

‘His brother’s votive smoke’: Negotiating the Identity of the British Veteran of the Great War

Nancy Rosenfeld

Edmund Blunden composed *Undertones of War* in 1924 while teaching English literature at the University of Tokyo. He begins his memoir with two questions and two answers: ‘Why should I not write it? I know that it is very local, limited, incoherent; that it is almost useless, in the sense that no one will read it who is not already aware of all the intimations and discoveries in it, and many more, by reason of having gone the same journey. No one? Some, I am sure; but not many. *Neither will they understand* – that will not be all my fault’.¹ In his answers to these two rhetorical questions Blunden suggests that the identity of the veteran of the Great War can be most definitively negotiated by the veterans themselves.

This essay suggests that the identity of the British veteran of the Great War was indeed negotiated by and among the veterans themselves, in a process lasting through the twenty years separating the two world wars, and even beyond. The veterans might have suspected, although they could not have been certain, that almost a century later this interwar period would be figured as a somewhat cushy ceasefire, an extended home-leave in Blighty, a liminal period in which the boundaries between peace and war were blurred. The constitution of the British veteran’s identity was a process which continued throughout this borderline period and partook of its liminality. A defining component of this identity was the sense of being a survivor, of having lived through a holocaust.

Blunden was aware of the importance of the passage of time. In 1958 he wrote a short monograph entitled *War Poets 1914–1918*. Forty years and tens of millions of deaths after the 1918

Armistice, Blunden writes that the ‘old Great War ended, and one trouble that followed was that Peace was not all happiness; then millions of veterans (in their twenties) began looking back [. . .] with desire and longing. At least there had been a generosity, a unity, a trust’.² The passage of time, in other words, enables the veterans to recall rare moments of comparative grace; yet they do not forget past suffering. The individual’s suffering is, moreover, often displaced onto other soldiers. In his discussion of the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Blunden notes that ‘a true word on Owen’s quality of pity is found in his friend’s [i.e. Siegfried Sassoon’s] introduction to the selected poems published in 1920. “He never wrote his poems (as so many war poets did) to make the effect of a personal gesture. He pitied others; he did not pity himself”’ (pp. 33–34).

Most of the poets had served as officers, hence their empathy with and admiration for the men under their command. Siegfried Sassoon depicts Corporal Griffiths on the eve of battle: ‘Vigilant and serious he stared straight ahead of him, and a fine picture of fortitude he made. He was only a stolid young farmer from Montgomeryshire; only; but such men, I think were England, in those dreadful years of war.’³ Lest one is tempted to see the latter as an example of nostalgic condescension or romanticised patriotism, it is worth noting that *Sherston’s Progress* was written almost two decades after the end of the war. If the Great War had, according to Paul Moeyes, come as a total surprise to the ‘ignorant young man’ whom Sassoon had been in 1914, by the early nineteen-thirties ‘he was better informed and quick to realise that European peace was yet again under threat’. This fear led him to publish *The Road to Ruin*, in which he ‘adopted the prophet-role, warning his readers about the devastating effect another war might have’.⁴ Sassoon’s *cri de cœur* is surely strengthened by his intimate knowledge of the suffering of the soldiers, whom he sees in the title poem, without even a soupçon of condescension, as his friends:

My hopes, my messengers I sent
 Across the ten years continent
 Of Time. In dream I saw them go, –
 And thought, ‘When they come back I’ll know
 To what far place I lead my friends
 Where this disastrous decade ends’.

Like one in purgatory, I learned
 The loss of hope. For none returned,
 And long in darkening dream I lay.
 Then came a ghost whose warning breath
 Gaspd from an agony of death,
 ‘No, not that way; no, not that way’.⁵

In *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves details the lives of the men at the front.⁶ One of the clearest memories of his first day in the trenches is the view of a stretcher case being borne away. According to the stretcher-bearer, the wounded man “‘aims too low, it hits the top of the parapet and bursts back. Deoul! man, it breaks his silly f–ing jaw and blows a great lump from his silly f–ing face, whatever. Poor silly booger! Not worth sweating to get him back! He’s put paid to, whatever.’”⁷

Scholars have debated the influence of common wartime experiences on postwar definitions of community. Diane DeBell contends that although ‘a powerful sense of comradeship developed among the men in the trenches, it was not sustained once the fighting was over. [. . .] The rapid disappearance after the war of a sense of community among veterans must have intensified the difficulty of integrating one’s own sense of order and sanity with the memory of disorientation and chaos’. One may not, however, agree with DeBell when she blames what she perceives as the postwar disappearance of a sense of community on the ‘political failure of the English intelligentsia’: the wartime ‘unity of feeling’ did not, in her words, become a ‘basis for political analysis or a desire for wider ideological change’ (p.

