

Owen and Sassoon at Craiglockhart

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Owen and Sassoon: The Edinburgh Poems

Ed. and intro. by Neil McLennan

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Neil McLennan, the Senior Lecturer and Director of Leadership Programmes at University of Aberdeen, has assembled the poems written by Owen and Sassoon at Craiglockhart War Hospital during their respective stays there in the second half of 1917. In the introduction McLennan argues strongly that the humane treatment that both poets received there sparked in them some of their greatest poetry. The shell-shocked Owen was assigned to Dr Arthur Brock for treatment. Brock's 'ergotherapy' involved contact with nature and social activities such as, in Owen's case, teaching at a local high school. The less-traumatised Sassoon, who had been sent to Craiglockhart at the instigation of Robert Graves and other friends as an alternative to being court martialled for the expression of his anti-war views, was assigned to Dr William Rivers. Rivers's therapy has often been ascribed to the influence of Freud, given that it was based on an idea of repression and therapy allowing what was repressed to be released. However, Rivers's basic idea was that, especially in the context of experience of combat, the repression was not of early sexual urges, but of urges connected with self-preservation. But there is no doubt that Sassoon appreciated the opportunities to discuss his feelings and experiences with the sympathetic Rivers. (Graves was never a patient at Craiglockhart, but visited Sassoon and Owen there and spoke

with Rivers – River's thought and practice was an influence on him during the early 1920s).¹

McLennan prints twenty poems from Sassoon and forty-two from Owen that can be assigned to their times at Craiglockhart. Sassoon, who of course survived the war and lived long after, was able to control the publication of his poetry, so the poems printed in this volume are taken from his *Collected Poems*, in which volume are they are printed in the different collections in which they first appeared. With Owen, however, McLennan prints all the poems that were either finished at Craiglockhart, or begun there – though in this latter case he prints the final versions of these poems that were arrived at during 1918. It is clear that for Owen the months he spent there allowed him to revise many early poems and to draft, at least, most of the poems on which his reputation now rests – by my count there are only another ten or so poems in Owen's *oeuvre* which were begun after leaving the hospital, in the months before Owen's death in early November 1918.

However, it is not quite clear what the function of this volume is. McLennan argues in his introduction that the poems contained here were strongly influenced by Edinburgh and environs, and it is well known that, in close contact with Owen, Sassoon had the opportunity to provide much advice and many suggestions to Owen for his poetry. It is obvious reading the introduction that local patriotism is a strong incentive for the volume, and there is nothing wrong with this. However, the Edinburgh influence as documented in the introduction is no more than a few points and suggestions, and there is no commentary on the poems, or any documentation of Sassoon's suggestions or edits to Owen's poems. I suspect that this is because the evidence for this lies in various other publications, such as biographies of Sassoon and Owen, editions of their letters, and Owen's *Poems and Fragments* edited by Jon Stallworthy, material which could

not be reproduced in bulk because of copyright. McLennan's volume doesn't include a bibliography so readers who want to study the poems Sassoon and Owen wrote at Craiglockhart in 1917, or their interactions, in more detail will have to rely on these other volumes. The value of the collection lies in the readability of the poems and the memory of the friendship of the poets.

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NOTES

¹ See McLennan's essay on Graves, Sassoon and Owen meet at Craiglockhart in Where Graves, Sassoon and Owen Met in *Gravesiana*, 4 (Summer 2018), pp. 490-502
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