

The Road to Edingthorpe: Sassoon's Diaries and Letters

The Sassoon Diaries, of which three volumes have so far appeared, spanning 1915-1925 (with the unexplained omission of 1919), might have been expected to supply primary revelation of the most assiduous, yet evasive modern English autobiographer. These were, at two removes, the Memoirs of the Twenties, in which George Sherston played a simplified version of the author--the war poetry left out and Craiglockhart (Slateford) without Wilfred Owen. In the Thirties Sassoon settled into a reflective, ruminative vein, returning in The Old Century and The Weald of Youth to his Victorian childhood and Edwardian "summer," then tracing the lucky life of an aspiring late Romantic lyricist, who also, in the years leading to the Great War, happened to hunt foxes. Siegfried's Journey concluded this sequence, drawing more heavily upon diary matter (as had Sherston's Progress with modifications). After apparently terminating at 1920 the story of the making of the real Sassoon with the Journey (1945), Sassoon became profoundly retiring, even reclusive.

The Diaries Rupert Hart-Davis has so far edited bring Sassoon's life only five years further on. Siegfried Sassoon: Letters to Max Beerbohm & a Few Answers, published by Hart-Davis to make the centenary of Sassoon's birth in 1986, does span 1930-1952, with a few Diary entries from 1928-1930, 1937 and 1939, but offers only glimpses of the later Sassoon, almost solely in relation to the Beerbohm-Sassoon friendship. What does this primary, first-hand witness to Sassoon's life, which the Diaries and Letters represent, reveal?

It must first be said that this is yet another self-edited Sassoon, as Hart-Davis informs us. In the long, introspective years before death in his 81st year in 1967, Sassoon deleted passages from diary entries of years earlier, made "fair copies" of many, and made alterations to style and content; the longest break, or deletion, is from 3 October 1924 to 19 February 1925. The effects of this self-editing process cannot be judged. There was perhaps, for Sassoon, an irreducible level of frankness; a writer's diary, especially that of such as Sassoon, is always likely to have been written with a view to publication, and his were clearly shaped, though less thoroughly than the Memoirs and autobiographies, to that end.

Sassoon had hoped that the posthumous publication of his Diaries, as E. M. Forster had expected of his similarly published homoerotic stories, would--as the blurb to 1920-1922 notes--"help others with similar literary, social and sexual difficulties." These ends, especially the sexual, might have been more directly served had the Diaries been published ten years or more earlier, but by the time they appeared, from 1981 to 1985, their revelations had been pre-empted by more revealing and franker works, both fictional and autobiographical. One might instance, on an ascending scale of explicitness, Forster's also posthumous novel Maurice (1971), J. R. Ackerley's My Father and Myself (1968), and John Lahr's biography of Joe Orton, Prick Up Your Ears (1978). The homosexual aspect of the Diaries could hardly astonish after such as these: it has the more limited interest principally of filling certain lacunae in Sassoon's record of self and, secondarily, of contributing a paragraph to the larger history of the double life led by the homosexual in the years of social stigma and potential harassment by the law. Sassoon's active homosexual life was hampered by feelings of guilt, perhaps involving a partial acceptance of the conventional prejudice against

homosexuality as unnatural perversion. He does not seem, unlike Ackerley and Orton, to have pursued sexual adventure for its own sake; he was ever the idealist.

So far as the public record went, and in the absence of far-ranging gossip, Sassoon's homosexuality was a well-kept secret during his lifetime. One is arrested to discover as early as 1918, in the first volume, that homosexual feeling is already acknowledged, in devotion to the "beautiful" men he commands, but this is absorbed with and sublimated by the calls of duty and comradeship (as was also the case, it seems with Owen). In his poetry homoerotic feeling is more deeply sublimated than in Owen's and lyrically idealized (as in "The Last Meeting"). His fastidious Romantic bent made him quite the inappropriate author of a needed Madame Bovary of "sexual inversion" (1920-1922, 53): he could manage only an emotional celebration of a poor colliery boy, which he probably destroyed. It was a paean to a loved soldier, Jim Linthwaite: by contrast, remembering such dead comrades, Sassoon's "kept" artist-lover in London "tastes like a cheap liqueur." The familiar double life of the autobiographies is deepened by the darker "secret life" more at odds with that of his bluff foxhunting friends than his poetic self.