162).⁸ The reality of the unity of feeling, both during the war and among the survivors as they looked back at the years in the trenches, should not be denied or denigrated.

Between December 1915 and March 1918 Private David Jones of Graves's beloved Royal Welch Fusiliers served at the front.⁹ Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* critiques Jones's war memoir as

curiously ambiguous and indecisive. For all the criticism of modern war which it implies, *In Parenthesis* at the same time can't keep its allusions from suggesting that the war, if ghastly, is firmly 'in the tradition'. It even implies that, once conceived to be in the tradition, the war can be understood. The tradition to which the poem points holds suffering to be close to sacrifice and individual effort to end in heroism; it contains, unfortunately, no precedent for an understanding of war as a shambles and its participants as victims.¹⁰

By his choice of a title for this work, first published in 1937, almost two decades after the Armistice, Jones hints at the possibility of viewing the Great War veteran as a liminal figure between peace and war: 'This writing is called *In Parenthesis* because I have written it in a kind of space between – I don't know between quite what – but as you turn aside to do something; and because for us amateur soldiers (and especially for the writer, who was not only an amateur, but grotesquely incompetent, a knocker-over of piles, a parade's despair) the war itself was a parenthesis – how glad we thought we were to step outside its brackets at the end of '18 – and also because our curious type of existence here is altogether in parenthesis'.¹¹ Indeed, by the late nineteen-thirties many British veterans of the Great War were beginning to fear that it was not the 1914–18 period, but rather the peace itself, which was parenthetical.¹²

In the short survey of pre-World War One war poetry with which Blunden opens *War Poets 1914–1918*, he notes that until 1914

‘the soldier in the emplacement or in the charge had not noticeably sung himself’. The main exception is ‘Shakespeare, notwithstanding that his biographers have failed to discover his army identity disc. But the author of *King Henry V*, *Cymbeline*, *Coriolanus*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* knew very well what happens to men and round them in real war; he is exact in all points’ (pp. 10–11). Gower, Fluellen, Macmorris, Jamy and their comrades are indeed real, and the scenes in which they appear, whether around the campfire, in the emplacement or in the charge are among the play’s most memorable. Nor are we spared atrocity: the wanton slaughter of Fluellen’s beloved ‘poys’, the young non-combatants left to watch the equipment. The play’s most oft-quoted oration, however, is that in which King Harry, addressing his men prior to a battle which they are likely to lose, defines the war veteran:

He that outlives this day and comes safe home
Will stand a-tiptoe when this day is named...
He that shall see this day and live t’old age
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours
And say, ‘To-morrow is Saint Crispian.’
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars
And say, ‘These wounds I had on Crispin’s day.’ [...]
But he’ll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words [. . .]
Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered. [. . .]
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon St. Crispin’s day.¹³

The words are poignant as well as stirring: the veteran is envisioned twenty or thirty years down the line at the centre of a loving, admiring circle of family and friends; he looks back with pride at dangers overcome and may be tempted to boast, or even

embroider his exploits a bit; his experience gains superadded meaning via his noble commanders who are loyally toasted on the feast day; only those fortunate enough to have fought in France are 'real men'. In his discussion of the British 'Theatrical Flair', Fussell suggests two main reasons for 'the British tendency to fuse memories of the war with the imagery of theater. One is the vividness of the sense of role enjoined by the British class system. The other is the British awareness of possessing Shakespeare as a major national asset' (p. 197). It may be argued, however, that while Shakespeare, in Blunden's words, 'knew very well what happens to men and round them in real war', King Harry's depiction of the veteran does not apply to such veterans as Jones, Graves, Blunden, Sassoon and other survivors of the Great War. One should, of course, avoid automatically attributing the ideas expressed by a great Shakespearean character to Shakespeare himself; King Harry's words do not necessarily reflect the playwright's view of the war veteran. If viewed in context, the king's speech can be seen as yet another example of Shakespeare's familiarity with army life. This, he may be saying, is the kind of rhetoric which is used to awaken the men's fighting spirit before a battle.

