

Two Sassoon Biographies

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Siegfried Sassoon The Making of a War Poet: A Biography
1886-1918

Jean Moorcroft Wilson Duckworth, £25

&

Siegfried Sassoon

John Stuart Roberts Richard Cohen Books, £20

Let me put my cards on the table. For ten years I thought I could do a biography of Siegfried Sassoon; after all, he was the one important Great War poet left whose life had not been exposed to public scrutiny. I wrote Sir Rupert Hart-Davis several times asking him if I could peruse Sassoon's unpublished diaries with the motive of putting together a biographical study, but I was politely discouraged and told that Jon Stallworthy was slated to write the biography. But as time passed and no biography appeared, I decided to make the journey to Wolfson College, Oxford and to inquire from Professor Stallworthy whether or not he intended to begin the biography. Professor Stallworthy told me that he would consider the commission when he completed a biography on Louis MacNiece. I went off and worked on my own critical study of the war poetry of Graves and Sassoon, *The Great War and the Missing Muse*, and returned to Jon Stallworthy several years later when he was in the final stages of finishing his acclaimed biography of MacNiece. He told me then that he had decided against writing the biography largely because Sassoon's life after the Great War lacked enough activity to sustain an interesting biography. He also informed me that there were already several biographies in the pipe-line. I reflected on his assessment and realised the good sense in his discouragement. I already knew Jean Wilson's two volume study was well under way, and I was full of envy when I learned she had

somehow managed to convince George Sassoon into giving her full support in writing about his father's life and works. Then, I learned that an authorised biography had been agreed to. The combination of Stallworthy's advice, Jean Woolf's head start, and my own recognition, having failed miserably to get beyond page 50 in a planned biography of the American Jewish writer John Cournos, that I lacked the skills needed to write about someone else's life, allowed me to sit back and wait for the competent biographers to produce their findings. I was as impatient as a schoolboy awaiting Christmas vacation to discover answers to the various enigmas that had eluded my own queries about Sassoon. Who was Glen Hunter and what exactly happened between them in New York? Why did Sassoon marry Hester Gatty? Was there a strong psycho-sexual relationship between Graves and Sassoon? Did Sassoon ever meet Graves when Graves returned to England in the summer of 1939?

Well, two of the proposed three biographies have now appeared, and some of the questions have been answered, and perhaps with the appearance of the third, a few more questions will be answered. The two biographies under discussion have made a reasonable start at sorting out Sassoon's life. Jean Wilson's biography is a scholar's dream. It takes Sassoon's first 32 years and details almost every move he makes. Stylistically, this meticulous study slows down the reading pace considerably, but I cannot imagine a lay reader buying a book like this in the first place. The 525 pages of small printed text with copious footnotes immediately suggest that this book is not going to be a leisurely romp through the fox-hunting fields depicted by Surtees. Further, the fifty odd pages of dense explanatory notes inform the reader that Jean Wilson is serious about her scholarship.

Wilson's biographical insights into Sassoon's relationship with his two brothers, Hamo and Michael, are exceedingly useful in understanding his shy and retiring character. The dissection of his school life at Marlborough offers fascinating material not only about Sassoon, but about the nature of the English public school mentality which was influential in moulding his sexual proclivities.

... like most public schools of the day, the Marlborough authorities clearly feared that the close proximity of teen age boys deprived of female company would result what they regarded as immoral practices. In an attempt to discourage sexual liaisons and what was known as "self-abuse" or "beastliness" (that is, masturbation) there were no doors on the lavatories. Pupils were not allowed to visit dormitories alone in the day and several parts of the school were strictly out of bounds. (94)

In fact, Wilson offers the reader a well-argued exploration of his developing homosexuality. She places the release of Sassoon's pent up sexuality with his meeting of Edward Dent in 1915. Dent's open lifestyle and association with other homosexuals at Cambridge (Forster, Dickinson, Bartholomew) offered Sassoon sensitive peers with whom he could discuss the sexual "fever" which tormented him. Dent also introduced Sassoon to the dissolute artist Gabriel Atkin, who became his first lover in late 1918. Sassoon's vain attempts at sorting out Atkin's catastrophic life permeate Sassoon's diary entries in the first half of the 1920s.

Wilson proposes that there was a very strong sexual attraction between Graves and Sassoon. To support her contention, she quotes from Graves' letter of 20 November 1917 to Sassoon telling of his impending marriage to Nancy Nicholson. Graves claims that he does not wish be thought of as a "confirmed homosexual". Wilson suggests that this letter shocked Sassoon and was partly responsible for Sassoon going before the Medical Board at Craiglockhart a few days later not caring whether or not he lived or died. But this literal reading overlooks Graves' relationship with Marjorie Machin, the auxiliary nurse Graves met at Somerville College, Oxford while recovering from a fall in June 1917. In his letters to Kenyon Barrett, Graves reveals that this heterosexual affair was more than simple idealised passion. Graves was well on his way to heterosexuality when he met Nancy Nicholson (Marjorie had revealed she had a fiancée fighting at the front, and Graves reluctantly bowed out). Admittedly, under the circumstances, it is unlikely that Graves told Sassoon directly about his

infatuation with Marjorie, but considering the closeness of the two men, surely as late as November 1917, Sassoon must have had strong evidence that Graves' sexual proclivities were far more female-inclined than his own.

Wilson successfully challenges a number of Adrian Caesar's wobbly contentions from his *Taking It Like a Man* as well. Caesar's book, it will be remembered, is full of evidence of both sadism and masochism reflected in war poetry. Wilson argues that in his analysis of Sassoon's poetry, Caesar has disregarded the marked influence Christianity had on Sassoon, who held beliefs such as purification can be gained through suffering and that sacrificing one's life for one's god offered salvation. Wilson's close reading and analysis of poems such as "The Redeemer" or "Stand-To: Good Friday Morning" make Caesar's psycho-sexual musings appear rather insubstantial.

