A Voice in the Wilderness: The First War Poetry of G.A. Studdert Kennedy

More than any other event in the twentieth century, the Great War seems to have had a deleterious effect on the Christian Church. Though progress had been made around the turn of the century in restoring the relationship between the Church and the working class, the War prompted a division between the Church and the soldier who could not see a loving God at work. Added to this was the criticism of poets such as Owen, Sassoon, and Sorley, who say the Church as responsible in part for the deaths of soldiers who had been convinced that battle was their moral duty. It is in this environment of doubt and distrust of the Church that the poetry of Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy comes to fruition. A poet/priest who serves as a chaplain in France during the latter half of the War, he acts to connect the disillusionment of the soldier with a faith in God through his poetry and in doing so challenges the standard First War canon. Studdert Kennedy in many ways agrees with the criticisms delivered by the major First Was Poets against the Church, yet his poetry seeks to reconcile the alienated soldier with the loving God of Christianity, not through pretentious invocations of honor and glory but by verbalizing his own struggles with the apparent contradictions between Church teaching and God's word.

The Church had a history of previous religious thought upon which to base its approval of England's entry into the war. St. Ambrose's letters recognized the necessity of war for a secure peace based on a just cause. Augustine saw war that restores peace and justice to both sides as an act of love. Aquinas allowed for war provided there was the authority of the sovereign, a just cause and a right intent. Article XXXVII of the Church of England stated that "it is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars." With passages in Matthew and Romans to support this belief as well, the Church saw itself as justified in supporting England's participation. Within reason, the leaders of the Church of England saw their support of the war effort as justifiable.

The animosity of the major First War poets toward Christianity, however, appears to stem in part from the role that the Church of England played in the war. Often preaching a "Just War" message from the pulpits and persuading their congregations to volunteer for service, the Church seemed to be going against the very teaching of Jesus concerning loving one's neighbor. While Lord Kitchener and Archbishop of Canterbury Randall Davidson had made it clear that they had no wish for the church to be sources of recruiting campaigns, many bishops and clergy in their own way did appeal for recruits. While reminding Christians of their loyalty to the City of God, Davidson in his Pastoral Letter of December 1914 wrote,

> I think I can say deliberately that no household or home will be acting worthily if, in timidity or self-love, it keeps back any of those who can loyally bear a man's part in the great enterprise on the part of the land we love (Wilkinson 32).

Archbishop Lang of York was even more staightforward in a November 1915 "Recruiting Supplement" of *The Times* in stating, "I envy the man who is able to meet the call; I pity the man who at such a time makes the great refusal" (Wilkinson 33).

While the Church was providing more and more support for the conscription movement, Archbishop Davidson and many of the Anglican leaders maintained that clergy should be exempt from conscription and discouraged their clergy from enlisting. It was this kind of elitism that caused many soldiers not to respect or trust the chaplains who served them at the Front. In light of the Articles and with metaphors of militarism abounding in the hymnals and in the Book of Prayer and in the Bible, it became difficult for the Davidson and his peers to defend their exclusion of clergy from armed service (Wilkinson 9).

A second source of combatant bitterness against religion was the patriotic poetry written in England to encourage enlistment and garner support for this glorious enterprise. Much of the pro-War poetry produced in England also seemed to have a link with Christianity, so that when the poetry of glory and valor clashed with the reality of the war, Christianity was associated with what were seen as lies. John Oxenham, a popular novelist of the period, published his first book of verse just prior to the war and two subsequent volumes during the war years. Oxenham's verse, like much of what was published in war anthologies of the period, implied that God was behind England's efforts:

As sure as God's in His Heaven,
As sure as He stands for Right,
As sure as the hun this wrong hath done,
So surely we win the fight!
(Victory Day: An Anticipation)

In linking God's stand for Right with Britain's victory over the hun, Oxenham attempts to propagate the Just War. While the ending to this poem, "and by their own great valor, and the Grace of God, they won,/ Briton, Britons, Britons are they! --/ Britons, every one!" is constructed to excite enthusiasm, it also acts to disenfranchise those who are not in the War effort and to encourage others to join it. The implication is that only those involved in aiding the victory may be claimed as "Britons, every one." Likewise, John Graham Bower's "In The Morning" exhibits the same righteousness as Oxenham's verse, the supposition that God is on Britain's side:

It was not by our feeble sword that they were

overthrown,
But Thy right hand that dashed them down, the
servants of the proud;
It was not arm of ours that saved, but thine,
O Lord, alone
When down the line the guns began, and sang Thy
praise aloud,

seeing the destruction generated by the guns as a form of praise.