Sassoon, too, uses the discourse of the drama when contemplating his life in the trenches:

I wanted to know – to understand – before it was too late, whether there was any meaning in this human tragedy which sprawled across France, while those who planned yet further slaughter were like puppets directing operations on which the unknown gods had turned their backs in boredom with our blundering bombardments. [...]

And I felt a great longing to be liberated from these few hundred yards of ant-like activity – to travel all the way along the Western Front – to learn through my eyes and with my heart the organism of this monstrous drama which my mind had not the power to envision as a whole.¹⁴

Writing from the standpoint of the surviving playgoer who finds the small theatre claustrophobic and yearns to run for the exit, Sassoon envisions the war as a drama, a tragedy. The puppeteers – the generals and politicians – have turned into an audience which has lost interest: they are envisioned poking one another in the ribs and whispering Abner’s ironic words to Joab, ‘Let the young men now arise and play before us’.¹⁵ The result is a vast puppet show in which the puppets themselves are left to pull the strings.

It would be hard to exaggerate the significance of the use of *survivor* as a synonym for *veteran*. Sassoon himself was a famous survivor; numerous escapes from death made him heedless of danger and earned him the sobriquet Mad Jack. As Miranda Seymour notes, Graves was so worried about his friend’s recklessness that he sent him a rhymed letter describing how the two would one day rest and recuperate in Graves’s beloved Wales;¹⁶ this letter was later published under the title ‘Familiar Letter to Siegfried Sassoon (*From Bivouacs at Mametz Wood, July 13th, 1916*)’:¹⁷

In Gweithdy Bach we’ll rest a while,
We’ll dress our wounds and learn to smile
With easier lips; we’ll stretch our legs,
And live on bilberry tart and eggs,
And store up solar energy,
Basking in sunshine by the sea,
Until we feel a match once more
For *anything* but another war.

Graves here sketches an idealised picture of postwar life; as such it is somewhat lacking in the feel of reality accruing to King Harry’s depiction of the old soldier home from the wars. But Graves’s aim in composing the ‘Letter’ is, of course, the converse of King Harry’s aim in speaking to his troops: while the king would fire up the men to recklessness, would encourage them to

risk their lives during the coming battle, Graves would convince his friend to avoid risks whenever possible. Unlike King Harry's veterans, who are presumed to recall their youthful gestes with proud longing, Graves and Sassoon will find it difficult to learn to smile again after the fighting is over. Their recovery will not enable them to look back nostalgically at past exploits and victories; even in an imagined postwar perspective they are simply sick of war.

Graves speaks of *surviving* and *survivors* repeatedly in *Goodbye to All That*. Detailing his first meeting with Captain Dunn, commander of C Company, Graves writes: 'I had expected a grizzled veteran with a breastful of medals; but Dunn was actually two months younger than myself – one of the fellowship of "only survivors."' Captain Miller was another 'only survivor': 'Only survivors had great reputations. Miller used to be pointed at in the streets when the battalion was back in reserve billets. "See that fellow? That's Jock Miller. Out from the start and hasn't got it yet"' (p. 98). One also notes Dunn's words to Graves when welcoming the latter to the unit: "'Our chaps are all right, but not as right as they ought to be. The survivors of the show ten days ago are feeling pretty low, and the big new draft doesn't know a thing yet"' (p. 100).¹⁸

The term *survivors* hints at a lack of meaning, a fatalistic sense that there is no reason, no explanation for one man's coming through the battle unwounded while another is killed. The ironically titled 'Preparations for Victory', one of the poems which Blunden appended to *Undertones of War*, expresses his understanding of survival as a matter of chance:

My soul, dread not the pestilence that hags
 The valley; flinch not you, my body young,
 At these great shouting smokes and snarling jags
 Of fiery iron; as yet may not be flung
 The dice that claims you. Manly move among
 These ruins, and what you must do, do well.¹⁹

Ironically, the recklessly brave may survive while the hesitantly fearful may be killed, although this is contrary to what Graves feared would happen to Sassoon. The survivors find it difficult to understand, to interpret their own survival: when all is a matter of luck, what meaning can be attached to the fact that one returns from the battle while his brother does not?