Overall, Wilson's reading of the Graves-Sassoon friendship during the war is well-thought out and analysed. Her picture of the two poets in Harlech recovering after being wounded on the Somme in the summer of 1916 is well-drawn.

Sassoon's fortnight at Harlech went well. Almost fully recovered physically, he enjoyed numerous games of golf with Charles Graves, a fellow-enthusiast, and went on several outings into the beautiful surrounding hills with the family. Most of the times, however, was spent with Robert in his little cottage, Gwuthdy Bach. Newly pink-washed and hung with fresh blue curtains, it made an attractive retreat. It was here they carried out the main purpose of their visit, to work on their poetry together.

My only other criticism regarding Graves and Sassoon is Wilson's interpretation regarding Sassoon's refusal to attend Graves' wedding to Nancy Nicholson as anything more than an "unavoidable absence." It seems to me Sassoon purposely missed the wedding due to a jealous fit of pique.

I am surprised that Wilson's proof reader at Duckworth to allow "Grave's" to pass for "Graves's" in several places on page 275. Nevertheless, if Jean Wilson can produce a second volume of Sassoon as meticulously researched and documented as the first, she will do for Sassoon Studies what R. P. Graves has done for Graves Studies: offer an excellent springboard for future researchers.

John Stuart Roberts' *Siegfried Sassoon* is the first full biography of Sassoon if one disregards Dame Felicitas Corrigan's *Poet's Pilgrimage* (1973). This book offered a selective recounting of Sassoon's spiritual journey into the arms of the Roman Catholic Church. Despite its prejudices, Corrigan's book could have been used to some advantage by Roberts' whose final chapters dealing with Sassoon's conversion are very sparse indeed.

Roberts' biography is breezy; it is a popular biography that reads very well (despite far too many irritating misprints) and presents an adequate overview of Sassoon's life. On the way, the book answers a number of questions about Sassoon's life that I mentioned earlier. I now know that Glen Hunter was an empty headed twenty-five year old New York actor who led Sassoon on a "devilish dance up and down West 44th Street" (148). I now know that Hester Gatty was chosen as a wife because Sassoon was feeling the pains of rejection by his lover Stephen Tennant, and Hester offered him an opportunity for some kind of redemption (251). Roberts' fills in more information about the mysterious Philipp of Hesse, who appears in the diaries simply as P, but he does not confront the rumours which suggest that Sassoon was in contact with Philipp, who had joined the Nazi party during the 1930s and was busy trying to convince Edward Windsor about the advantages of Fascism, until the declaration of war in September 1939. What was the nature of the extended friendship?

The value of this biography, then, is the filling in of gaps. Sassoon's short-term love affair with the flirtatious playwright Ivor Novello is briefly exposed (194-195), and this disastrous affair is somewhat mitigated by Sassoon's introduction to the actor Glen Byam Shaw, who will become one of Sassoon's most trusted friends and

lover. The details of Sassoon's excruciating love affair with Stephen Tennant corresponds closely with Philip Hoare's fine study of Tennant, *Serious Pleasures* (1990). However, Roberts' explains in some detail the manner in which Tennant's unconscionable treatment of Sassoon threw him into the arms of the wholly unsuited Hester Gatty. The history of their marriage is difficult to read without shuddering. The two were completely unsuited, and the nature of their frustration with each other reaches a climax in 1945.

On George's birthday Hester entered Sassoon's study and informed him that she had been taking legal advice about the custody of George. She was confident any decision would go in her favour...it was the ultimate threat. When she left, he went around the house removing as many traces of her as he could, including a framed photograph which he threw into the fire saying: "Goodbye and burn." (290)

In Roberts' account of Sassoon's life, Robert Graves is treated rather tentatively. Both men were slightly neurotic and quirky, and it is difficult to apportion blame for the breakdown of the friendship to one or the other. Sassoon is shown to have been financially supportive to his friend during the early years of his marriage (and Graves did appreciate Sassoon's generosity), but his almost paranoid disapproval of Graves when, for example, he discovered that Graves had agreed to attend one of Edith Sitwell's Anglo-French poetry society meetings without consulting him offers a view of just how difficult a friend Sassoon could be. What is troubling is that Roberts' Gravesian scholarship is so blatantly poor that one feels uncomfortable with his conclusions about the friendship. For example, looking at Roberts' account of the Laura Riding notorious suicide attempt, which became the talk of literary London in 1929, I think my point will be taken.

Roberts' places the suicide attempt in the summer of 1929 when in fact it happened on 27 April 1929. Roberts' continually refers to the Irish poet Geoffrey Phibbs as Geoffrey Phipps. Roberts' also states that the police at first thought that "he [Graves] had pushed Laura out the window during the quarrel" (234) when in fact the

police first questioned Phibbs. Roberts' claim that after the suicide attempt Nancy and Phipps (sic) went off to Oxfordshire to be with her and Graves' children is also incorrect. At the time of the suicide attempt, Nancy and the children were living on a barge on the Thames not in Islip. All these errors appear in one paragraph, and when one considers the importance of the Graves-Sassoon relationship, one would expect Sassoon's biographer to have been a bit more careful in his preparation.

In the end, one puts down Roberts' biography feeling that a good deal more of Sassoon's life has been exposed, but somehow the man himself has been allowed to escape. It is rather like being on a train from London to Edinburgh with a chatty travelling companion. In the ensuing journey one comes to feel that one knows the person, one shares jokes and confidences; however, once one steps off the train and on to the platform, one realises that all one has is an outline of a shadow-life. This is how I finally come to judge Roberts' life of Sassoon. The essence of the person has escaped me somehow.