As the war progressed, many soldiers saw the German armies as victims like themselves so that poems like G.R. Glasgow's "Attila" which calls on God, not to be merciful but to judge Germany, angered them. Only when the war is over and Germany stands "shamed and broken" does Glasgow ask God to show "Mercy and not judgment, Lord." The major poets would see this as yet another sign of Christianity's hypocrisy. Only the lie that War was a glorious enterprise which emphasized abstract ideals such as Liberty and Sacrifice seemed to anger the poets more. Poems like F.W. Bourdillon's "All's Well" which claims, "Of the blood so nobly poured/ There shall surely be reward./ In the name of the Lord/ All's well!" contrasted sharply with the reality for those who didn't see their sacrifice being rewarded.

Of course, Christian writers weren't the only ones writing patriotic verse. Thomas Hardy, who had a lifelong abhorrence for war, writes a call to action in "Men Who March Away." Sympathizing with the soldiers' plight, Hardy describes the attitude of the soldier through the soldier through the soldier's eyes, rather than extolling martial virtues or glorifying death (Crawford 32). Hardy has, however, received criticism for his poetry, Jon Silkin calling it "declamatory propaganda in the pejorative sense of the word" (Silken 44). The war poet Charles Sorley called "Men Who March Away" "the most arid poem in Hardy's book, besides being untrue of the sentiments of the ranksman going to war: "Victory crowns the just" if the worst line he ever wrote" (Sorley 116).

The problems which the major war poets saw in the patriotic verses, particularly Christian ones, stem from this sense of being untrue. As they were of a generation brought up on the Authorized version of the Bible, the major poets like Owen and Sassoon were very familiar with the language and ideas of Christianity, as were most educated men (Spear 107). The loving God and sacrificial Christ could not be reconciled with the horrid reality of war, nor could the idea of glory through death equal the suffering they was every day. Once they had been in the trenches long enough, they found little glory in the death that surrounded them. To them, religion as represented by the church was doing nothing to stop the war and God was doing nothing to save its victims (Spear 104).

The result was a reconstruction of religion as the war poets saw it in the trenches, based on two Biblical models — Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and Christ's sacrifice. The parent-child aspect of the Abraham and Isaac model translated to the war-time split between the older and the younger generation. The older generation, represented by the government and statesmen, was sacrificing the younger generation, just as Christ had been sacrificed by God. Owen's "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" portrays this vividly, wherein an Angel tells Abram to "Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him./ But the old man would not so, but slew his son,/ And half the seed of Europe, one by one." This was how they viewed God as well, sacrificing Jesus at no expense of his own. The soldier poets identified with Christ, sharing in his undeserved death. Yet more than their identification with Christ as victim, they identified with Christ as self-sacrificer. They claimed to live Christ's statement, "Greater love hath no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13), and this comes through in their poetry.

As Adrian Caesar notes, Siegfried Sassoon was raised to believe, based on Christianity and Romanticism, that suffering was ennobling. The highest form of love, that which made one like Christ, was to die for a friend (Caesar 108). Sassoon develops this Christ-soldier image in his poem "The Redeemer." "He faced me, reeling in his weariness,/ Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear./ I say that He was Christ..." This image of the soldier as Christ is repeated in Owen's poem "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" wherein he states, "I, too, saw God through mud, / The mud that cracked on checks when wretches smiled." This image of the suffering, sacrificial soldier became the central image of Owen's "pure Christianity" whose primary focus was on the "greater love." Owen and many of his peers, therefore, seem not to be rejecting Christianity but church religion, Christianity as interpreted by the bishops and priests (Spear 110).

Just as the provoked Wilfred Owen's greatest poetry, so it stimulated the religious poetry of G.A. Studdert Kennedy, a chaplain to the armed forces in France from December 1915 until 1919. Published under the pseudonym "Woodbine Willie," Studdert Kennedy's poetry has been compared with that of the major canonical poets of the period, most notably Wilfred Owen (Wilkinson). In many ways Owen and Studdert Kennedy are surprisingly alike as poets. As might be expected of a chaplain, Studdert Kennedy relies heavily on religious language and imagery in creating his poetry just as Owen, with his strong Evangelical background, does. Likewise, he shares Owen's view of the soldier as a Christ-figure, a sacrificial offering for the redemption of others. Finally, in many ways even Studdert Kennedy's beliefs about the War and the Church resemble Owen's.

