tangible). In doing so, the men inevitably created a barrier to the desire to vent their accounts of the more traumatic experiences and social restrictions perpetuated by the church and society at large, preventing them from 'infecting' their loved ones with their sadness. The effects of this silence were twofold: The men didn't achieve the counsel they desperately needed, and which modern medicine soon declared necessary, but also the lessons of the tragedy were not fully realised by society at large; father to son and mother to daughter teachings were manipulated to tell a rosier story. And here is the cross over between PTSD, policy of silence and propaganda.

4. A good article on the effects of silence.

<https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/the-silence-after-the-war>

5. Sassoon and Owen were poster boys for Shell Shock, but it affected them in very different ways. Sassoon was an extrovert: a psychopathic rage bore him hero status, but then gave him the platform to protest. His aura then inspired Owen, who's introverted empathy and natural creative talents surpassed Sassoon's. Owen's need to cleanse himself of hypocrisy ultimately led him to his death.

6. In *Not About Heroes*, MacDonald explores the crossroads of these themes within the crucible of Craiglockhart and the twisted husk of Sassoon's imagination in his later years, ruminating over the millions of lost lives and the beauty of Owen's perfect mind.

## Homosexuality

1. There is a very good article at <http://www.eastsussexww1.org.uk/homosexuality-in-wwi/>

2. At the time, the world of feelings, love, truth between men caged by anti-gay laws, attitudes, class, rank, and regiment was one of guarded code and repressed sub text. In the world of the play, sometimes the love, the passion, breaks through.

**SASSOON:** You must take great care of yourself— for me — for all of us.

**OWEN:** (smiling) Is that an order?

**SASSOON:** A strict order.

**OWEN:** Then I will. For you. (Suddenly, they hug each other. There is probably as much fear as love. They let go. SASSOON looks around.)

**SASSOON:** Well, I'm glad there was nobody around to witness that little scene. For the honour of our fellow patients and all that. Craiglockhart Hospital might have succumbed to corporate hysterics.

**OWEN:** I think I'd have enjoyed seeing that — Edinburgh in apo - p-plexy... (OWEN'S attempt at a joke fails. He is near to tears — which are not allowed. He moves away.)

**SASSOON:** Look, you're forgetting Mr. Strong's masterpiece.

**OWEN:** No, I'd never ... (takes two sheets of blue writing paper from his pocket.) This ... I didn't mean it to be funny, but you never know.

**SASSOON:** For me?

**OWEN:** Like everything else.

3. Within the passion of the poetry, the grief of loss are deep feelings between men;

"...When I find new loveliness to praise,

And things long-known shine out in sudden grace,

Then will I think: 'He moves before me now.'

So he will never come but in delight,

And, as it was in life, his name shall be

Wonder awakening in a summer dawn,

And youth that, dying, touched my lips to song."

*(Sassoon, The Last Meeting)*



4. Perhaps most moving of all, bridging the intense passion for each other and their intense passion for poetry and truth, is Owen's letter to Sassoon in which he invokes the starry firmament as a metaphor:

"And you have fixed my life — however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I spun around you, a satellite, for a month, but I shall swing out soon — a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze. Someday, I must tell how we sang, shouted, whistled and danced through the dark lanes of Colinton; and how we laughed till the meteors showered around us, and we fell calm under the winter stars. And some of us saw the pathway of the spirits for the first time. And seeing that pathway so far above us, and feeling the good road so safe beneath us, we praised God with louder whistling; and knew we loved one another as no men love for long. I wish you were less undemonstrative — for I have many adjectives with which to qualify myself. As it is, I can only say I am ... Your proud friend, Owen."

*(From Owen's letter to Sassoon, 5 November 1917, Shrewsbury - Adapted for Not About Heroes)*

5. See <http://rictornorton.co.uk/owen.htm> for further love letters between Owen and Sassoon, and Essays on Gay History and Literature.

## Poetry

1. Sassoon and Owen were war poets. Sassoon's poetry was and is considered highly but, within the spectrum of the entire war poetry cannon, less remarkable than Owen's and that of others. Sassoon's journey as a war poet began within the Jingoistic model, buying into the propaganda-based 'Glory of War' format commonly received in the early part of the war. Sassoon however, who had led a privileged life up until 1914, was a closet homosexual and lost not only his brother in Gallipoli, but the love of his life, David Cuthbert Thomas during his first year in the war. This loss marked a massive change in his poetry, which primarily focused on the tragedy and the loss of David and then began to reflect the 'pity of war'; it was this compassion in Sassoon's poetry which inspired the novice Wilfred Owen to give his God-given capacity for empathy and visceral metaphor over to that same purpose.

