

## Siegfried Sassoon: Scorched Glory, a Critical Study by Paul Moeyes

Richard Emeny

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As there has been no full length study of Siegfried Sassoon since Michael Thorpe's, *Siegfried Sassoon* in 1966, (a book incidentally which Sassoon disliked), Mr Moeyes' new work is both timely and welcome. It must have been peculiarly difficult to write, because, as the author points out in his preface, Sassoon's biography is clear for all to see in the two prose trilogies, in the poems and in the more recently published diaries. This makes it difficult to say anything new about the events of Sassoon's life although interpretations of them can vary.

Mr Moeyes has decided, rightly I believe, that Sassoon is one of those writers about whose work it is impossible to write without setting it in the framework of the man's life. It is likely that the dearth of books about Sassoon has been because he, a self-absorbed man, has said most of it himself and there is not much that can be rewardingly added. I do not believe there has been such neglect as Mr Moeyes suggests when he classes Sassoon with Gibson, Drinkwater, Abercrombie and Nichols. It is the problem of finding more to say of a man who claimed his biography was in his poetry. In fact, First World War poetry is much studied and Sassoon is probably second to Owen in coursework. For such reasons, however, Mr Moeyes has shown considerable courage in attempting this book.

That said, I am not sure why he wrote it, since he does not appear to like most of Sassoon's work very much, nor does the man's character or life appear to appeal to him. Apart from *Memoirs of An Infantry Officer*, *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man* and *The Old Century*, Mr Moeyes sees little of good in Sassoon's work. Consequently, some of his judgments are difficult to understand. Broadly, he takes the conventional view of Sassoon: callow young man following country pursuits, writing at the instigation of his mother sub Swinburnian verse, then the War and the explosive effect it had on his complacency, leading to a sympathy with the working classes and a barely understood socialism, followed by a turbulence during the 1920s when he could not find a satisfactory place for himself in English letters or society. Then he found his true destiny: writing the prose 'biographies' for which he is

best known, biographies which were conservative looking back to an ideal rural and orderly past. His settling in Wiltshire thanks to the legacy from his aunt seems symbolic of this. Finally there is the long haul to catholicism and a type of peace. There is surely more to the man than this.

Mr Moeyes sees the chief influences on Sassoon's life and work as his mother, for which he does not supply much evidence, the War, his homosexuality and his yearning for the past. Well, up to a point Lord Copper. Undoubtedly, his mother was an influence: most mothers are, but not one who determined her son's life quite as Mr Moeyes suggests. As for the homosexuality, clearly that was of great importance, but Mr Moeyes claims that had Sassoon written about it, his writing would have been better, that by omitting it from his semi-biographical work, that work was diminished. He mentions but dismisses the fact that had Sassoon admitted his homosexuality in writing, he could well have been sent to prison. Most of his contemporaries who were homosexual were similarly careful. J. R. Ackerly for instance. The homosexuality is only important if Sassoon was trying to write an autobiography, and that is where my main difference with Mr Moeyes occurs: he was trying to do something quite different.

For instance, in discussing *The Old Century*, one of the books liked by Mr Moeyes, he complains that Sassoon remembers only the pleasant cosy things in his childhood. First, this is incorrect: the picture of his father's funeral, the separation of his mother and father - probably a cultural and racial separation as well as an emotional one - as well as other less than happy events are sensitively depicted. But Sassoon was painting the picture of a boy: his brothers and he quickly went back to their games, because children are hard and unfeeling since their experience and understanding of the 'lacrimae rerum' is of necessity limited. Above all, Mr Moeyes seems to ignore that Sassoon was not simply writing a book of memoirs. *The Old Century* is a carefully crafted work of art. Although set round his own childhood (he was writing about what he knew best), he was constructing an elegiac evocation of a lost age and a lost innocence. Sassoon saw the colossal effect of the Great War on Britain; he was not the only one to recognise this, but his response was to emphasise what from the pre war world had been lost. The book is not a sentimental reversion and longing for the lost life of childhood and the country gentry, but more a query as to whether the post war directions were better or even valid. *The Weald of Youth* continues this with a wonderful evocation of the mix of country

life and sport with the gradual and increasing pull of an artistic and literary milieu.