I had insufficient evidence to justify even hinting at this third, deeper level in my Siegfried Sassoon, a Critical Study, published the year before its subject died. I did comment on the absence of sexual feeling from the autobiographical prose and the relative paucity of love poetry--most of which, in any case, was stilted and conventional. I forebore tempting speculation on the suggestive lines from one, "The Imperfect Lover:"

...if we loved like beasts, the thing is done,
And I'll not hide it, though our heaven be hell.

(Picture-Show, 1920)

Their implication agrees, however, in Diaries 1920-1922, with Sassoon's fretful allusions to "the cursed nuisance of sex" (86) and distracting "sex hunger" (154); and while with Edmund Blunden the "gross elements of sex are miraculously remote" (161), his German lover P., failing to reciprocate Sassoon's emotional openness and desire that "love...really mean something," is set down as "rather coarsely sensual" (225). The passages about his homosexual affairs reveal him as one, above all, vulnerably seeking love--about which, if it were achieved, there would be a final reticence.

Indeed, Hart-Davis tells us in his Introduction to the 1923-25 volume that Sassoon had himself removed all reference to "affairs of the heart" (11). Thus, it is hard to know how to judge from the fleeting references in the Beerbohm letters, the relationship with Stephen Tennant, the Bright Young Thing who was Sassoon's lover before he escaped (?) into marriage in 1933. Stephen's hypochondria tried Sassoon sorely and the relationship was evidently responsible for "three years' spiritual disintegration." Tennant died in 1987: must further deaths occur before diaries of later date appear?

The desire to tame that emotionally vulnerable self, which the straight autobiographies confess, continues to determine the shaping of the Diaries. He may buzz about England in his Gwynne Eight, country-house hopping, dining out in a society his socialist side theoretically deplores, mix with the Woolfs, Wells, and Forster, but

his poetic self shrinks back into the conservative clique of Gosse, Squire, and Hodgson--whose dismissal of The Waste Land as "literary legpulling" reassures him (1923-1925, 55). He resents V. de Sola Pinto's (Velmore of the Memoirs) too frank placing of his privately printed "Recreations" as not signalling the "spark from the cultural conflagration" the post-War Sassoon aspired to be, but as exhibiting, though with facility, "the languid interest of a half amused spectator" (1923-1925, 38). Pinto saw he was liable to become a peripheral poet, lacking "a faith, a passion." Neither knew that faith lay further in the future, in a spiritual form and in withdrawal from the cultural ferment.

What the Diaries do reveal, especially in the third volume, are the germs of the subject-matter and retrospective vision of the prose autobiographer and celebrant of a past which could be ordered more selectively than Eliot's "fragments." Sassoon discovers the "'period' attractiveness" of the Nineties (1923-1924, 68); makes Enoch Arden revisittings to the places of his pre-War world, which he will combine later with a desire to which the Memoirs also give context, to "weave" his friends into "a tapestry of human understanding" (253).