Considering the common religious heritage of many of that generation and the widespread use of the Christ-soldier theme, some similarities among poets will of course be inevitable, but the fundamental differences crucial to understanding the separate quality of Studdert Kennedy's poetry are often overlooked. Unlike Owen, Studdert Kennedy's use of Christian images and liturgy has more to do with his belief rather than with "the literary modalities of allusion, irony and paradox" which predominates in the canonical writers' use of religion (Studdert-Kennedy, *Dog* 53). Owen and Studdert Kennedy differ as to their reasons for using and developing the Christ-soldier image. While Owen uses it to explore a situation and his role in it, Studdert

Kennedy tries to interpret and explain the situation in terms of a higher reality manifested in both the historical Christ and the present victim of war (*Dog* 67).

Despite its positive religious perspective, Studdert Kennedy's poetry cannot be as easily dismissed as the affected patriotic verse of some of the pro-War poets. Rather than the cliché-ridden verse which characterizes much of Oxenham's work, Studdert Kennedy produces poetry which grapples with the questions of faith which seemed to trouble the soldiers he served. Until relatively recently his poetry, however, has not received the critical attention. For many years the only literary criticism written on Studdert Kennedy's verse work was a brief discussion in a chapter of Roy Fuller's *Owls and Artificers* and an analysis of "Easter" in I.A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*, a major influence on Fuller's work. Richards's critical reading is based upon an incomplete version of "Easter," editing one line to exclude reference to the war and excluding the entire fifth verse, thereby erasing the religious aspect of the poem. Fuller, likewise, bases his criticism on the same incomplete text. In the early 1980s Gerald Studdert-Kennedy, nephew of the poet, devoted one chapter of *Dog-Collar Democracy* to the poetry of his uncle, focusing primarily on the dialect verse written in the manner of Rudyard Kipling. He notes that in failing to address the issue of belief, Richards and Fuller have set up an easy target, a kind of writing which would fail to meet their expectations. In that respect, Studdert Kennedy's verse could not be truthfully described as an inferior version of the poetry in Silkin's anthology, for the critical skills which Silkin uses on Owen, Sassoon and Rosenberg "would not be fully engaged even on good writing of this kind" (*Dog* 111). Kennedy's strength lies not so much in the poetic form as in the content and ideas, soberly addressing the trials of faith which Owen and Sassoon parody and malign.

Like the major poets of the war, Studdert Kennedy found his views on War, the Church, God, and Humanity sorely disrupted by what he saw. Though he came into the war with a simple, even blood-thirsty patriotism, his experience of war first-hand forced him to discard, and even loathe, such blind devotion (Wilkinson 244). As he came to write in his post-War treatise *Lies*, "War is pure, undiluted, filthy sin" (125). The belief that War was a purifying agent, "God's appointed medicine for the purging and cleansing of the nation" (133), was to him the partial cause of the previous four years. The nations had gotten away from the truth that War is large-scale murder. There were no valorizing or glorifying effects via war; it bore no resemblance to the vision of Liberty and Sacrifice one conceived while sitting safely by the fire. "You don't go out to give your life," he wrote; "you go out to take the other fellow's. You don't go out to save, you go out to kill" (*Lies* 125). Holding services while lying on his stomach in no-man's land and burying the dead where they lay, Studdert Kennedy saw an aspect of war he had not been prepared to accept. War was no longer just nor honorable but was instead a "Waste of ways the Saints had trod,/ Waste of Glory, waste of God" (Waste"), and he was forced to abandon his old ideas of the Just Was and patriotism which had deceived him.

His views on the Church had changed as well by the middle of his service in the war. After sensing the animosity that some soldiers felt toward the chaplains, Studdert Kennedy came to believe that part of the split came form the clergy's emotional distance form the soldiers. Many chaplains, the soldiers complained, were not willing to talk man-to-man, hiding behind cant phrases and prescribed forms of words. Studdert Kennedy seems to question what traditional religious teaching could mean in such a surrounding in his dialect poem, "Thy Will Be Done," in which a soldier prays as he has been taught, yet the gas keeps blowing toward his trench. Seeing the uselessness of tradition when it no longer applied, he tried to break through this facade, mocking in his "A Sermon" — as Sassoon had in "They" — the thoughtless responses which chaplains had been taught to give:

Whenever people seek to know
And ask the reason why
Their sons are swallowed up by wars,
And called to fight and die,
There is one thing I ask, dear friends,
One thing I always say,
I ask them straight, I'm not afraid,
I ask them, "Did you pray?
Did you pray humbly on your knees
That it might be God's Will
To spare his life and bring him back,
To spare and not to kill?"
Then if they still can answer Yes,
And think to baffle me,
I simply answer, "Bow your head,
His death was God's decree." . . .