[http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/11/10/siegfried\\_sassoon\\_and\\_wilfred\\_owen\\_the\\_best\\_poems\\_of\\_the\\_great\\_war\\_are\\_by.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/11/10/siegfried_sassoon_and_wilfred_owen_the_best_poems_of_the_great_war_are_by.html)

2. Sassoon's most powerful poem 'The Last Meeting' is a formative poem in Not About Heroes.

<http://www.bartleby.com/135/35.html>

3. Sassoon's 'The soldier's declaration' - although not a poem - is a landmark in the growth of his and Owen's political agendas.

<http://noglory.org/index.php/finished-with-the-war-a-soldier-s-declaration>

4. Owen's growth as a poet, within the walls of a blossoming friendship with Sassoon, led him to break free of the shackles of experience and write fictional poetry which, through his immense compassion, freed him to cover the full gamut of themes within the war with an intensity of emotion which even Sassoon found "shocking".

<http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/Owena.html>

5. Anthem for Doomed Youth. Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' is selected by MacDonald as the definitive poem in Owen's journey. The themes within suit the message of the 'pity of war' which the author means to champion. It was certainly written under Sassoon's tutelage.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthem\\_for\\_Doomed\\_Youth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthem_for_Doomed_Youth)

6. Dulce Et Decorum Est, although arguably Owen's most famous poem, does not feature in the play. This is because it was written days before he died, in the trenches. It is more of a story poem and is of particular academic interest due to its nonstandard verse structure, which Owen borrowed from the French romantic style and is not often seen in English poetry. Therefore, it has been the lynchpin of schools' curricula but not necessarily as suited to MacDonald's vision of the two men's relationship.

## Past Productions

*Not About Heroes* had its première at the Edinburgh Festival in 1982 and won a Fringe First award. Directed by Eric Standidge, Sassoon was played by the author and Owen by David Learner.

It toured to the King's Head, was adapted for Yorkshire TV and BBC Radio 4, and was published by Faber and Faber, all in 1983. A new production at the Royal National Theatre in 1986 celebrated the centenary of Sassoon's birth. A national tour took place the following year with Paul Shelley as Siegfried Sassoon and Stephen McGann as Wilfred Owen. In 1992, the author directed a revised text for the Citizen's, Glasgow – a production which afterwards was seen in Shrewsbury as part of the celebrations marking the centenary of Owen's birth.

A production by Dianne Wiest at the Williamstown Theatre Festival transferred to New York City in 1985. Edward Herrmann and Dylan Baker both won OBIE awards. The 1987 Stratford Ontario production, with Nicholas Pennell and Henry Czerny, was revived the following year. *Not About Heroes* was also performed in the early 1990s at The Round House Theatre in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Stephen McGann reprised his role as Owen in a production at the Oxford Playhouse in 1987, opposite Paul Shelley as Sassoon. Jonas Armstrong played Owen in a 2000 production at the Edinburgh Fringe.

In October/November 2008, Rowan Tree Theatre Co. in the Scottish Borders mounted a production of the play to mark the 90th anniversary of the end of the Great War and in celebration of the company's twenty-first birthday. One performance was given in Craiglockhart Hospital, the site of the actual meeting of the two poets. Sassoon was played by Oliver Bisset, and Owen by Matthew Burgess. The play was directed by John Haswell and produced by Judy Steel.

Notable productions of *Not About Heroes* in recent years have included a version mounted for the 2002 Hay-on-Wye literary festival, starring Roger Moss and Owen Sheers. It was directed by Cathy Gill and produced by the novelist Louis de Bernières. The following year, Peter Dickson and Andrew Butterworth starred in a production at the Crescent Theatre, Birmingham. In 2005 MADHouse Productions staged a poignant version in the intimate surroundings of the Barons Court Theatre in west London. A production by director Tim Baker at Theatr Clwyd won Daniel Llewellyn Williams the Best Actor accolade at the Wales Theatre Awards, and a new production, again directed by Baker and featuring Daniel Llewellyn Williams as Sassoon and Iestyn Arwel as Owen toured Wales, England and the World for the first time in 2017.



