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## Chapter 8 – The Gospel According to St Wilfred

Deafening explosions fill the air. The rattle of machine-gun fire is heard. In the gun flashes you glimpse a trench parapet surmounted by barbed wire. Figures, clearly British Tommies, move to and fro in silhouette. A single great-coated figure appears wearing a German steel helmet. His first words are taken from one of Wilfred Owen's most famous poems 'Anthem for Doomed Youth':

*What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?*

*Only the monstrous anger of the guns*

He begins a song, the first words of which evoke Rupert Brooke's poem 'The Soldier': 'In a foreign field he lay, unknown soldier, unknown grave'. Is this the latest film of the First World War, or perhaps a stage production of *Oh, What a Lovely War!* or even *Journey's End*? As is soon made clear this is a rock concert, the band is Iron Maiden with lead singer Bruce Dickinson fronting their live version of the song 'Paschendale' (Iron Maiden, 2007). The lyrics include images of blood filled trenches, lifeless bodies hanging on the wire, soldiers drowned in mud and compare the battlefield to a bloody tomb. It suggests parallels between the situation of British and German soldiers and draws comparisons with Christ's crucifixion. Iron Maiden's vision of the Third Battle of Ypres is one of their most impassioned and deeply felt songs, drawing on many of the key War myths we have been examining and its lyrics instantly evoke comparison with the work of the famous war poets, most notably Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.

Elsewhere I have suggested that a relationship between music and poetry began during the War itself, that 'the changing nature of the war poets' relationship to remembrance is reflected in the interaction between music and the remembrance of the War and, in Britain, 'so much of the continuing musical response to the Great War operates within the constraints of a popular memory defined by the war poets' (Grant and Hanna, 2015, pp. 111 and 124). Here I was referring to both popular and classical music and it is the latter which is in greater thrall of the poets with few able to break free (Wood, 2014). Examples include Mark-Anthony Turnage's *The Torn Fields* (2001) as well

as his opera based on Sean O'Casey's play *The Silver Tassie* (2000), Colin Matthews's *No Man's Land* (2011) and American Kevin Put's Pulitzer Prize winning opera, based Christian Carion's film, *Silent Night* (2012). Nevertheless many popular songs draw inspiration from the iconic poetry of the War. Before looking at some examples we should explore the similarities and differences between poetry and song and examine the specific myths that, in Britain especially, the war poets have generated.

### **Poetry and song lyrics**

Some writers suggest that 'songs can work like poetry, providing an experience of transcendence beyond the banality of ordinary everyday living' (Rolston, 2001, 50). Others point out that song lyrics cannot be the exact equivalent of poetry as the two are designed to perform different functions (Woodard, 2007). Frith suggests this holds true even for songs whose words can 'stand by themselves' for once music is added new meanings are produced and the very best songs 'can be heard as a struggle between verbal and musical rhetoric, between the singer and the song' (Frith, 1996, p. 182, emphasis in original). Not all would agree with this rigid distinction and writing lyrics and writing poems involves many similar skills and techniques, such as rhythm and repetition. There is clear overlap where a poem has been set to music or a poet is more interested in the sound of the words than their meaning (Frith, 1996, pp. 180-2). A number of volumes of poetry also include song lyrics and the boundary between them is blurred by songwriters and poets as well as by listeners and readers (Negus and Astor, 2015, pp. 233-4). In some cases songwriters have been poets before turning to song (Leonard Cohen and Patti Smith for example) or have published volumes of poetry (Dylan, John Lennon, Gil Scott-Heron). Polly Harvey has always been interested in the blurred lines between poetry and song and her most recent work, the volume of poems and photographs *The Hollow of the Hand* plus the album *The Hope Six Demolition Project* (2016, Island) explores this relationship with sung versions of several of the poems. Harvey says that in writing the songs for *Let England Shake* she thought herself into the role of an officially appointed war songwriter and asked 'how would I report back and try to do it in an impartial way... Like war poets or like any foreign correspondent but trying to do it through song' (Sawyer, 2011). In doing so Harvey's songs emulate

one of the key approaches of *chanson* which often resembles ‘a kind of poetic and musical journalism’ (Hawkins, 2000, p. 4). Indeed *chanson* has been accepted in France as another form of poetry since at least the 1960s when Brel, Brassens and Ferré became the first songwriters to be included as recognised poets in Pierre Seghers’s collection *Poètes d’aujourd’hui (Contemporary poets)*. Perhaps Keith Negus and Pete Astor get closer to the reality with their concept of popular musicians as ‘architects’ rather than romantically inspired individuals (Negus and Astor, 2015). They suggest that song production is more like designing a building or, I would suggest, directing a film, especially with regard to elements such as ambiguity and repetition. Both architects and film directors exist somewhere between the ‘inspired individual creator’ of a poem or novel and the leader or manager of a creative team. Thus whilst the lyrics of songs may closely resemble poetry we might depict recorded song as being closer to film making (Moy, 2015, pp. xvii-xxvi).

### **Paul Fussell and the myth of the war poets**

When we read about the past we are constantly looking for points of reference, for people who appear to think and feel the way we think and feel. We live in an age after two total wars and with the threat of nuclear destruction having been present for 70 years, ‘we know now that war is dirty,’ whereas, ‘Edwardian England had much less cause to feel it so’ (Stephen, 1993, p. 298). In the First World War there is however a group who, by their education, their sensitivity and their reaction to war and death, very much fit the bill of ‘thinking like us’ and not like their fellow Edwardians – the war poets. These young men were almost exclusively middle and upper class and the War was uniquely shocking for them, just as it would be if we were suddenly transported into the trenches.

