

Wilfred Owen (1893 - 1918)

In June 1915 Wilfred Owen, then 22, wrote to his mother from Bordeaux quoting the poet, dramatist and novelist Comte de Vigny: "If any man despairs of becoming a Poet, let him carry his pack and march in the ranks." A few months later Owen had joined up in the Artists' Rifles. The following summer he was commissioned into the Manchester Regiment. In January 1918 he was invited to Robert Graves' wedding where he was introduced as "Owen the Poet," and by the end of 1918 he was dead.

Most of the poems on which Wilfred Owen's literary reputation is based were drafted and/or revised in the fourteen months between 26 June 1917, when he arrived at Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh after five horrific months on the Somme, and 26 August 1918, when he was declared "fit to proceed overseas" once again and instructed to report to the Embarkation Commandant at Folkestone the following Saturday.

The critical encouragement and recognition provided by accomplished writers was crucial to Owen's development and satisfaction in his work. His encounter with Siegfried Sassoon has been much analyzed and has also been distilled into drama in Stephen Macdonald's *Not About Heroes*. It was Sassoon who introduced Owen to Robert Graves and also, through Robert Ross, to Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells.

Graves' pair of letters to Owen were sent just as Owen was gaining confidence in his poetry. Graves' comments were frank, generous and positive; his tone shifts markedly between the October 1917 letter ('You're a poet: but you are a very careless one at present') and the one two months later ('Don't make any mistake Owen, you are a damned fine poet already and are going to be more so'). The latter letter left Owen approaching his last Christmas—in Yorkshire separated from his immensely supportive family—in a state of euphoria. On 23 December 1917, in one of the 554 extant letters that Wilfred sent his mother in twenty years, he wrote, "I can think of nothing at the moment but Robert Graves' letter." A week later he confided, "I go out of this year a poet my dear Mother, as which I did not enter it...I am startled. The tugs have left me: I feel the great swelling of the open sea taking my galleon."

Owen's reputation has grown since his death. The hallmarks of his poetry are his uncompromising truthfulness and, more particularly, in Philip Larkin's words, his "deep and unaffected compassion." There is evidence to

suggest that his work is more widely read now than ever before. 18 March 1993 will be the centenary of Owen's birth; and 4 November 1993, the seventy-fifth anniversary of his death. To mark these anniversaries the Wilfred Owen Association, which was founded in 1989, and which now has about 400 members in all parts of the world, is planning three weekends of events and activities in Shropshire. It is also encouraging other local and national arts organisations to celebrate the Owen centenary. Members of the Association committee are in discussion with officers of the Imperial War Museum and of the Poetry Society about the possibilities for several events in London and elsewhere next year. But the Association's main programme will take place in Shropshire.

The intention is that the events and activities in Shropshire should be sufficiently imaginative and carefully programmed to attract numerous visitors from outside the county. From Thursday the 18th of March to Sunday the 21st of March the Association is organising events and activities on the theme of "Owen the Poet." From Friday the 11th of June until Sunday the 13th of June, the theme will be "Wilfred Owen and Shropshire"; and from Thursday the 4th of November until Sunday the 7th of November 1993, the theme will be "Owen and the First World War." Given that Owen's work has inspired artists in many media—including film makers, composers, visual artists, and at least one choreographer, as well as numerous writers—the planned weekends will include events in many art forms.

We are hoping to include a performance of Britten's "War Requiem," a series of films from and about the First World War, as well as plays, exhibitions, readings, recitals and talks.

The Association is also planning to inaugurate lasting memorials to Owen in 1993 in both Oswestry, the place of his birth, and Shrewsbury, his home town for much of his short life. A limited competition among sculptors and letter-cutters has been held to select a design for the memorial in Shrewsbury, which is planned to be "simple but striking," with some lines of Owen's poetry forming its centre-piece. The memorial in Oswestry will probably take the form of an appropriately inscribed plaque.

Further details about the Wilfred Owen Association are available from 10 College Hill, Shrewsbury, SY1 1LZ; and contributions to the Association's memorial appeal fund will also be gratefully received.

Robert Hutchison
Chairman, Wilfred Owen Association