### **2017 Interview with the Director Tim Baker**

The full interview can be found digitally at: <http://www.walesartsreview.org/wales-at-the-fringe-flying-bridge/>

#### **Tell us about your show**

Our latest project, and the show we're taking to Edinburgh is *Not About Heroes*, a Fringe First winning play written by Stephen McDonald. The title of the play is taken from a preface that Wilfred Owen wrote to his last volume of poetry in which he said his work is not about heroes and his poems aren't about heroes, but they are about war. In this show, what is being celebrated is that Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, two influential war poets, met up during the war in 1917 and became great friends. An interesting fact is that they met in Craiglockhart hospital in Edinburgh 100 years ago. Their friendship grew specifically through poetry and through the experience of war. Although Owen and Sassoon were heavily implicated gay lovers their real cross-interest and developing relationship was about their shared passion to tell the truth about war through poetry. The play features a mixture of poetic content set to the backdrop of war and this, for me as a director, make the scene opposites a very exciting exploration to work with.

#### **Tell us about Flying Bridge Theatre Company**

Flying Bridge Theatre Company is a relatively new company based in Newport, one of the few professional theatre companies based there. Our focus is creating a work, which bridges communities, by working with our audiences before and after they see our show. Our ideal is to visit a city and do more than just the booked performance; we are interested in sharing our work with people who might not get the chance to see it on the stage. We want to bring new audiences to see great theatre and that's what we hope to do with *Not About Heroes* and a series of other projects in the future. Flying Bridge have created shows such as *A Regular Little Houdini* (which has now been performed globally) and *Between The Crosses* (which will also be playing in Edinburgh this Summer) and have a real passion for community driven engagement, 'bridging' that gap between theatre makers and audiences

#### **Tell us about yourself**

I am Tim Baker; I have worked as a director and writer in Wales for 40 years. I am a Welsh speaker and I have worked with several of the National Theatres in Britain. I am as passionate about theatres and audiences as I have ever been. I enjoy bringing theatre to new spaces and encouraging young people to engage with the arts, whether as an audience or an active participant. The thing that drives me is working with a quality of work whether on a stage, on a street, in a community centre or in a primary school.

## Meet the Cast



**Daniel Llewellyn Williams**

*Siegfried Sassoon*

Dan is a multi-award-winning actor, fight director and writer.

In 2014, he formed Flying Bridge Theatre and has determined to educate, entertain, inspire and provoke with his work.

After completing a three-year acting diploma course at LAMDA, Dan also became a stage fight director of note, continuing to act for many regional rep companies, West End shows, film and television both nationally and internationally for the last 16 years.

Dan is an associate member of the company at Theatre Clwyd where he met and worked with Tim Baker. Under Tim's direction Dan won Best Actor in the Wales Theatre Awards 2015.



**Owain Gwynn**

*Wilfred Owen*

Owain trained at RADA and East15

Owain's theatre work includes *The Light Princess* and *Warhorse* for the National Theatre, *Porgy & Bess* for the Open Air Theatre at Regent's Park, *Spring Awakening* (Deffro'r Gwanwyn) for the Welsh National Theatre (Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru), *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* for Clwyd Theatr Cymru, and *The Master And Margarita* for Fragments Theatre.

His screen credits include *The Last Rambler* (short), *Macbeth* (short) and *Zanzibar* (TV series).

Owain is a fluent Welsh speaker, and is a proficient musician with experience of guitar, piano, saxophone and the ukulele. He is a highly physically trained performer, with skills including martial arts (aikido/karate), fencing, kayaking, climbing and large-scale puppetry.

He is also highly skilled in stage combat and sword fighting.

## War/Conflict Poetry and the Poets in the Play

Roughly 10 million soldiers lost their lives in World War I, along with seven million civilians. The horror of the war and its aftermath altered the world for decades, and poets responded to the brutalities and losses in new ways. Just months before his death in 1918, English poet Wilfred Owen famously wrote,

*“This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War.”*



## Siegfried Sassoon

Siegfried Sassoon is best remembered for his angry and compassionate poems of the First World War, which brought him public and critical acclaim. Avoiding the sentimentality and jingoism of many war poets, Sassoon wrote of the horror and brutality of trench warfare and contemptuously satirised generals, politicians and churchmen for their incompetence and blind support of the war. His later poems, often concerned with religious themes, were less appreciated, but the autobiographical trilogy *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* won him two major awards.