One of the most disturbing instances of *survive* is found in Graves's description of the battles of autumn 1915. The Middlesex unit had just suffered 550 casualties, including eleven officers killed; two recently commissioned officers, Henry and Hill, who escaped from the fighting unwounded, reported to their colonel and adjutant:

Hill told me the story. The colonel and adjutant were sitting down to a meat pie when he and Henry arrived. Henry said: 'Come to report, sir. Ourselves and about ninety men of all companies. Mr Choate is back, unwounded, too.

They looked up dully. 'So you've survived, have you?' the colonel said. 'Well, all the rest are dead.'²⁰

Survival, it seems, is morally neutral, a fact of nature. Neither credit nor blame accrues to the survivors; they are not congratulated, nor does the colonel express joy at seeing two of his officers back alive and unwounded. The hungry, exhausted junior officers are not even offered a bite of the meat pie or a slug of the whisky which their seniors are sharing.

A parallel episode is recalled by Blunden in *Undertones of War* (written five years before *Goodbye to All That*); on arriving at a dugout in Flanders which he was to supervise:

I found the tunnels crammed with soldiers on business and otherwise. The Colonel and Adjutant of the R.F.'s, who had taken our place in the Tower Hamlets sector a fortnight or so before, were occupying a new and half-finished dugout; they

used me very hospitably. The Colonel remarked, pouring me out a drink, 'We no longer exist'. I asked how: he explained that their casualties had been over 400. [...] 'Ah, well', he said, throwing a crumpled paper at the Adjutant, 'we'll be off. – There's a great hole on top, young man; I had it partly filled up, but it's not the only one. . . . *We no longer exist*'. He had it by heart, said it lightly, but I interpreted him.²¹

Blunden's colonel is admittedly somewhat more welcoming than Hill's. Yet perhaps the senior officers' apparent indifference has its source in their own sense of having been placed in charge of an abattoir, a meaningless bloodbath in which even the commanders do not control the pace at which the victims are sent to their deaths.

If the veteran of the Great War saw himself as a survivor, how did he figure the event which he survived? One notes, albeit hesitantly, that some veterans viewed the war as a holocaust. From the vantage-point of the early twenty-first century it may seem difficult, possibly even blasphemous, to associate the word *holocaust* with any war other than World War II. Yet, as noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the specific application of the term *the Holocaust* to the genocide perpetrated on European Jewry by the Nazis during World War II was introduced by historians during the 1950s, probably as an equivalent to the Hebrew *sho'ah*— 'catastrophe', 'total destruction'.²² The uncapitalised word, however, goes back as far as the thirteenth century; its meaning is 'a sacrifice wholly consumed by fire; a whole burnt offering'. From the seventeenth century *holocaust* has been used metaphorically to refer to a great slaughter or massacre. Examples of the application of *holocaust* or its synonyms to the death of millions of young men during the Great War will now be examined.

In 1928 Siegfried Sassoon published his sonnet 'On Passing the New Menin Gate', in which the poet-survivor critiques a war

memorial, built in the decade since the Armistice, on which the names of 54,889 fallen soldiers are engraved:

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
'Their name liveth for ever,' the Gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

Sassoon's reference to the death of tens of thousands of young men as an *immolation* is of course suggestive of a burnt offering, a sacrifice to one of the bloodthirsty gods of old. Yet even the composers of the Hebrew Bible were beginning to question the utility, not to say justice, of such sacrifices. In Psalm 51, also known as the Penitential Psalm, the Psalmist pleads with the Deity:

O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it; thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.²³

As Hannibal Hamlin points out:

The Penitential Psalms, and Psalm 51 in particular, played a vital role in the liturgy of the English Church as well as in the private prayers and devotions of individual Christians. [...] Psalm 51 was also a text in which sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformers, Protestant and Catholic alike, found the seeds of ideas that ultimately affected what they believed and how they worshiped.²⁴

Psalm 51 continues to be cited as a statement of the Deity's growing lack of interest in animal sacrifices, or, indeed, of the biblical narrators' reconceptualisation of the Deity as a loving, forgiving father. Thus *immolation*, with its Old Testament connotations, strengthens the poet's sense of derision for those who sent the men to their fiery deaths.