In Britain the view that the truth about the First World War lies in a small number of writers and poems became firmly established during the 1960s and has remained embedded in the perceptions of the public. The interpretation of First World War poetry by more than one generation of teachers, writers and others has been heavily indebted to one, ground-breaking, but significantly flawed text. Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975) appeared at the end of a decade in which the War had been utilised as a symbol for the bankruptcy of an

outdated class system and a blatant example of the folly of war to parallel events in Vietnam. Fussell's book provided the intellectual underpinning to more didactic works such as *Oh What a Lovely War* (both the play and film) or Stanley Kubrick's 1957 film *Paths of Glory*. Though Fussell's advocates will point out that his book is not intended as history it is often portrayed in that way and thus its shortcomings need to be listed. There are inaccuracies in depicting life in the front line and tours of duty. Fussell gives you the impression of a never-ending succession of battles when, in reality, the average British soldier spent more time playing football than fighting. Fussell falsifies casualty figures saying 'even in the quietest times, some 7000 British men and officers were killed and wounded daily' (Fussell, 2000, p. 41). The true figure is about 1,600, still appalling but Fussell is wrong by a factor of four. Hyperbole is passed off as fact. An example being the comments of Major Pilditch in August 1917 that the war would last so long that 'children still at school' would end up in the trenches (Fussell, 2000, p. 72). Fussell calls this comment 'brilliantly prophetic' yet no critic appears to have pointed out the absurdity of his statement. Chronology is distorted. The Battle of Neuve Chapelle (10 March, 1915) is placed after the first German gas attack at Ypres (22 April, 1915) and the mine explosion at Messines is responsible for the capture of Vimy Ridge (some 30 miles away and occurring two months previously) (Fussell, 2000, pp. 10 and 14). Fussell also suggests that Vimy, one of the most notable successes of the War, was a failure and that it is in Belgium when it is in France. Fussell's account of the end of the war is that Germany was defeated because she attacked so successfully (Fussell, 2000, p. 18). About the only analyst who would have agreed with him on this point was Adolf Hitler. There is a total absence of anything about the home front or, indeed, anything other than the trenches of the Western Front.

More crucial though are Fussell's failings of literary analysis. His three main assertions are that:

1. The war poets' views are representative.
2. Their style marked a complete break from the past and meant that euphemistic, over-patriotic, language could never be used again.

3. They opposed the War, which they considered unjustified and futile.

Many have pointed out the error of the first and several have scotched the second, though few have seriously challenged the last (Gregory, 2008, pp. 271-2; Prior and Wilson, 1994; Vance, 1997, pp. 89-90; Stephen, 1996a, pp. 26-9; Winter, 2013, p. 250). Were the key war poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen in particular, as anti-war as Fussell and many others suggest? If you read all of Owen's war poems (not just the famous half-dozen or so) or the post-war comments of Sassoon a somewhat different, and far more complex, picture emerges. Sassoon and Owen were determined to 'see things through' and defeat Germany and were, along with Robert Graves, highly ambiguous in their attitudes towards war. Though Owen clearly despised war he still dragged himself back to fight and die in it, even when an honourable escape had been offered to him. Both Owen and Sassoon won the Military Cross and though Sassoon tossed the ribbon of his in the Mersey, he went back to active service after his famous public declaration against the War and later replaced the discarded ribbon (Egremont, 2006, p. 203). In a letter to E.M. Forster in June 1918 Sassoon states how he could no longer support Bertrand Russell's pacifist ideas in the light of Germany's renewed militarism and also came close to repudiating his statement when, in *Siegfried's Journey*, he says that 'I must add that in the light of subsequent events it is difficult to believe that a peace negotiated in 1917 would have been permanent. I share the general opinion that nothing on earth would have prevented a recurrence of Teutonic aggressiveness' (Hibberd, 1986, pp. 108-9; Sassoon, 1945, p. 57). Turning to Owen my own analysis of the approximately 100 poems he wrote during the War is that only eight could be interpreted as at all 'anti-war' and in one, '1914', he speaks of 'The foul tornado centred on Berlin'. Though written in that year he revised it in 1917-18 without amendment or ironic intent (Owen, 2004, p. 93). There are also great differences between the two poets that are not often highlighted. Owen wrote a far smaller number of poems about the War than Sassoon. Out of the 113 Sassoon wrote after he enlisted only three contain no reference or at least allusion to the War. It is fair to say that Sassoon was obsessed by the War both during it and for the rest of his life. On the other hand Owen, for whom we can only cite evidence from the War itself, was far less obsessive. Of

80 poems written during Owen's active service at least 30 make no reference whatsoever to the War. In many others Owen utilises classical allusions and the kind of romantic language Fussell claims he helped banish and which does not appear in Sassoon's work. He uses words like 'forsooth' and 'foreknows' in poems written or revised at Craiglockhart and 'The Wrestlers', one of his last finished works started in July 1917, features Heracles's fight with Antaeas, utilises phrases such as: 'And fain would make all place for him' and makes no connection with the War (Owen, 2004, pp. 81, 83 and 184-6).