Born into a wealthy Jewish family, sometimes called the "Rothschilds of the East" because the family fortune was made in India, Sassoon lived the leisurely life of a cultivated country gentleman before the First World War, pursuing his two major interests, poetry and fox hunting. His early work, which was privately printed in several slim volumes between 1906 and 1916, is considered minor and imitative, heavily influenced by John Masefield (of whose work *The Daffodil Murderer* is a parody).

Following the outbreak of the First World War, Sassoon served with the Royal Welch Fusiliers, seeing action in France in late 1915. He received a Military Cross for bringing back a wounded soldier during heavy fire. After being wounded in action, Sassoon wrote an open letter of protest to the war department, refusing to fight any more. "I believe that this War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it," he wrote in the letter. At the urging of Bertrand Russell, the letter was read in the House of Commons. Sassoon expected to be court-martialled for his protest, but poet Robert Graves intervened on his behalf, arguing that Sassoon was suffering from shell shock and needed medical treatment. In 1917, Sassoon was hospitalised.

*Counter-Attack and Other Poems* collects some of Sassoon's best war poems, all of which are "harshly realistic laments or satires," according to Margaret B. McDowell in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. The later collection, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, included 64 poems of the war, most written while Sassoon was in hospital recovering from his injuries. Public reaction to Sassoon's poetry was fierce. Some readers complained that the poet displayed little patriotism, while others found his shockingly realistic depiction of war to be too extreme. Even pacifist friends complained about the violence and graphic detail in his work. But the British public bought the books because, in his best poems, Sassoon captured the feeling of trench warfare and the weariness of British soldiers for a war that seemed never to end. "The dynamic quality of his war poems," according to a critic for the *Times Literary Supplement*, "was due to the intensity of feeling which underlay their cynicism." "In the history of British poetry," McDowell wrote, "[Sassoon] will be remembered primarily for some one hundred poems ... in which he protested the continuation of World War I."

After the war, Sassoon became involved in Labour Party politics, lectured on pacifism, and continued to write. His most successful works of this period were his trilogy of autobiographical novels, *The Memoirs of George Sherston*. In these he gave a thinly-fictionalised account, with little changed except names, of his wartime experiences, contrasting them with his nostalgic memories of country life before the war and recounting the growth of his pacifist feelings. Some have maintained that Sassoon's best work is his prose, particularly the first two Sherston novels. *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man* was described by a critic for the *Springfield Republican* as "a novel of wholly fresh and delightful content," and Robert Littrell of *Bookman* called it "a singular and a strangely beautiful book."

That book's sequel was also well received. The *New Statesman* critic called *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* "a document of intense and sensitive humanity." In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, after Sassoon's death, one critic wrote: "His one real masterpiece, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* ... is consistently fresh. His self-scrutiny is candid, critical, and humorous.... If Sassoon had written as well as this consistently, he would have been a figure of real stature. As it is, English literature has one great work from him almost by accident."

Sassoon's critical biography of Victorian novelist and poet George Meredith was also well received. In this volume, he recounted numerous anecdotes about Meredith, portraying him vividly as a person as well as an author: "The reader lays the book down with the feeling that a great author has become one of his close neighbours," wrote G. F. Whicher in the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*. The critical portions of the book were also praised, though some found the writing careless. But the *New Yorker* critic noted Sassoon's "fresh and lively literary criticism," and the reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* declared that "Mr Sassoon gives us a poet's estimate, considered with intensity of insight, skilfully shaped as biography, and written with certainty of style."

In 1957 Sassoon became a convert to Catholicism, though for some time before his conversion his spiritual concerns had been the predominant subject of his writing. These later religious poems are usually considered markedly inferior to those written between 1917 and 1920, yet *Sequences* (published shortly before his conversion) has been praised by some critics. Derek Stanford, in *Books and Bookmen*, claimed, "the poems in *Sequences* constitute some of the most impressive religious poetry of this century."

Speaking of Sassoon's war poetry in a 1981 issue of the *Spectator*, P. J. Kavanagh claimed that "today they ring as true as they ever did; it is difficult to see how they could be better." Looking back over Sassoon's long literary career, Peter Levi wrote in *Poetry Review*: "One can experience in his poetry the slow, restless ripening of a very great talent; its magnitude has not yet been recognised.... He is one of the few poets of his generation we are really unable to do without."