What Mr Moeyes does not delve into is the proximity and influence of London. The part of England in which Sassoon spent his childhood is a peculiar area: country with all that meant at the time, but with easy access to London. There were plenty of commuters even in Edwardian England, and in several poems and prose works trains are a symbolic part of his childhood. Access to culture and a metropolitan lifestyle were an hour away. Many of his mother's relatives were leading members of the cultural life of the period and the young writer was much influenced by them: he was much more than the callow young sportsman, but it is part of the artistry of his work that he has isolated that part of his life. It is worth noting that there is still a point-to-point course in the area from which it is possible to see the Post Office Tower.

Mr Moeyes is also incorrect in stating that social taboos meant that Sassoon had no experience of members of the working class before 1914. That may be true as far as the urban working class is concerned, but in the countryside there was more social cohesion and class could be a consolidating rather than a disruptive element. The all consuming interest in agriculture frequently made class more of a horizontal than vertical system. Thus he writes of Dixon, the groom, and Homeward, the carrier, with real knowledge and affection. Neither is a cardboard character, nor are his hunting friends (as Mr Moeyes suggests), although they are carefully selected as part of the weaving in the tapestry that he wished to create.

Sport too, especially cricket and hunting, Sassoon's two preferences, was a social leveller, because people from any class could and did take part in it. People in the Sassoon family might not have called on the working classes, but in rural England at least, that did not imply ignorance or lack of sympathy. There are subtleties in the English class system that escape Mr Moeyes.

The Graves/Sassoon friendship is well chronicled, though neither comes out of it very well. Mr Moeyes presents Sassoon as changing his view of Graves from early enthusiasm through close friendship, gradual disenchantment (Graves not quite a gentleman), to the overt hostility caused by the publication of *Goodbye to All That*. This seems somewhat superficial. As a product of Charterhouse, Graves was as much a gentleman as Sassoon, but he did have a degree of what might be called masochism about him. It can be seen in a physical sense in his

description of the boxing tournament at Charterhouse, and in a more intellectual sense when he seems to delight in being 'the only man in step.' Captain Dunn excluded him from *The War the Infantry Knew* largely because many of those highly individual steps had been plain wrong. As Mr Moeyes indicates, *Goodbye to All That* includes many inaccuracies. When Sassoon's own copy of the book was auctioned twenty-five years ago, it was found to contain both Edmund Blunden's and his own manuscript 'corrections.' Scarcely a page goes by without inaccuracies being alleged. Undoubtedly Sassoon saw Graves' view on many matters as being overstated throughout their friendship, but it was the publication of *Goodbye To All That* which caused the final rift.

It is a pity that what Mr Moeyes does not discuss in detail is Graves' role in persuading Sassoon to become a patient at Craiglockhart. The action probably saved Sassoon but was based on what appears to have been a trick: Graves persuaded him that the army would never court martial him, thus neutralising Sassoon's protest against the war. Mr Moeyes quotes *The War The Infantry Knew* to show how Sassoon's protest was out of touch with the real feelings of his fellow soldiers. This may have been true, but unfortunately the remainder of the passage is not quoted. It goes on:

There is great unrest, and an intensity of feeling and determination that make certain the coming of great political and social disturbance after the War, the early phase may precede the end of the War.

Set against this background, Sassoon's protest does not seem quite such a muddled and ineffective gesture as Mr Moeyes and others, including Robert Graves perhaps, have portrayed it. It also brings Graves' action in 'saving' Sassoon into greater question.

Mr Moeyes' book is full of information and detail and he knows his subject well. His judgment of Sassoon's work is however harsh: he sees sentimentality, a coldness to humanity despite the war experiences and a lack of engagement with the twentieth century. Apart from the war poetry he does not find Sassoon's style of writing in tune with the times. He has done considerable service in bringing Sassoon once more to the public eye in a full-length book, but it is a pity that he has found in Sassoon so much he does not like, and a considerable amount he appears to misunderstand.