In recalling the Somme campaign of 1916, Blunden compares the events to a holocaust. Robert Nichols, 'a poet chiefly lyrical', in Blunden's words, produced

in verse, while he lay in a hospital bed, idealisms concerning such dark affrays as 'Dawn on the Somme': 'Oh, is it mist, or are these companies / Of morning heroes who arise, arise / With thrusting arms, with limbs and hair aglow, / Towards the risen gold' [...]. Thus in 1916 one poet at least, with animation, could keep up the old strain; but Nichols knew very well, prosaically, that dawn on the Somme just then was infinite despair. He attempted realism about such holocausts, but oddly enough his romantic halo lasts longer than his revolver writing.²⁵

In her explication of *In Parenthesis*, DeBell has noted that the 'metaphor of the Mass as ritual sacrifice is threaded through the narrative from the very beginning'. Within Jones's emotional perspective of Christ as 'Glorious Victim' the writer makes use of the various stages of sacrifice: oblation, immolation, mactation (p. 170). The six scriptural quotations which serve to conclude the book, however, include Leviticus 16. 10, 'The goat on which the lot fell let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness', and Song of Songs 5. 9, 'What is thy beloved more than another beloved [...]?' The sacrificial animal, 'my beloved' and 'my friend', was chosen by lottery, by chance, and it cannot be by coincidence that Jones chooses to close his *tour de force* with the unanswered question: Why him and not another?

One would not like to exaggerate the importance of the occasional use of the word *holocaust* and its synonyms in describing the mass slaughter of 1914–1918. Yet its presence and its associations – the sacrifice of a perfect, unblemished animal, the burnt offering – cannot be ignored. Surely the biblical associations borne by the concept allow for questioning the meaning of the sacrifice itself. The burnt sacrifices detailed in the Hebrew Bible were offered up to God, and thus for the contemporary believer, as well as for the twentieth century Christian, were meaningful. However, the movement away from such forms of worship which is hinted at in the Bible suggests that the Deity was understood to demand of his believers a different form of adoration. The rite of offering up hecatombs of burnt meat was apparently undergoing a process of delegitimisation while the Hebrew Bible was being composed and during the period when its various sections were being canonised, as the poet-survivors of the Great War would have known.

Despite his admiration for *In Parenthesis* – which he terms ‘in many ways a masterpiece impervious to criticism’ – Fussell does not spare Jones the rod of his criticism:

What keeps the poem from total success is Jones’s excessively formal and doctrinal way of fleeing from the literal: the books and the words of Malory, Frazer, and Eliot are too insistently there, sometimes at the expense of their spirit. One result of this applied literariness is rhetorical uncertainty and dramatic inconsistency. [. . .] As readers, we don’t always know who’s speaking, and to whom. (pp. 153–54)

Jones is, however, neither literary nor uncertain in his description of John Ball’s last day at the front: 1 July 1916, the onset of the Battle of the Somme. Through the eyes of the young hero we see the men as they stand:

separate, upright, above ground,
blink to the broad light
risen dry mouthed from the chalk [. . .]
walking in the morning on the flat roof of the world.

Ball observes his comrades as

Each one bearing in his body the whole apprehension of that innocent, on the day he saw his brother's votive smoke diffuse and hang to soot the fields of holocaust; neither approved nor ratified nor made acceptable but lighted to everlasting partition. (p. 162)

On the morning of battle Ball knows that he is to witness the death of many, if not most, of his brothers-in-arms. From the vantage-point of 1937, Jones imagines his brothers as smoking votive candles, whose soot, together with that of thousands of other such smouldering flames, covers the killing-fields.

John Buchan (1875–1940) – barrister, journalist, historian, MP – is best remembered for the many popular novels he wrote, including *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Greenmantle*. In his personal memoir, *The Pilgrim's Way: An Essay in Recollection*, published posthumously in 1940, he looks back to what he calls his 'undistinguished record of service' in France during the Great War.²⁶

The battle of the Somme was one long nightmare, when ill weather and fatigue had to be endured by a body which was nearly always in pain and was steadily declining in strength. My time in France was purgatorial, for, though I had few of the hardships of the actual trenches, lengthy journeys in the drizzling autumn and winter of 1916, damp billets, and irregular meals reduced me to such a state of physical wretchedness that even today a kind of nausea seizes me

when some smell recalls the festering odour of the front line, made up of incinerators, latrines and mud. (p. 164)

Memories of the flames of his personal purgatory, which included the stink of the incinerators, may explain why Buchan, when writing about late friends and family members, referred to the war as ‘that holocaust of youth’ (p. 258). The reference, again, is to the sacrifice, the burnt offering, as Buchan, twice High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, would have known.