At one point Fussell says that 'any historian would err badly who relied on letters for factual testimony about the war' but it does not occur to him that that it is even more dubious if you rely on poetry because poems are not factual accounts, they are works of art (Fussell, 2000, p. 183; Stephen, 1996a, p. 233). Poets, and most other artists including popular musicians, have no difficulty separating their artistic purposes from historic fact yet, so often, interpreters of their work continue to make this confusion. This comes despite the warnings of one of first critics to produce a systematic study of the war poets. In 1964 Fussell's fellow American John H. Johnston was quite clear that 'if we had to depend upon World War I poetry for our knowledge of the causes and aims of the struggle, the ideals involved, and the military purposes which governed the fates of so many millions of men, our understanding of these matters would not only be meagre but in some cases rather seriously distorted' (Johnston, 1964, p. 16). Fussell's ideas now have a waning influence in much of academia, especially amongst historians, but continue to be lauded by literary critics and the public. In 2011 Louisa Young was typical in calling *The Great War and Modern Memory* 'a history book' in which 'every sentence remains strong, valid and beautifully put' and of the thirty reviews on the *goodreads* website all are positive using words like 'landmark', 'remarkable', 'classic' and 'illuminating' (Young, 2011; *goodreads*, various dates). Perhaps most revealing is the comment of Susie Wilde when she says 'I learnt more about WW1 from this book than almost any other' (Wilde, 2009). She of course means that it is the book which most closely matches her own conception of the myth of the War.

## Owen and Sassoon's 'realism'

One of the few books about music and the First World War, Glenn Watkins's *Proof through the Night*, concludes with an analysis of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* of 1961. Britten memorably fashioned nine of Wilfred Owen's poems into one of his greatest works. Watkins's concluding comment is that in the *War Requiem* 'the meaning as well as the meaninglessness of the Great War had found a new and resonant echo' (Watkins, 2003, p. 429). This is, at best, an over-literal and incomplete interpretation of the work of both artists. Though they utilise the First World War in their imagery they are aiming for a more universal message, to go beyond realism to expose the underlying nature of war. An example from one of Owen's best known poems is 'Dulce et Decorum Est' where he describes a gas attack as 'a green sea'. He clearly means the chlorine gas utilised in 1915. Owen himself did not get to the front until 1916 by which time chlorine gas had gone out of use, however the image of the 'green sea' was a far stronger one than had he employed the 'realism' of phosgene or mustard gas, the first being colourless, the latter yellow-brown, and neither would have served the artistic purpose of the poem (Pruszewicz, 2015). This sometimes confuses literary scholars. Stuart Lee refers to the fact that Owen never experienced a gas attack as 'one of the great mysteries' whilst the Poetry Foundation biography of Owen insists he was subjected to gas, on 12 January 2017 (Pruszewicz, 2015; Poetry Foundation, nd). Such comments show how fixed the idea that poems such as 'Dulce et Decorum Est' had to spring from first-hand experience has become when, in probably every other period of literary history, these critics would have no difficulty in accepting that the poem, though based on real events, sprang from the writer's artistic imagination. It is also an error that some critics of popular music fall into as well, suggesting that songs about, say, the breakup of a relationship, must come from the artists own experience. This is equally fallacious as Alan Moore aptly demonstrates in his analysis of Amy Winehouse's song 'Rehab'. Given Winehouse's well documented issues with alcohol and drugs many see the song as pure autobiography but Moore illustrates that it 'is not a simple recounting of that actual experience... It

is contextualised, ironised, indeed it is made into an art object fit for interpretation' (Moore, 2012, p. 210).

In the preface for his planned book of poems Wilfred Owen wrote: 'All a poet can do today is warn [children]. That is why the true [War] Poet must be truthful' (Owen, 1918. The words in square brackets were crossed through in the original ms). Owen here raises the issue of the meaning of truth in relation to war. Both Owen and Britten intended their work to apply to all wars not just the specific one through which Owen and Sassoon fought with distinction, as Martin Stephen suggests they were 'not poets of the First World War, or even trench poets, but poets of war' (Stephen, 1996a, p. 192). Because the First World War carries such pregnant meaning and, in the public imagination, immediate resonance of 'pity' it has become a symbol for a multitude of artists to express their rage at the stupidity of armed conflict. Like Owen, Sassoon and Britten before them, popular musicians also attempt to convey this universal message. There is therefore more than a cursory link between popular music about the War and the work of the war poets.

One of the key 'truths' Owen and Sassoon attempt to portray is that of love and, as Stephen rightly points out, 'their work can only be fully appreciated if it is seen as love poetry and not war poetry' (Stephen, 1996a, p. 191). This is a crucial factor in their work and yet one that often gets ignored or forgotten, mainly because it can present significant problems. Not so much their homosexuality as their attitudes towards civilians and women, which are sometimes quite brutal (Gregory, 1994, pp. 120-1). Sassoon, other than in one poem 'The General', does not criticise the military leadership of the War, even in his 'protest' letter they are excluded. Neither does he have any antipathy for the enemy. But 'of all the culprits Sassoon constructs, one group stands alone: women' (Cole, 2013, p. 99). Poems such as Sassoon's 'Glory of Women' or 'The Hero' or Owen's 'Disabled' are deeply misogynist and, expressed by others or outside the frame of war, likely to be heavily criticised. However within their context where, for the two, 'the masculine camaraderie of war produces a love surpassing all others' these ideas are overlooked (Campbell, 1997, p. 833). Campbell goes further by

suggesting that in the war poems of Sassoon 'Death in combat, specifically the passive [...] death of a man, is purer than sexual desire between the genders. The orgasmic "fierce love" of a dying soldier penetrated by a bayonet is morally preferable to feminine desire' (Campbell, 1997, p. 834). What Sassoon is doing is employing hyperbole to make his point but it is still a disturbing concept.