## Wilfred Owen

Wilfred Owen, who wrote some of the best British poetry on World War I, composed nearly all his poems in slightly over a year, from August 1917 to September 1918. In November 1918 he was killed in action at the age of twenty-five, one week before the Armistice. Only five poems were published in his lifetime—three in the *Nation* and two that appeared anonymously in the *Hydra*, a journal he edited in 1917 when he was a patient at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh.

Shortly after his death, seven more of his poems appeared in the 1919 volume of Edith Sitwell's annual anthology, *Wheels*, a volume dedicated to his memory, and in 1919 and 1920 seven other poems appeared in periodicals.

Almost all of Owen's poems, therefore, appeared posthumously: *Poems* (1920), edited by Siegfried Sassoon with the assistance of Edith Sitwell, contains twenty-three poems; *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1931), edited by Edmund Blunden, adds nineteen poems to this number; and *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1963), edited by C. Day Lewis, contains eighty poems, adding some juvenilia, minor poems, and fragments but omitting a few of the poems from Blunden's edition.

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born on 18 March 1893, in Oswestry, on the Welsh border of Shropshire, in the beautiful and spacious home of his maternal grandfather. Wilfred's father, Thomas, a former seaman, had returned from India to marry Susan Shaw; throughout the rest of his life Thomas felt constrained by his somewhat dull and low-paid position as a railway stationmaster. Owen's mother felt that her marriage limited her intellectual, musical and economic ambitions. Both parents seem to have been of Welsh descent, and Susan's family had been relatively affluent during her childhood but had lost ground economically. As the oldest of four children born in rapid succession, Wilfred developed a protective attitude toward the others and an especially close relationship with his mother. After he turned four, the family moved from the grandfather's home to a modest house in Birkenhead, where Owen attended Birkenhead Institute from 1900 to 1907. The family then moved to another modest house in Shrewsbury, where Owen attended Shrewsbury Technical School and graduated in 1911 at the age of 18, having attempted unsuccessfully to win a scholarship to attend London.

Owen's life as a poet apparently began in the summer of 1917, but he had, in fact, been preparing himself haphazardly but determinedly for a career as poet throughout the preceding five or six years. He had worshipped Keats and later Shelley during adolescence; during his two years at Dunsden he had read and written poetry in the isolated evenings at the vicarage; in Bordeaux, the elderly symbolist poet and pacifist writer Laurent Tailhade had encouraged him in his ambition to become a poet.

When Sassoon arrived at the hospital at which he was being treated, it took Owen two weeks to get the courage to knock on his door and identify himself as a poet. At that time Owen, like many others in the hospital, was speaking with a stammer. By autumn he was not only articulate with his new friends and lecturing in the community but was able to use his terrifying experiences in France, and his conflicts about returning, as the subject of poems expressing his own deepest feelings. He experienced an astonishing period of creative energy that lasted through several months, until he returned to France and the heavy fighting in the fall of 1918.

By the time they met, Owen and Sassoon shared the conviction that the war ought to be ended, since the total defeat of the Central Powers would entail additional destruction, casualties and suffering of staggering magnitude. In 1917 and 1918 both found their creative stimulus in a compassionate identification with soldiers in combat and in the hospital. Despite their strong desire to remain in England to protest the continuation of the war, both finally returned to their comrades in the trenches, where sadly Owen was killed just one week before Armistice in 1918.



# **Anthem for Doomed Youth**

Wilfred Owen

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 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.

## Dulce et Decorum Est

Wilfred Owen

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 gas-shells dropping softly 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*

## Dreamers

Siegfried Sassoon

Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,  
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.

In the great hour of destiny they stand,  
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.

Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win  
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.

Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin  
They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,  
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,  
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,  
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain  
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,  
And going to the office in the train.

## Everyone Sang

Siegfried Sassoon

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;  
And I was filled with such delight  
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,  
Winging wildly across the white  
Orchards and dark-green fields; on - on - and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;  
And beauty came like the setting sun:  
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror  
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone  
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.



## Suicide in the Trenches

Siegfried Sassoon

I knew a simple soldier boy  
Who grinned at life in empty joy,  
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,  
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain.

No one spoke of him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

You snug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.