O, by Thy Cross and Passion, Lord,
By broken hearts that pant
For comfort and for love of Thee,
Deliver us from cant.
("A Sermon")

What Studdert Kennedy found most distasteful about such staid responses was that it promoted the view of a distant God, one who was unreachable and unknowable. There could be no power nor virtue in a faith which took all things on trust, in a spiritless submission to the lie that whatever is is right. "Faith does not mean that we cease from asking questions," he said; "it means we ask and keep on asking until the answer comes" (*Lies* 133). Only a God who was approachable and near could be a God in whom Studdert Kennedy could put his faith:

Dost thou not heed the helpless sparrow's falling?
Canst Thou not see the tears that women weep?
Canst Thou not hear Thy little children calling?
Dost Thou not watch above them as they sleep?

Then, I my God, Thou art too great to love me,
  Since Thou dost reign beyond the reach of tears,
Calm and serene as the cruel stars above me,
  High and remote from human hopes and fears.

Only in Him can I find home to hide me,
  Who on the Cross was slain to rise again;
Only with Him, my Comrade God, beside me,
  Can I go forth to war with sin and pain.
                ("Comrade God")

And just as Studdert Kennedy saw God as approachable, he also saw God as a suffering God as well, suffering with those He loved. "Only a God who not only suffered in Christ on the cross but who was still suffering now made any sense" (Wilkinson 138). He writes in "The Suffering God":

Father, if He, the Christ, were Thy Revealer,
  Truly the First Begotten of the Lord,
Then must Thou be a Suff'rer and a Healer,
  Pierced to the heart by the sorrow of the sword.

Then must it mean, not only that Thy sorrow
  Smote thee that once upon the lonely tree,
But that to-day, to-night, and on the morrow,
  Still it will come, O Gallant God, to Thee.

Unlike Owen and many of the other major poets, Studdert Kennedy did not see God, the Father, as an indifferent Abram, willing to sacrifice His children at no cost to himself God was suffering alongside his children.

These suffering children, the soldiers, were Christ-figures, their suffering not just *like* Christ's suffering but in fact actually Christ's suffering. The fear they suppressed before going over the top was Christ's fear in the Garden of Gethsemene. "At its simplest and least articulate, in comradeship and self-sacrifice, the suffering revealed the Christ-like impulse to deny self in the interest of higher unity" (*Dog* 67). Like Owen's "Apologia" and Sassoon's "The Redeemer," Studdert Kennedy's "Solomon in all His Glory" demonstrates the Christ-likeness of the soldiers:

Still I see them coming, coming
  In their ragged broken line,
Walking wounded in the sunlight,
  Clothed in majesty divine. . .

Purple robes and snowy linen
  Have for earthly kings sufficed,
But these bloody, sweaty tatters
  Were the robes of Jesus Christ.

"Beside the wounded tattered soldier who totters down to this dressing station with one arm hanging loose, and earthly king in all his glory looks paltry and absurd," Studdert Kennedy wrote later in *The Hardest Part*. Their wounds were the wounds of Christ and their blood was the redeeming blood. He makes this connection in "Her Gift" as well:

  He bled
Horribly. Do you remember?
  I can't forget,
  I would not if I could,
  It were not right I should,
    He died for me. . .

He saw God in Christ through these men, coming to a fuller understanding of sacrifice and of the love which makes one willing to sacrifice one's life for others. This love for one's comrade is stronger than any other love, even than that for women, and elicits stronger emotions than any other, as he notes both in "Passing the Love of Women": "Your comrade love is stronger love,/ 'Cause it draws ye back to 'ell," and in "His Mate": "But there is no sterner sorrow/ Than a soldier's for his mate." It was this love which Wilfred Owen called "greater love" and upon which Owen based his reinterpreted view of Christ and religion.

An affirmative view of Christianity has for so long been linked with the patriotic platitudes of some state-side First War poets, that it is difficult to know what to do with the verse of G.A. Studdert Kennedy, at once sympathetic to the grievances of Owen and the War Poets and yet devoted to Christianity and the Church. In the past, critics have "solved" the complications posed by his poetry by ignoring the religious element in his poetry and focusing on his mechanics, dismissing him as a poor dialect poet. The richness in his poetry, however, acting as a spiritual response to many of the questions raised by Owen, poses a challenge to the exclusiveness of the agnostic, anti-War canon that has been elevated by Silkin and others as anthologists. Once literary critics have recognized the merit of such poetry, this will open the way for study of other non-canonical First War poets who have been likewise marginalized because their perspectives on the War do not agree with the modern canon.

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James Washick
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208