Diaries 1923-1925 offers opportunity for a remarkable glimpse of the weaving process. In an entry dated September 15, 1924, Sassoon describes a motoring excursion in Norfolk whose high point is revisiting Edingthorpe, a remote village where his mother had rented the rectory for eight summer weeks in 1897. The visit covers less than two dissatisfied pages (201-2): "the landscape was strangely unrecoverable in the light of memory...sad and remote...in the grey end of an autumn afternoon;" comparatively little is recalled ("mistily I memorised our elongated old shandydan..."); "Rural and derelict to the last degree was Edingthorpe." A drab present has almost obliterated the past. Yet if we turn back to The Old Century (1938), we find Sassoon revisiting Edingthorpe, apparently for the first time since 1897, "in almost sultry sunshine, on an August afternoon." The 1924 "revisiting" has not, for literary purposes, taken place: it was incompatible with the remembered experience desired. The 1937 revisiting thus becomes the authentic one, and the assiduous autobiographer, seeking "mental release from Hitler and Mussolini" (Letters to a Critic, 1976), finds what he now deliberately seeks. An expansive fifteen-page meditation (131-146) is pursued without contact with another person, as if in a dream. The landscape is pleasantly "humdrum," the Rectory land gratifyingly "as narrow and unassuming as ever," "the almost unidentifiable post office had merely been moved from one dear old cottage to another." Preparations for an excursion to the seashore in 1897 now flash back in detail upon the mind's eye; the church witnesses continuity without excessive change, the graveyard is "just sufficiently neglected to be pleasing" (in 1924 it was "unkempt"); an inscription above the lych-gate in memory of a former parson's son, killed in the Great War, reawakens soothing memory of Sassoon's brother Hamo, killed at Gallipoli in 1915, "as a little boy on a donkey." Ensnared, still unnoticed, in the Rectory garden, memory peoples it with his beloved family, ending in a lengthy reminiscence of the "magnificent" Aunt Lula--and so the world of "forty years ago" prevails and becomes, in the pages of The Old Century, a permanent destination for the revisitant. The abortive visit of 1924, at the wrong season and at an unready stage in his life, cancelled by edited memory, is overlaid by the elaborated evocations of 1937.

The Edingthorpe passage is a major instance of a continual process of self-editing and refinement of original responses. This can work interestingly in reverse, as when comparing the Diaries 1915-1918 with Part III of Sherston's Progress one finds, contrary to Hart-Davis' statement that it "consists entirely of quotations from [the Diaries]," entries subtly edited to preserve the "simplified" Sherstonian response. An overall effect of the Diaries is to deepen one's awareness of the distinction between Sassoon's "true" self and the Sherston persona, which had been blurred by his allotting his war-experience largely to the latter and giving it only summary treatment in Siegfried's Journey. From the earliest diary entries one is aware of the febrile reactions to the War of an idealist and romantic poet. From November 1915 to mid-June 1917, when he addressed his Soldier's Declaration to his C.O., Sassoon wrote almost daily, striving to catch the hues of sky and landscape, determined to preserve the "vivid scenes" and not let the "strangeness" turn "commonplace" (96). Emotionally he fluctuates between a reiterated death-wish and a Keatsian desire for "as many sensations as possible" (51), exulting (like Brooke's swimmers) in sloughing off the old "slack" self: "I'm being pushed along a rocky path, and the world seems all the sweeter for it" (74). But the toll of good men in 1916 tells: convalescing in August, he fires "a burst of bitter poetry;" Hardy's Dynasts and Mr. Britling Sees It Through feed a deep reflective disenchantment.

The "Socialist" Sassoon was never surefooted. His poem of April 1919, "Everyone Sang," acclaiming the imminent social revolution, was justly despised by Robert Graves, who comments sourly in Goodbye to All That, "everyone did not include me" (Penguin ed., 228). Nor, we now realize, from the November 11th entry in Diaries 1915-1918, did it really include Sassoon:

I got to London about 6:30 and found masses of people in streets and congested Tubes, all waving flags and making fools of themselves--an outburst of mob patriotism. It was a wretched wet night, and very mild. It is a loathsome ending to the loathsome tragedy of the last four years. (282)

This seems more in touch with Sassoon's deepest sense of reality than the willed romantic optimism of the poem six months later.

What the Diaries chiefly reveal or confirm is that Sassoon's true creative road always led to Edingthorpe, obeying "my queer craving to give the modern world the slip" (Old Century, Chapter VIII). The War had disrupted a dreaming life and driven it into reality's harsh embrace; he had protested strongly against circumstance, but could not (as Pinto saw) become a poet for the world of Yeats' "Second Coming" (contemporaneous with "Everyone Sang"). His gift was not only to recapture the past, but to take possession of it, inventing it--"an unashamed idealization of everything that I remembered with gratitude and affection" (Letters to a Critic, 20).

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