Who, or what, is the god to whom this holocaust is dedicated? The question hangs in the air, especially when the burnt offering is not a live bull (whose roasted meat may eventually fill the stomachs of the temple priests), but rather the body of a dead soldier. Blunden recalls his thoughts while on the road to Ypres: ‘Most of all, out of a deranged chronology and dimmed picture, I recollect the strange sight of red-rose-like fires on the eastward horizon at dusk, the conflagrations of incendiary shells tumbling into that *ghat* called Ypres’.²⁷ The scene at Ypres is compared to the burning of human corpses on the Ganges; the town has become a huge funeral pyre. Within religious contexts the burning of the body is meaningful: disposing of the mortal remains frees the soul to continue its journey through the cosmos. When removed from a religious context, however, the funeral pyre is meaningless: the corpse is not a suitable offering to a god whose nostrils twitch pleasurably at the odour of roast meat; nor is the burning of the body envisioned as enabling the soul to shuffle off the mortal coil which prevents it from returning to its Maker. In Fussell’s words,

every word of *Undertones of War*, every rhythm, allusion, and droll personification, can be recognised as an assault on the war and on the world which chose to conduct and continue it. Blunden’s style is his critique. It suggests what

the modern world would look like to a sensibility that was genuinely civilized'.²⁸

Thus the burnt offering is meaningful merely as the raw material of metaphor, as a figure for the slaughter which was the Great War. Twelve years after the Armistice Blunden gives expression to the inability to attach meaning to the events of the war; in his introduction to *Great Short Stories of the War: England, France, Germany, America*, he notes that:

Contrast, irony, and coincidence are always with us, but, in general freedom, we are not inclined to let them hold us up. In the system of time and space called war, these figures were encountered at almost every step [...]. You are one of an army of millions – and you are alone; you are nothing, and everything; you press this piece of metal, and may bring misery on a girl at the other end of the earth; you move an inch or two in a wrong direction, and – what then?²⁹

The one fixed rule seems to be that just as 'the mind is its own place', war is its own 'system of time and space'; moreover, within this space, the familiar rules of cause and effect do not apply. On 11 November 1918 Sassoon was still in uniform, although down in the country, as he recalls in *Siegfried's Journey*, written with the events of 1939–1945 fresh in his mind:

Walking in the water meadows by the river below Garsington on the quiet grey morning of November 11th, I listened to a sudden peal of bells from the village church and saw little flags being fluttered out from the windows of the thatched houses on the hill. Everyone had expected to hear that the Armistice was signed; but even now it wasn't easy to absorb the idea of the War being over. The sense of relief couldn't be expressed by any mental or physical gesture. I

just stood still with a blank mind, listening to the bells which announced our deliverance.³⁰

Rushing up to London, the poet joined the flag-waving crowds in the capital, feeling, however, no wish to shake hands with anybody. Indeed there was little joy. Even the rejoicing in 'Everyone Sang' is attenuated by the 'heart shaken with tears' and the 'horror' which 'Drifted away' across the bridge of the enjambment. Later in *Siegfried's Journey* Sassoon describes an extended postwar lecture tour of North America in which he does his best to bear witness to the futility of war; on a visit to Chicago the poet spends an afternoon with fellow-poet Carl Sandburg:

I remarked that it seemed funny to think of me coming to tell Chicago that war doesn't pay. 'I guess you just done what the good Lord told you to do,' he replied with a slow smile. 'Maybe a few of them'll believe you. But they can't know unless they've been there themselves. Bullets, bombs, bayonets, gas, are nothing more than words to them'.

The moment when he said that now seems to have been the central point of my time in America (p. 197).

In conclusion, fellow-survivors Sassoon, Blunden, Jones, Graves, might have agreed with Buchan that 'the War had shown that our mastery over physical forces might end in a nightmare, that mankind was becoming like an overgrown child armed with deadly weapons, a child with immense limbs and a tiny head'.³¹ They would probably not have accepted the hesitant optimism which instils Buchan's memoir, however. Their experiences in the Great War had left them with the sense that they – the survivors, the animals who had inexplicably escaped the ritual slaughter – were best qualified to define what it meant to have come through the holocaust. Yet even they were unable to attach a meaning to their sacrifice.

Max Stern College of Jezreel Valley, Israel

NOTES

Title quotation: David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber, 1969 (1937)), p. 162.

¹ Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1929), p. vii.

² Edmund Blunden, *War Poets 1914–1918, Writers and their Work*, 100 (London: Longman, for the British Council, 1964), p. 28.

³ Siegfried Sassoon, *Sherston's Progress* (New York: Literary Guild of America, 1937), p. 217.

⁴ Paul Moeyes, *Siegfried Sassoon: Scorched Glory: A Critical Study* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), p. 125.

⁵ Siegfried Sassoon, 'The Road to Ruin', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1947), p. 199.

⁶ See Diane DeBell, 'Strategies of Survival: David Jones, *In Parenthesis*, and Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*', in *The First World War in Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Holger Klein (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 161–73. DeBell terms *Goodbye to All That* 'a wonderful cache of anecdotal information', and considers it 'perhaps the most valuable source in English for the individual and collective experience of trench warfare' (pp. 163–64).

⁷ *Goodbye to All That* (London: Cassell, 1957), p. 86.

⁸ 'Strategies of Survival', p. 162.

⁹ Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 302, 309. Seymour notes that Graves considered Jones's postwar work on Welsh mythology to be plagiarism. She argues that Graves's 'extreme hostility to both David Jones and Dylan Thomas may have stemmed from the fact that they were working in a similar field [mythology], when Graves wanted it all to himself'.

¹⁰ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 147.

¹¹ *In Parenthesis*, p. xv.

¹² T. S. Eliot 'was proud to share the responsibility' for the publication of *In Parenthesis*, as he writes in his 'Note of Introduction'; he believed

that ‘it will no doubt undergo the same sort of detective analysis and exegesis as the later work of James Joyce and the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound’ (p. vii). One might ask parenthetically, as it were, whether Eliot and Jones would have rejoiced had they known that on the ninetieth anniversary of the events described ‘in parenthesis’, Jones’s prose-poem would indeed be the subject of much scholarly ‘detective analysis and exegesis’.

¹³ William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (London: Norton, 1997), *Henry V*, IV. 3. 41–67.

¹⁴ *Sherston’s Progress*, pp. 218–19.

¹⁵ Samuel 2. 2. 14.

¹⁶ *Life on the Edge*, p. 53.

¹⁷ Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), pp. 44–46.

¹⁸ Fussell argues that: ‘The most obvious reason why “theater” and modern war seem so compatible is that modern wars are fought by conscripted armies, whose members know they are only temporarily playing their ill-learned parts’ (*The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 191).

¹⁹ *Undertones of War*, p. 269.

²⁰ *Goodbye to All That*, pp. 141–42.

²¹ *Undertones of War*, pp. 249–50.

²² The word *sho’ah* appears in Isaiah, Psalms and Job in the sense of *ruin, desolation*; such total destruction can be the result of a storm (water) or of dryness (possibly, though not of necessity, resulting from fire); *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. by F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), pp. 980– 81. The *OED* editors add that the term *the Holocaust* ‘is in common use among Jews, but seems to be otherwise relatively rare except among specialists’.

²³ Psalm 51. 15–17.

²⁴ Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 173–74.

²⁵ *War Poets 1914–1918*, pp. 29–30.

²⁶ John Buchan (Lord Tweedsmuir), *Pilgrim's Way: An Essay in Recollection* (Cambridge MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), p. 163. Buchan's perceived lack of distinction as a soldier was, incidentally, occasioned by his age (he was in his early forties during the war) and ill health.

²⁷ *Undertones of War*, p. 211.

²⁸ *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 268.

²⁹ Edmund Blunden, *Great Short Stories of the War: England, France, Germany, America* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1930), pp. i-ii.

³⁰ *Siegfried's Journey 1916–1920* (London: Faber, 1945), p. 97.

³¹ *Pilgrim's Way*, p. 184.