

Poetry for Pleasure

Helen Goethals

Gardens Behind the Lines, 1914-1918: Gardens Found and Made on the Western and Eastern Fronts by Anne Powell

London: Cecil Woolf, 2015. 44 pp. £9. ISBN 978-1-907286-44-5

Keith Douglas: Genius Overlooked by Morgan Merrington

London: Cecil Woolf, 2016. 58 pp. £10. ISBN 978-1-907286-45-2

Siegfried Sassoon at the Grave of Henry Vaughan by Deborah Fisher

London: Cecil Woolf, 2016. 24 pp. £7.50. ISBN 978-1-907286-46-9

Ivor Gurney: Poet of the Trenches and the Gloucestershire Countryside by Phil Carradice,

London: Cecil Woolf, 2016. 40 pp. £9 ISBN 978-1-907286-47-6

These four books appear in the War Poets Series edited by the well-known academic and biographer Jean Moorcroft Wilson and published by her husband Cecil Woolf (yes ... a nephew). In fact the study of the poetry of Ivor Gurney marks the fortieth publication in the series, a feat which in these lean times offers no small cause for celebration.

There is no doubt but in the mind of the English public the First World War poets overshadow those of the Second. As Robert Graves once crisply observed, “‘war poet’ and ‘war poetry’ are terms first used in World War I and perhaps peculiar to it.’ For the time being at any rate, the proportion in this series of poets belonging to the First World War rather than the Second certainly bears that out and, naturally, no attempt has been made to balance the books. Indeed, there is no artificial even-handedness even among the Great War poets. Some are the subject of a single monograph, whereas a privileged few (Edmund Blunden, Isaac

Rosenberg, Edward Thomas) have been approached from several angles.

The casual variety of poets and approaches is offset by a pleasing harmony of form and content. These monographs are essentially essays, to be read at one sitting, based on or accompanied by a generous selection of poems quoted in full. As the systematic use of sub-titles suggests, we have here studies which present not only the 'life, times and work' of a poet but also a well-argued point of view, often one which makes unusual and intriguing connections. Such is the case of the above-cited essay which brings together Henry Vaughan and Siegfried Sassoon. Though somewhat uneven in style, the monographs are refreshingly un-pedantic. Not the least of their charms is that they are concise and nicely designed to be slipped into a bag or a briefcase, to be read at grateful leisure.

Morgan Merrington's study of Keith Douglas is a good example. Drawing on previous work by Desmond Graham, Tim Kendall, Edna Longley and others, it presents, on the one hand, a succinct and balanced biography while, on the other, it draws attention to several poems not found in the anthologies. Among other pleasures, this gives the reader the opportunity to read 'Syria', a poem by Douglas whose present topicality is proof (if proof were needed) that the true interest of war poetry goes well beyond its acknowledged historical value.

The series also offers the opportunity to discover little-known poets. *Anne Powell's Gardens Behind the Lines, 1914-1918* has proved to be one of the runaway successes of the collection. And deservedly so, for within its covers we discover the multitude of green spaces which the trench poets tended or attended to in the midst of mayhem, and we are introduced to the letters and poems of Winchester-educated Alexander Douglas Gillespie (1890-1915), killed on the first day of the Battle of Loos.

No doubt what imparts to the collection a real sense of integrity is that each study is aimed at the reader who gathers in all readers, the ‘common reader’ so delightfully described by Virginia Woolf:

He reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others. Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole – a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing.

Certainly these monographs provide such a pleasure and if one dips at random into the series, then one is bound to come up with just such ‘odds and ends’ as help to make up each reader’s sense of what happens when poets are caught up in war. Such reading, like all poetry, according to Robert Frost, ‘begins in delight and ends in wisdom’.

A word, then, to the wise. The War Poets Series is so charmingly eclectic that it seems, to borrow a phrase from the preface to Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes’ anthology *The Rattle Bag*, ‘to have amassed itself like a cairn’. Such a *laissez-faire* attitude cannot help but lead to some conspicuous absences: no Wilfred Owen, no Robert Graves. The Woolfs are at pains to point out that this is ‘an ongoing project’. The War Poets Series remains an open one: *A vos plumes, citoyens!*

The Woolfs publish two series of books dedicated to the lives, works and times of, respectively, the Bloomsbury group (Bloomsbury Heritage Series) and twentieth-century war poets (War Poets series). A full list of their publications can be found at Blogging Woolf:

<https://bloggingwoolf.wordpress.com/books/cecil-woolf-publishers/>

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