# WILFRED OWEN

(1893 -1918)

## FACT SHEET

- Born in Shropshire, England
- Tried out poetry when he was young
- Worked as an assistant to a Reverend (vicar).
- Taught English in France until 1915, when he returned to England and joined the army (Artists Rifles)
- In 1917 had a terrible time in the trenches: had to hold a flooded dug out (big hole) in 'no man's land' for fifty hours whilst being bombed and shot at!
- Eventually he was sent to military hospital in England because he had 'shell shock'.
- He met Siegfried Sassoon in hospital who encouraged him to continue and develop his poetry.
- Wrote most of his famous poems in hospital or soon afterwards.
- Returned to war in France in 1918, and died on 4<sup>th</sup> November.
- His parents were told the news of his death on the day of the armistice (when the war ended).



# SIEGFRIED SASSOON

(1886 -1967)

## FACT SHEET

- Born to a wealthy Jewish family and had a good life
- Very innocent about war, which people think made his reaction to it even stronger.
- His brother died at Gallipoli (where Brookes also died) and this had a very strong effect on him
- Was called 'Mad Jack' in the trenches because he was so upset by the war
- He showed his anger at the war and the British Government through poetry.
- Thought to be suffering from 'shell (bombs) shock' so sent to military hospital.
- Met Wilfred Owen in hospital and mentored (taught) him. Owen is also a very famous WW1 poet.
- When he was older, religion helped him cope with the horrors of war.



# WILFRED OWEN

## WORKSHEET

**AIM: To analyse Wilfred Owen's poem, 'Dulce Et Decorum Est'**

Use your fact sheet about Wilfred Owen, your copy of the poem, and what we have discussed in class, to help you answer these questions.

### Part One – Wilfred Owen Background Information

1. Where was Wilfred Owen born?
2. When did he start practising writing poetry?
3. What was his job when he left war?
4. What did Owen do in France until 1915?
5. Why did he return to England in 1915?
6. Why was Owen sent to military hospital back in England? Describe the illness he had:
7. Which other famous World War One poet did he meet in hospital?
8. What did Sassoon encourage him to do?
9. On what date did Owen die?
10. Why is this so tragic?

## **Part Two: Analysing the Poem**

First Stanza:

1. What is the title of this poem?
2. What is the main emotion expressed in the first stanza (verse)?
3. Write an example of a simile used in the first stanza:
4. Why were the shells 'disappointed'?

Second Stanza:

1. How does the emotion change at the beginning of the second stanza?
2. What were the soldiers 'fumbling' for and why?
3. Owen uses a metaphor to describe what the gas looked like. What is that metaphor?

Third Stanza:

1. Why do you think the third stanza is only two lines long? Think about the dramatic effect and the emotion:

Fourth Stanza:

1. What is the main emotion expressed in the fourth stanza?
2. Name three parts of the body that are affected by this sort of gas:
3. What does the final line mean in English:

*Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.*

### **Extension Question:**

Write your opinion of this poem. Think about what the emotion expressed, use of powerful words, use of similes and metaphors, layout, and what the poet is trying to say. Try to use full sentences and give reasons to support your ideas:



# SIEGFRIED SASSOON

## WORKSHEET

**AIM: To analyse Siegfried Sassoon's poem, 'Suicide In The Trenches'**

Use your fact sheet about Siegfried Sassoon, your copy of the poem, and what we have discussed in class, to help you answer these questions.

1. Describe Sassoon's family background and upbringing,
2. How might this have affected his opinion of the war when it first started?
3. What event dramatically changed Sassoon's opinion of the war?
4. Was Sassoon only angry at the German and Central Powers for the war?
5. What condition was Sassoon thought to be suffering from in the trenches?
6. Where was he sent to recover?
7. Which other famous poet did he meet there?
8. How did he express (show) his anger?
9. Read the poem 'Suicide in the Trenches' again. Write some of the rhyming pairs.
10. Describe the main emotions in each of the three stanzas.
11. What is the soldier like before he goes to war?
12. What happens to him after he has been fighting in the trenches for a while?
13. Why did '*no one spoke of him again*'?
14. Why is Sassoon angry with the public for cheering the soldiers as they go off to war?
15. What does he tell people they must do instead?

### Extension Question:

Write your opinion of this poem. Think about what you like, don't like, the use of powerful words, expression of emotion, layout and the purpose of the poem. Try to give reasons: