

REVIEWS

Rupert Brooke & Wilfred Owen: Everyman's Poetry. Selected and Edited by George Walter.

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At first glance, a one volume collection of the poetry of Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen seems, to say the least, odd. Traditional views of the poets represent them as complete opposites: Brooke the idealistic patriot and Owen the compassionate realist. In the introduction the editor, George Walter, uses this very reason to justify this joint volume. Brooke and Owen, Walter writes, "best fulfil the popular image of the war poet" and "have almost become required reading for anyone studying the historical, social or cultural impact of the First World War."

Walter argues that the poetry of both authors is far more diverse than their reputations suggest. Brooke's reputation rests on "The Soldier". In Walter's view this ignores his "more characteristically cynical and witty poems", like "A Channel Passage" or "Lust". He maintains that "The Soldier" should be compared to Brooke's other poems, like "Heaven", rather than with the poetry of Owen in order to assess Brooke's achievement accurately. Walter is not the only one who argues against the traditional view of Brooke as a patriot who was ignorant of the realities of modern war. Robert Graves in "Fashions in Poetry" (reprinted in *Collected Writings on Poetry*, ed. Paul O'Prey, Carcanet, 1995: 16) wrote in defence of Brooke. He stated that Brooke's patriotic writings were necessary "for the public inspiration of a militarily unorganized power engaged in a death-struggle with a highly organized one" and that if he had not died early, the war "almost certainly would have embittered Brooke" (*Collected Writings on Poetry* 17).

Graves raises an important point in the critical response to Brooke; Brooke died early in the war before writers began to chronicle the true horror of the war. Siegfried Sassoon, considered the most bitter of the war poets, was writing highly idealistic poems like "Absolution" at

the same time that Brooke was writing his poetry. Walter makes this point as well, but he seems to undermine his argument when he states that Brooke's 1914 sonnets "were begun after he returned from taking part in the ill-fated Antwerp expedition of October 1914." This seems to suggest that Brooke knew the true nature of the war while writing his idealistic poetry. Is Walter trying to suggest that Brooke ignored the horrors of the war and continued to write patriotic poems, perhaps casting a bigger shadow over Brooke's work than traditional views do? This is a question Walter leaves unanswered, and this uncertainty ultimately weakens Walter's purpose.

I would agree with Walter that Brooke has been treated unfairly and has been a victim of critical taste and short-sightedness, and that Brooke's poetry does need to be reassessed. Walter, however, does not give the reader the tools to accomplish this reassessment. Not only does the apparent contradiction in his introduction leave uncertainty in the reader's mind but—and more seriously—he does not include the poems that he uses as proof of Brooke's breadth of work. Neither "A Channel Passage" nor "Lust" appear in the collection.

Walter then turns to Owen; he writes that Owen's reputation suffers from the constant focus on his most famous war poems. This attention on Owen's war poems, Walter believes, "refuses to acknowledge the more contemplative response he shows to the war in poems like 'The Send-off' and 'The Calls' or the challenge of the overtly homoerotic 'It was a navy boy' or the sadomasochistic 'The Rime of the Youthful Mariner'." Once again Walter raises an important issue, and he is not the first commentator to raise this issue. Graves in an undated letter to Siegfried Sassoon wrote that Owen's poetry "is not of course in the propaganda but in spite of the propaganda" (*In Broken Images*, ed. Paul O'Prey, Moyer Bell, 1988: 171). Graves clearly separated Owen's poetic ability from his subject.

As with Brooke's poetry, Walter does not include those poems which he feels have been unjustly neglected. Of the four he mentions, only "The Send-off" is included. This is a result of Walter's reliance on the 1921 edition of Owen's poems, edited by Sassoon and Edith Sitwell (with poems published in Owen's lifetime that were not included in the 1921 collection). This edition (an second updated edition of their 1920 collection) started the process of criticism that eventually developed into the reputation Owen currently enjoys. So Walter, instead of freshly selecting a group of poems from the two volume edition of Owen's *Complete Poems and Fragments* (1983) edited by Jon Stallworthy,

returns to the very edition that helped to create the reputation against which Walter argues.

Having said that, this collection is intended to give general readers a cheap introduction to the poetry of Brooke and Owen. In this respect, the collection, I think, succeeds. So while the collection may not satisfy the scholar, it will certainly be a good starting point to those readers who want an introduction to the two poets.