In some ways it is not surprising that the work of the war poets is seen as a 'realistic' portrayal of the War. Sassoon's poetry in particular is written in a colloquial, matter-of-fact style stripped of literary decoration. It is therefore easier to confuse what is certainly a more realistic depiction of the War - mud and blood as opposed to high-flown heroic sentiment - for a fully factual account and then conflate realism with anti-war sentiments. Put another way the 'voice' that one hears in the poetry is not necessarily that of the poet himself. This relationship between the voice of the work and that of the author is one that is readily accepted in popular music. When Richard Thompson sings another song of despair or Colin Meloy one about gay love in the trenches most listeners do not hear these as autobiographical. Neither does reading novels appear to confuse most people but, strangely, many literary critics interpret poems as 'automatically' self-referential (Frith, 1996, p. 185). Neither Owen, Sassoon, nor even the latter's fellow officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, Robert Graves in his somewhat exaggerated memoir *Goodbye to All That*, was trying to distort reality. They would readily admit they changed things to more closely serve their literary purpose and that they were not trying to write history. What Sassoon and Graves (as well as Vera Brittain and many others) did in their later prose works is also typical of how memory works. In remembering the past we, consciously or unconsciously, impose our views of the present upon it. Janet Watson emphasises this point in her summation of the effect Sassoon was seeking in both the Sherston trilogy and his own memoirs. It also explains why the works still have such universal appeal:

Sassoon's aim was never to reconstruct his specific lived experience of the Great War, but to use his autobiographical details to create a more coherent portrait of society before, during and especially after the years of conflict. His work is popularly known through

misinterpretation. He aimed for a unified story of the universal, and has been credited instead with the specific powerful tale of an individual (Watson, 2004, p. 239).

### **The war poets in song**

In adapting poetry to song musicians can stick closely to the original, with little musical embellishment. Equally they can adapt the words and/or add significant musical structure which may significantly alter the original meaning. Both Joe McDonald's album of Robert Service's poems *War, War, War* and French-American Sergerémy Sacré's *War Poems - Siegfried Sassoon* (2011, self-published) stick to the first approach and both could be criticised for not adding a great deal to the impact of the poetry or, even, by adding music, distracting the listener from the words. Songs that borrow lines or imagery from poems are, however, numerous. Looking at all types there are around 100 songs from 30 different poets, 21 of them British. The most referenced are Sassoon (18), Owen (13) and Canadian John McCrae (9). We have already mentioned some including Iron Maiden (Owen and Brooke) and Bolt Thrower (Binyon). One of the more arresting updates of Owen's poetry is 'Dulce et Decorum Est' by Scottish new wavers The Skids (from *Days in Europa*, 1979, Virgin). Though only retaining the title line in its chorus the song works 'against Owen's dramatization (i.e. the narrator warning his "friend" to not tell "The old Lie"), the track [sic] instead positions its narrator as "inside" the war experience, while his addressee is not: a necessary condition for being able to "confide" that "these visions bear no meaning"' (*Traxionary*, 2014). The album's themes include World War Two and, especially in the stand-out track 'Working for the Yankee Dollar', Vietnam and US Imperialism. It caused some controversy due to its cover, an excellent pastiche of a Nazi poster for the 1936 Olympics, which many, including John Peel, failed to interpret as ironic. Siouxsie and the Banshees 'shattered, spectral reading' of John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields', retitled 'Poppy Day' (from *Join Hands*, 1979, Polydor) is less dramatic. Examples that retain the words in more lavish musical settings include: the gorgeous 'Dust', a Rupert Brooke adaptation by the 1972 incarnation of Fleetwood Mac, with music by the underrated Danny Kirwan (from *Bare Trees*, Reprise); Show of Hands excellent double album *Centenary: Words and Music of the Great War* (2014, Universal)

which juxtaposes 'straight' versions of poems by a range of war writers including two women, May Wedderburn Cannan and Jessie Pope, with more complex folk-rock versions and Canadian alternative country band NQ Arbuckle's 'Part Of A Poem By Alden Nowlan called Ypres 1915' which is exactly what the title suggests, a musical setting of Nowlan's 1960s war poem (from *Xok*, 2008, Six Shooter). Kipling is a favourite of neo-folk and martial industrial musicians and his most xenophobic verse 'For All We Have and Are' has been adapted by the only openly fascist band to have recorded a song related to the War. Sokyra Peruna ('Perun's Axe', Perun being the Zeus of Slavic mythology) have been dubbed 'Ukraine's premier white nationalist metal band' (Lee, 2015). They claim to be 'proud of our glorious nation's history' which includes its collaboration with their Nazi occupiers during the Second World War. They have expressed support for neo-Nazi organisations such as Combat 18 and Blood and Honour, a neo-Nazi music promotion network and political organisation. The band also lent their music to a video about convicted white separatist terrorist David Lane, who died in 2007 in a US prison whilst serving a 190-year prison sentence for crimes including the murder of a radio talk show host (Lee, 2015). Lane also had connections with Prussian Blue, describing the Gaede twins as his 'fantasy sweethearts' and saying, in James Quinn's documentary film, that he viewed them like daughters (Quinn, 2007). Sokyra Peruna's version of the Kipling poem (the title track of their 2003 album) did not entail a great deal of creative thought. It reproduces the poem exactly with the exception of amending the line 'the Hun is at the gate' to 'the Jew is at the gate'. Perhaps their hate-filled output is indicative of the current disturbed and violent situation in their country. Musically the band were heavily influenced, especially in their earlier punk/Oi period, by Skrewdriver, probably the best known neo-Nazi rock band and not far distant politically from Sokyra Peruna is British white-power musician and leader of the band Brutal Attack Ken McLellan. Active since the early 1980s McLellan's solo album *Ordinary Boy* appeared in 2012 (Hatecore) which adopts a more acoustic and restrained approach from the punk/Oi of his main band. Listening to the album and the Owen-inspired 'Devil's Hail (Anthem for Doomed Youth)' with uncaring Generals 'signing the death warrants of a million men' you can easily fail to grasp its singer's extreme political views.

McLellan demonstrates that adopting War myths is most certainly not an indicator of one's political leanings.

Owen himself was a great music lover and even expressed a wish to become a musician and there are several notable versions of entire Wilfred Owen poems (Leadbetter, 2015). In 1982, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', which has been called 'possibly the paradigmatic witnessing text of the 1914-18 war', was set to music by 10,000 Maniacs, appearing on their first EP release *Human Conflict Number Five* and later on the compilation *Hope Chest* (Warner)(Chambers, 2004, p. xi). The song is unique in the oeuvre of the group as it is sung by guitarist John Lombardo, not lead singer Natalie Merchant (who sings back-up vocals). A reggae inflected song, not unlike the work of The Specials, with a tune similar to Bob Marley's 'No Woman, No Cry', some have found it rather trite, or at least detracting from the impact of the words, but it is certainly unusual and may well have introduced the poet to a new audience. Also in 1982, Virginia Astley set Owen's poem 'Futility' to music she had composed. Originally performed with her short-lived group The Ravishing Beauties, it became their only release on the NME Mighty Reel cassette before appearing on a Belgian compilation (*Promise Nothing, Why Fi*) the following year. It begins with a military-style drum roll but then is mainly a simple piano accompaniment with woodwind. Astley's light, almost adolescent, vocal adds a touching naiveté to the words, clearly intended as being spoken by a Wartime nurse or VAD and it makes a fascinating comparison to the Benjamin Britten version.

The Libertines nostalgia for a 'lost' England is not dissimilar to that of the Kinks. Dorian Lynskey suggests Pete Doherty and co-frontman Carl Barât 'dreamed up a version of England and built a band in its image' (Lynskey, 2015). An early potential name for the band was Albion and Doherty, son of an army officer, entitled his 2007 book of thoughts and poems *Books of Albion*. Doherty has said that for him England 'was this mythical place, but when we moved there [when he was 12], the England that I thought existed – this England of Hancock, *Porridge* and Kipling – was nowhere to be fucking seen' (Lynskey, 2015). It is somewhat surprising that neither Doherty nor Barât specifically

referenced the First World War until Barât's 2015 album with the Jackals, *Let it Reign* (Cooking Vinyl). This contains both 'Summer in the Trenches', only the title seems to reference the War, and the 'guttural, Clash-like homage to first world war servicemen' 'Glory Days' (Sullivan, 2015). The Libertines reunion album later in the year went further by adapting Wilfred Owen for its title *Anthem for Doomed Youth* (Virgin EMI). The opening track 'Gunga Din' references Kipling, 'Heart of the Matter' Graham Greene and there is also 'You're My Waterloo'. The title track though containing lines such as 'hanging on the old barbed wire' and 'they wished you luck and handed you a gun' is less about the War than the band's fraught history and one reviewer remarked, astutely, that 'this is the Libertines' ode to those who, like them, have made it through to the other side' (Daly, 2015). Despite the War's presence being somewhat distant *Anthem for Doomed Youth* is an apt demonstration of how deeply the iconic poems of Owen have penetrated British culture.

Isaac Rosenberg stands out from other British war poets for his origins in the East End Jewish working class. Unlike Sassoon, Owen and Graves he was not an officer but a private soldier, and not a very good one, a 'liability' who did not make friends for reasons beyond his religion and, one might say, even died ironically, on 1 April 1918 (Stephen, 1996a, p. 135). Yet in many ways he is the most remarkable of all the war poets. Unlike Owen and Sassoon, most of whose poetry was composed away from the front, Rosenberg's was written near the line. 'He suffered no disillusionment for he had few illusions to shed' and 'his purpose is not to inform nor to warn. Rather, [his] poems are an exploration of man's situation as revealed by war, of what war does to the sensibility of man' (Noakes, 2013, pp. 55-6). Rosenberg does not fit the war poet myth and adaptations of his works are fewer. There is one instrumental album by progressive metal band Returning We Hear the Larks (*Ypres*, 2010, *Murder on the Dancefloor*), who are named after one of his finest poems. A close relative of Rosenberg's 'droll rat' from 'Break of Day in the Trenches' is Billy Cyldish's 'Fritz the Trench Mouse' who shares the cosmopolitan tendency to move between the British and German lines (from *Dung Beetle Rolls Again*, 2012, *Damaged Goods*). I would also suggest that though bands such as Bolt Thrower and Sabaton, who depict the lives of soldiers without emotion or

embellishment, more usually reference Owen it is the spirit of Rosenberg they are closet to.

Rosenberg had suffered extreme poverty and racism in his life, which continued into his army career, and yet despite this he never wrote anti-war poetry nor expresses anger, instead he interpreted his 'experiences through his own, remarkable vision' (Noakes, 2013, p. 58). Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump' is a highlight of the Tiger Lillies 2014 album *A Dream Turns Sour* which sets the words of ten war poets to music, the unifying factor being that none of them survived the War. Described as the 'Godfathers of alternative cabaret' this was the Lillies' 35<sup>th</sup> album since their formation in 1989 (Meads, 2011). Led by the often falsetto-voiced Martin Jacques the trio's main musical influence is Kurt Weill and their subject matter is often controversial including topics such as bestiality (*Farmyard Filth*, 1997), prostitution (*The Brothel to the Cemetery*, 1996) and blasphemy (*Bad Blood and Blasphemy*, 1999) but also includes versions of *Woyzeck* (2011), *Hamlet* (2012) and *Lulu* (2014). As well as the poems of Rosenberg, Owen, Sorley and McCrae *A Dream Turns Sour* includes lesser known works such as Noel Hodgson's 'Before Action', Leslie Coulson's 'One Little Hour' and, especially effective, Arthur Graeme West's 'God, How I Hate You' which Jacques delivers with bitter relish.

Other songs, whilst not directly quoting the war poets, clearly take inspiration from them. There are distinct similarities between 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda' and Wilfred Owen's 'Disabled' about a legless young veteran. As in Bogle, the poem describes the protagonist's carefree pre-war life and lack of any patriotic motivation for enlisting, though the Owen character's freedom is depicted through football rather than trekking across the Australian outback. 'He was drafted out with drums and cheers', is reflected in Bogle's band playing the Patterson song and on his return, just as in Bogle's song, the cheers are absent and the women ignore him. He is left to 'take whatever pity they may dole' and 'spend a few sick years in institutes' (Owen, 2004, p. 152). The Danish death metal band Iniquity utilise the poets and their graphic depictions of trench warfare to dramatic effect. Their 'Poets of the Trench' (from *Grime*, 2002, Mighty Music) is in two parts. The first is a more straightforward reflection on those who fell, on both sides, in the Battle of the Somme sung in

the usual death metal style growled to the point unintelligibility by vocalist Mads Haarlov. The second part, written by bass player Thomas Fagerlind, is more unusual, taking the form of a diary entry or letter written after the battle and spoken in clear English. The narrator has been on a train talking with another survivor, probably going on leave, but is now back in the trenches before another attack that he does not expect to survive. Its powerful language, inspired by death metal pioneers such as controversial and often censored Cannibal Corpse, also recalls some of the best wartime novels such as *Le Feu*, *Storm of Steel* or Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*.

### **Canadians: Robert Service and John McCrae**

American folk rocker Country Joe McDonald's album *War, War, War* (1971, Vanguard) came not long after the split of his seminal psychedelic rock band Country Joe and the Fish. As part of the latter McDonald (himself a US Navy veteran) had been in the forefront of the anti-Vietnam War movement, their most notable anti-war songs being the Lyndon Johnson parody 'Super Bird' (on 1967's *Electric Music for the Mind and Body*) and, even more famously, the anthemic 'I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die Rag' (the title track of their second album released later in the same year) which is preceded by the 'Fish Cheer' and features prominently in McDonald's performance at the Woodstock Festival. Both songs are all the more powerful because they are deeply ironic and full of humour. 'Super Bird' uses the metaphor of comparing the President with both Superman and the B52 bombers which were, at the time, raining death on the North Vietnamese and the 'cheer' is a fairground-style 'calling on' asking the audience to 'give me an F....' etc, which on the record has to spell 'F.I.S.H.' but in live performance usually spelt 'F.U.C.K.' The Rag goes on to urge Americans to 'put down their books pick up a gun, we're gonna have a whole lot of fun' and hopes their parents will 'be the first one on their block to have your boy come home in a box.' Dorian Lynskey suggests that the song captured 'the confusion and gallows humour of the average soldier's experience' and Bradley and Werner that it 'placed a veteran's perspective on Vietnam at the center of the Woodstock myth' (Lynskey, 2012, pp. 115 and 135; Bradley and Werner, 2015, pp. 96-102). The 'Rag' proved a huge success in its twin aims of giving those protesting the war something to sing and really

annoying those who supported it. In comparison *War, War, War* is much less confrontational. Featuring McDonald on acoustic guitar (with occasional harmonica, tambourine and organ) it is a musical setting of nine of Robert Service's war-related poems. Service was born in Preston, Lancashire, but became known as 'the bard of the Yukon' after emigrating to Canada. Though over 40 when war broke out he volunteered for the Canadian Red Cross and in 1916 wrote *Rhymes of a Red Cross Man* whilst convalescing in Paris. Service, like Isaac Rosenberg, does not fit the war poet stereotype. He suggests that the War was justified and brings a sense of humour entirely lacking in Sassoon and Owen. He also shows 'the ordinary soldier as far more in control of himself and his destiny' and Featherstone suggests that Service had 'an avowedly democratic outlook [...] that contrasted markedly with the threatened imperial ground of John McCrae' (Stephen, 1996b, pp. 146-7; Featherstone, 2013, p. 178). Highlights of the album include 'War Widow', laden with Service's typical sarcasm, with the War being praised for ridding an overpopulated society of young men, a companion piece to Barbara's 'Veuve de Guerre'. Another, which gets away from the usual War clichés, is the long ballad 'Jean Desprez' about a French peasant boy ordered to shoot a captured Zouave by a callous German officer but who guns down the German instead. The muted tones McDonald adopts and the sparse accompaniment certainly allow the poems 'space to breathe' and the words to take precedence. Prevented by contractual problems from reissuing the album McDonald re-recorded it live on 7 July 2007 at the 2nd annual 'Our Way Home Peace Event and Reunion,' honouring US Vietnam War resisters and others in Castlegar, British Columbia.

John McCrae is another poet whose work is often misused or misinterpreted. He was responsible for the poem which is probably (in part at least) the best known of the War 'In Flanders Fields'. McCrae, a Canadian Medical Officer, wrote it in May 1915 after presiding over the funeral of friend and fellow officer, Alexis Helmer, who died in the Second Battle of Ypres. McCrae himself died of pneumonia in January 1918 by which time his poem was 'well known throughout the allied world' (turtlezen, nd; Ward, 2014, pp. 100-101). In 2015, a statue of McCrae was erected in Ottawa, the poem appears on Canadian banknotes and coins and there are even two children's books about it (Holmes, 2005, pp.

11-12). Nowadays McCrae's famous verses are interpreted by most as being anti-war. This is because its last stanza, where the poet urges those left behind to avenge the dead, is often omitted. Some critics have taken issue with the revengeful theme of this stanza, and especially the way, in the middle stanza, that McCrae enlists the dead in his cry. Jennifer Ward considers the poem riddled by 'colonialism, imperialism, war mongering, homophobia, and falseness' (Holmes, 2005, p. 25). Tim Kendall, echoing Fussell, sees it as overtly propagandist in calling for the War to be prolonged and contrasts McCrae with Sassoon as being 'two extremes of a spectrum of opinion among the fighting men' (Kendall, 2010). Yet though McCrae and Sassoon may differ in their poetry, they are not so far apart in their overall sentiments, and Sassoon's war poems are every bit as propagandist though from a different perspective. Fussell's comments on 'In Flanders Fields' are especially illuminating of his overall approach to war poetry. Calling the poem 'vicious and stupid' he suggests:

Things fall apart two-thirds of the way through as the vulgarities of 'Stand Up and Play the Game!' begin to make inroads into the pastoral, and we suddenly have a recruiting-poster rhetoric apparently applicable to any war (Fussell, 2000, p. 249, my emphasis).

It is highly simplistic to accuse McCrae's poem of being no better than a recruiting poster and the comments betray ignorance of (or at least ignore) McCrae's other war poems such as 'The Anxious Dead' or 'Disarmament' which are far more equivocal. Fussell also ignores the historical context in which the poem was written, a time when the outcome of the War was entirely uncertain and exhortations to fight the invader were also being expressed by both Owen and Sassoon. Most tellingly Fussell sneers at the idea that the poem may be applicable to all wars rather than specifically the First World War and this lies at the heart of the weakness of his analysis. Fussell, and many others, believe that the 'best' war poets were responding specifically and solely to the war of 1914-18 which was uniquely awful and uniquely commanded by bloodthirsty halfwits. Martin Stephen is highly perceptive about why we make assumptions like these in relation to McCrae's poem when he wrote that 'the most convenient image of Great War poetry is based on the shock-and-horror category of writing. It symbolises what in our national guilt we feel we ought to think

about the First World War' and consequently 'to question that image [...] is regarded nowadays almost as sacrilege' (Stephen, 1993, pp. 10 and 6, emphasis in original). Stephen's comments might also be considered in relation to popular music. Many, possibly most, of the songs in this book do not challenge this implied guilt.

'In Flanders Fields' is also the war poem that has most often been set to music, by as early as 1920 at least 55 composers including Arthur Foote, Charles Ives and John Philip Sousa had done so (Ward, 2014, p. 96). More recently there have been choral versions by Canadians Alexander Tilley (first recorded 2001) and Barry Taylor, Matthew Ackroyd and Dennis Khvatov (2003) and by Americans John Jacobson and Roger Emerson (1994) as well as a bagpipe/choral version by the Bonfire Ensemble (also Canadian, 2006), sold on a CD to raise funds for the Canadian Legion. Eric Bogle set the poem to music (on *A Toss of the Coin*, 2013, Greentrax) and there is a, rather strange, pop version by Canadian Anthony Hutchcroft with an associated ballet (2007). Coope, Boyes and Simpson's 2014 double album is entitled *In Flanders Fields* and the track 'Spring 1919' references the poem whereas in Australian folk band Redgum's song 'Ted' (on *Virgin Ground*, 1980, Epic) the protagonist finds himself in 'mud up to his crotch in Flanders fields'. A rock version of the poem by Russian band Romislokus utilises a modern response to McCrae's original written by Canadian DJ Stan Hilborn (on *Trans Aviation Pilots*, 2004, ti-ja). Sung in English it is of interest for its mixing of the original in a multi-national context. American electronic band Silent Signals version, musically poised rather uneasily between 1980s electronic pop and martial industrial, is entitled 'Poppy Grow (In Flanders Fields)' and is on their 2007 split album with Martial Canterel, *View Beyond The City Wall*. Finally French doom metal band Mourning Dawn have produced an interesting comment on this and another of the War's most famous poems not to take a decisively anti-war stance, Laurence Binyon's 'For the Fallen' (first published in *The Times* in September 1914) which is the album's title track (2009, Total Rust). Overall none of these really manage to convey the complexities and contradictions of the original poem, most are too reverential and accept the mythical status McCrae's verse has achieved, especially in Canada.

## Electrelane 'The Valleys'

Though many of the songs directly adapted from the works of the war poets are overly reverent others, whilst acknowledging their mythologized status, are more nuanced. The work of Owen and Sassoon, when examined in its entirety, is far more complex and ambiguous than their usual portrayal as disillusioned pacifists allows. Neither Owen nor Sassoon saw themselves as historians but as purveyors of artistic truth (Stephen, 1996a, p. 192). Their attitude towards all war – not just the one in which they fought – is reflected in the more complex and ambiguous songs examined here. It is instructive that both Karl Willetts and Polly Harvey have explicitly recognised their debt to Owen in particular but it is the spirit of the poet they have inherited rather than any slavish attempt to copy (Willetts, 2014; Segal, 2000). Another example is the most extraordinary adaptation of First World War poetry in popular music. Sassoon wrote 'A Letter Home' in May 1916 following the death of the man he loved, David Thomas. The poem is one that somewhat dispels Sassoon's caricature as a disillusioned didact as he indulges in the 'Marvellian pastoral and seeks out Miltonic "pastures new" for the dead' (Kendall, 2007, p. 213). In 2004 the all-female alternative rock band Electrelane (or to be more precise their singer and keyboard player Verity Susman) adapted the poem under the title 'The Valleys' for their second album *The Power Out (Too Pure)*. The band had formed in Brighton in 1998 taking inspiration from a wide variety of artists including the German 'krautrock' pioneers Neu!, The Velvet Underground and Jacques Brel and much of the album, recorded in Chicago with recording engineer Steve Albini, is marked by Susman's monotone lyrics (in several languages) and a variety of keyboards. However 'The Valleys' is significantly different musically from the rest of the album with the band accompanied by the Chicago A Cappella choir. Susman explained how the idea for the song arose:

I knew I wanted to write for a choir which I'd never done before... I had the basic sketch for the song, the melody and keyboard part. I played that to the rest of the band and we improvised around it, with the others adding the guitar, bass and drums... Originally I

thought that I'd sing it with the choir coming in part way through but I got carried away working on the choral score and so I thought why not have the choir singing all the way through. (Susman, 2015a).

She also had an idea for the theme of the song and the first lines of a lyric:

Someone I knew had died. He was young and was in an accident and he was on my mind a lot. Those first few lines are about hearing somebody and they're gone and trying to reconcile that. But to capture everything I wanted lyrically I was just hitting a brick wall. So I started looking around to see if there was something else that would capture what I wanted. (Susman, 2015a).

So her original intention had nothing to do with the War, 'I always viewed the song, at least from my perspective, as an expression of feelings about loss and memory, not linked particularly to WW1 or indeed any other war' (Susman, 2015b). This is the major strength of her vision and matches the emotions of the poem, 'I wasn't particularly looking at the First World War poets but there's an obvious link with how to reconcile people dying so young and yet still being so very alive in your memory' (Susman, 2015a). The song omits the first and last stanzas of the poem, re-orders some of the material and prefaces it with the choir's introduction 'I heard it from the valleys, I heard it ringing in the mountains'. As Susman explained:

I already had the few lines which are not from the poem. They formed the melody line and the song seemed to grow from there. Then when I found the poem with a reference to the valleys in there it made sense to keep them in... I'd first come across Siegfried Sassoon studying the First World War poets at school. He wasn't the first poet I went to but when I found that poem it was one of those eureka moments because it said everything I wanted to say and said it much better than I could and there were some surprising parallels with the person I was thinking about. It also scanned really well so emotionally, thematically and practically it really worked. (Susman, 2015a).

The two themes that are emphasised are love and remembrance which is strengthened by the use of the choir so strongly reminiscent of liturgical connections through hymns and requiems. Susman's adaptation perfectly fits the pastoral approach of Sassoon whilst simultaneously transforming poetry into song. It is a staggering artistic achievement by a group who received little recognition.

*Plate 8.1: Eelectrlane at the time of 'The Valleys'. From left to right: Rachel Dalley, Mia Clarke, Verity Susman, Emma Gaze. Photo: Louis Decamps*



Earlier I have been critical of doyens of American rock criticism such as Lester Bangs and Robert Christgau. One thing they got right was that if popular music is to have credibility and impact it must have contemporary relevance. So in tackling an historical subject it is not enough simply to analyse it within its own time, its importance for people today needs to be brought out. The error that many artists make in doing this is to think that ideas and attitudes are unchanged, that the men and

women of 1914-18 were the same as us in every way. This is why so many myths revolve around the innocent young men of Edwardian England being 'duped' into volunteering by callous imperialists. It fails to take into account the way that our attitudes to war, patriotism and the Empire have changed in 100 years. In 1914 it was quite usual to be a Socialist and a patriot, a radical and a supporter of the Empire. In the same way our sympathies are more easily engaged by individuals whose outlook seems most in tune with those of today. The sensitivities of a Siegfried Sassoon or a Wilfred Owen are easier for us to understand than those of the dour, Scottish Presbyterian, imperialist Douglas Haig. This would not have been so at the time, when concepts such as duty and honour had yet to be sullied by the horrors of two world wars, the Holocaust and other genocides. We therefore need to examine exactly how modern songwriters approach the idea of empathy when depicting characters from the War. Do they simply not consider this issue at all? Do they endow them with ideas that would have been unlikely at the time? Or do they understand that people's perceptions and attitudes change and take account of this in a more subtle conception? We have seen quite a few of the second type, for example the majority of songs about the Christmas Truce. The artists we will be considering in the next chapter are ones that fall into the last group.