# On the chalk down land bare

In the first week of July 1914, a small group of poets gathered in a lonely farmhouse by Lollingdon Hill, just to the south of Wallingford. They had come to walk amid the peace of the Downs and read poetry together. But much of their talk that long ago summer was not of peace but of war.

The farmhouse was part of what had once been a medieval monastery and the country lane that passes in front would once have been busy with sheep drovers heading to Wallingford from the Astons and the Downs. But by the time the poet John Masefield came here in search of a quiet retreat, the lane had been superseded by the turnpike that is today the road from Streatley to Blewbury. Although now half a mile from the nearest road and hidden by a fine stand of trees, Lollingdon Farmhouse can still be seen from the footpath circling the hill where wheatears and stonechats perch on fenceposts in the spring.

Among the guests that late Edwardian week were the socialite Violet Asquith, the social reformer Elizabeth Fry, the poet Rupert Brooke, and perhaps others from the neighbouring villages of Aston Tyrold and Aston Upthorpe where one or two members of the Bloomsbury set had weekend homes.[[1]](#endnote-1) Masefield was the only one among them who had already achieved fame as a writer. At that time, Rupert Brooke was better known for being described by WB Yeats as ‘the handsomest young man in England’.

A few days before the gathering at Lollingdon, news had come that Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had been assassinated in Sarajevo. ‘I remember saying,’ Masefield later recalled, ‘that the Austro-Serbian business might cause a European war in which we might be involved. But the others did not think this likely; they laughed.’

A month later, the First World War began.

The poems which Masefield and Brooke wrote to mark the outbreak of the war could not have been more different. For Brooke, full of impatient ardour, going off to fight at the front was more than a patriotic duty; it was an opportunity for the nation’s youth to slough off an ignoble existence and stride forth into a new world, a Camelot of nobility and honour:[[2]](#endnote-2)

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,

And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,

With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,

To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping.

Six months later, Brooke died of dysentery on his way to the Dardanelles.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Masefield, older, wiser, responded very differently to the outbreak of war. His poem *August 1914,* wasnot about honour and glory or ‘dying gladly for thee’.[[4]](#endnote-4) It was about the ‘heart-felt things’ — the sorrow in the hearts of the men he saw leaving their homes and families, saying goodbye to the life they had known and might never know again. The poem’s direct references to the war are few but poignant, as in the single line — ‘no new stones laid where the trackway ends’. And when he writes of ‘the fields of home, the byres, the market towns’, he surely had in mind Lollingdon and Wallingford and the thousands of men from the town and the surrounding villages who volunteered, receiving the briefest of training on the Kinecroft before being sent to Flanders.

*August 1914* seems now to belong to another time, but it remains one of the best loved in the language.

How still this quiet cornfield is to-night!

By an intenser glow the evening falls,

Bringing, not darkness, but a deeper light;

Among the stooks a partridge covey calls.

The windows glitter on the distant hill;

Beyond the hedge the sheep-bells in the fold

Stumble on sudden music and are still;

The forlorn pinewoods droop above the wold.

An endless quiet valley reaches out

Past the blue hills into the evening sky;

Over the stubble, cawing, goes a rout

Of rooks from harvest, flagging as they fly.

So beautiful it is, I never saw

So great a beauty on these English fields,

Touched by the twilight’s coming into awe,

Ripe to the soul and rich with summer’s yields.

These homes, this valley spread below me here,

The rooks, the tilted stacks, the beasts in pen,

Have been the heartfelt things, past-speaking dear

To unknown generations of dead men,

Who, century after century, held these farms,

And, looking out to watch the changing sky,

Heard, as we hear, the rumours and alarms

Of war at hand and danger pressing nigh.

And knew, as we know, that the message meant

The breaking off of ties, the loss of friends,

Death, like a miser getting in his rent,

And no new stones laid where the trackway ends.

Then sadly rose and left the well-loved Downs,

And so by ship to sea, and knew no more

The fields of home, the byres, the market towns,

Nor the dear outline of the English shore,

But knew the misery of the soaking trench,

The freezing in the rigging, the despair

In the revolting second of the wrench

When the blind soul is flung upon the air,

And died (uncouthly, most) in foreign lands

For some idea but dimly understood...

And die, uncouthly most, in foreign lands they did.

Masefield, at 36, was too old to be sent to fight at the Front. But the spring of 1915 saw him volunteering in a field hospital on the Marne, stretchering the wounded, cleaning out bedpans and burning amputated limbs. And there, behind the lines at the Battle of the Marne, he was witness to the first great slaughtering of the war, claiming a quarter of a million casualties on each side. ‘Whenever I look at these poor fellows,’ wrote Masefield, ‘my soul boils.’

Back home in the peace of Lollingdon, his wife Constance was finding the farmhouse lonely, damp and cold. And she could hardly have been cheered by Masefield’s letters:

… you can’t even guess the stink of it, from the bloody old reeking stretchers to the fragments hopping on crutches and half heads, and a leg gone at the thigh, and young boys blinded and grey headed men with their backs broken. I never knew I loved men so much. They are a fine lot, a noble lot, I love them all.

In another letter, he asks Constance to check that his bank in Wallingford will honour a cheque written for $30 as ‘I want to spend some American money on an arm for a poor man at Juilly & an arm costs that if it’s to be a serviceable one.’ In another, he tells Constance that he lies awake at night, thinking of her and cursing the Kaiser ‘for here are the best years of our marriage passing, with us miles apart, & you with the children and the household.’

August of that year saw him on his way to Gallipoli with the £3,000 he had raised from friends to help wounded soldiers. Soon after he arrived, the Dardanelles campaign was abandoned. Again, the dead and wounded totalled a quarter of a million men on each side.

Returning to Lollingdon Farmhouse, he turned his notes from the trip into the book that would become a classic in the literature of war. *Gallipoli*, he said, was his tribute to the courage and fortitude of the common soldier, the men ‘driven mad by heat and toil and thirst by day, shaken by frost at midnight, weakened by disease and broken by pestilence, yet arising on the word with a shout and going forward to die in exultation in a cause foredoomed and almost hopeless.’

Masefield was not the only poet who, too old to fight, volunteered to serve in the field hospitals of the Western Front. While he was on the Marne, tending to ‘spilt life and poor, beautiful men bled dead for want of a man to hold them,’ the Canadian physician John McCrae was also doing what he could for the sick and wounded. He, too, had exchanged a comfortable and prestigious position in life for the hardships and horrors of the trenches. ‘I am really rather afraid,’ he wrote to a friend, ‘but more afraid to stay at home with my conscience.’

McCrae’s introduction to the war was brutal. Soon after arriving at the Front, the inexperienced and ill-equipped First Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery was ordered to hold the line at the Second Battle of Ypres. ‘For seventeen days and seventeen nights,’ writes McCrae, ‘none of us have had our clothes off, nor our boots even, except occasionally. In all that time while I was awake, gunfire and rifle fire never ceased for sixty seconds … And behind it all was the constant background of the sights of the dead, the wounded, the maimed, and a terrible anxiety lest the line should give way.’

The Canadians did hold the line. At a cost of 6,000 men killed, wounded, or captured.

One Sunday morning in early May, one of their number, a young man whom McRae had befriended, was checking on gun emplacements when a shell landed at his feet. McRae helped to collect the body parts. Afterwards, he sat in the back of a field ambulance parked alongside the rows of freshly dug graves and hasty wooden crosses. On the mounds of earth, poppies had sprung up, as poppies do on disturbed ground. Taking a notepad from his pocket, he began to write. Twenty minutes later, he tore out the page and screwed it up, dropping it on the floor of the ambulance. When he had left, an orderly smoothed out the sheet and became the first to read what was to become the most famous poem of the First World War — and the one that gave the world its symbol of remembrance.[[5]](#endnote-5)

In Flanders fields the poppies blow

Between the crosses, row on row,

That mark our place; and in the sky

The larks, still bravely singing, fly

Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

Loved and were loved, and now we lie,

In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:

To you from failing hands we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high.

If ye break faith with us who die

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields.

John McRae, his lungs ravaged by chlorine gas, tended the wounded at the Front for three more years. He died of pneumonia in Boulogne, a few months before the Armistice.

Masefield and McCrae each wrote only a single war poem. From now on it would be left to younger poets to tell the truth of the trenches.

That truth had dawned in Flanders. It was there that the great slaughter began; there that the poison gas rolled over the trenches for the first time; and there, in the summer of 1916, that young men in their tens of thousands waited in the dawn light, listening for the cold sound of the whistle. One of them was a twenty-three-year-old classics student from Oxford, Lieutenant William Hodgson, who had already won the Military Cross for his bravery at the Battle of Loos.

‘Smiler’ to his friends, Hodgson had been hoping to make a name for himself as a poet. But on that June day in 1916, he found himself looking out over no man’s land towards a German machine-gun post that had been placed next to a wayside shrine. Knowing what was to come, he began writing a poem, finishing it just before the beginning of the Battle of the Somme. In all its fearful, heartfelt simplicity, *Before Action* became the poem that would make future generations weep for the pity of war.

By all the glories of the day

And the cool evening’s benison

By that last sunset touch that lay

Upon the hills when day was done,

By beauty lavishly outpoured

And blessings carelessly received,

By all the days that I have lived

Make me a soldier, Lord.

By all of all man’s hopes and fears

And all the wonders poets sing,

The laughter of unclouded years,

And every sad and lovely thing;

By the romantic ages stored

With high endeavour that was his,

By all his mad catastrophes

Make me a man, O Lord.

I, that on my familiar hill

Saw with uncomprehending eyes

A hundred of thy sunsets spill

Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice,

Ere the sun swings his noonday sword

Must say good-bye to all of this; –

By all delights that I shall miss,

Help me to die, O Lord.

When the whistles finally sounded, ‘Smiler’ Hodgson led his platoon over the top towards that machine-gun post by the wayside shrine. By nightfall, his throat torn through by bullets, he was one of 30,000 young men lying dead on the battlefield.

The year 1916 changed war. And it changed poetry. The slaughter on the Somme laid to rest any idea of the glory of war among those who were fighting it. Instead, there now arose from the poets of the trenches an angry, heart-piercing lament for the suffering and the waste. Instead of musings on beauty and truth, instead of sonnets to nightingales and pinings for forlorn loves, their poems now offered images of slobbering jaws and gun carriages running over dead men’s faces. Instead of the spirit of England awakening ‘ardent-eyed’ and ‘dying gladly for thee’ came the poetry of mangled limbs and rotting corpses.

The leader of these new poets was an officer who was sometimes suspected of having German connections. But it was a passion for the music of Wagner that had led Theresa Sassoon to call her son Siegfried. And Siegfried Sassoon it was who first used poetry to tell the reality of war in verse that many back home could not accept as poetry at all.

The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs

High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps

And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,

Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;

And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,

Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.

Not content with poetry as protest, Sassoon wrote an open letter — ‘A Soldier’s Declaration’ — to his commanding officer. And to make sure it was not hushed up, he worked his contacts to have it read out in the House of Commons and published in *The Times.* ‘I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority,’ he wrote, ‘because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.’ His protest, he hoped, would help to ‘destroy the callous complacence with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise’.

A Court Martial was out of the question. Not for ‘Mad Jack’ Sassoon. Not for a national hero who had already won the Military Cross for his bravery on the front line. Instead, Sassoon was sent to the Craiglockhart military psychiatric hospital near Edinburgh. And it is impossible not to reflect that officers and gentlemen who broke down under the trauma were likely to be diagnosed with neurasthenia and found a place at Craiglockhart while rank-and-file soldiers who broke down under the same strain were likely to be diagnosed with cowardice and found a place in front of a firing squad.

And so it was that the two greatest poets of the First World War came together in the peaceful grounds of a Scottish mental hospital.

Wilfred Owen well knew that the wounds of war were mental as well as physical and that it was not only officers who suffered. Passionately determined to tell what the trenches could do — had done — to the minds of many brave men of all ranks, he spared us nothing. The soldiers of his verses have ‘drooping tongues’ and ‘jaws that slob their relish’. They are the men whose pain had ‘gauged chasms round their fretted sockets’ and ‘whose minds the Dead have ravished’. They are men who have waded through ‘sloughs of flesh … Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter’ and men whose ‘eyeballs shrink tormented back into their brains’.

It was the poetry of ‘carnage incomparable, and human squander’. And above all, it was the poetry of pity. And it was at Craiglockhart that Owen expressed that pity in one of the finest poems in the language.

What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?

Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes

Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.

The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Owen and Sassoon insisted on returning to the Front. Not out of enthusiasm for the war. Not even out of loyalty to King and Empire. But out of solidarity with the men they had led and the men who had died. Both poets had come to believe that what they and many others had been through was an experience so intense that it could not be understood by those who had not been there — an experience that had created a kinship, a bond of love, unlike any other. Many of the later poems from the trenches speak to this bond, none more directly than Wilfred Owen’s poem *Apologia pro poemate meo*:

I have made fellowships –

Untold of happy lovers in old song.

For love is not the binding of fair lips

With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips, –

But wound with war’s hard wire whose stakes are strong;

Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;

Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

And with the pity and the love went an uncontainable anger. On leave in London, Owen carried with him grisly photographs of the dead and wounded to thrust into the faces of those who mouthed conventional platitudes about the war. And it was the most sonorous of those platitudes, ‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’ (Sweet and decorous it is to die for one’s country) that Owen was to savage when, back on the front line, he finished the short poem he had begun at Craiglockhart:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori.

In the summer of 1918, Owen rejoined his battalion. On October 1st, he led the Second Manchesters into battle at Joncourt, an action for which he was to be awarded the Military Cross. A month later, on November 4th, he again led his men against the machine guns on the Sambre Canal.

One week later, in a Shropshire market town, the bells were ringing out to celebrate the end of the war as Owen’s mother opened the telegram informing her of her son’s death.

Back at Lollingdon Farmhouse, Masefield had received an invitation from General Haig, Britain’s Commander on the Western Front, to tell the story of the Battle of the Somme. And so, once again, Masefield abandoned the Downs to walk the whole twenty-five miles of what had been the Front Line. On his return to Lollingdon, he turned his notes from that trip into another classic in the literature of war — *The Old Front Line*.

I have told the story of Masefield’s writings from the Somme in another book.[[6]](#endnote-6) But one of those letters, written to Constance at Lollingdon, bears repeating here. In it, he urges his wife to:

Imagine any 13 miles by 9 miles known to you, say from Goring to Abingdon, raking in Dorchester, Wallingford, Nettlebed and the Chilterns above Goring, you will get a hint of its extent. Then imagine in all that expanse no single tree left intact … Then imagine that in all that expanse no single house is left … Then imagine that in all that expanse there is no patch of ground ten feet square that has not got its shell hole … there is nothing but a waste of big grassless holes ten feet deep and ten feet broad, with defilement and corpses and hands and feet and old burnt uniforms and tattered leather all flung about and dug in and dug out again, like nothing else on God’s earth.

Masefield’s prose writings about the First World War have long been recognised as classics. But his only war poem remains *August, 1914,* withwhich this chapter began: his only war poem, that is, unless you are prepared to accept the theory of Professor Philip Jenkins of Baylor University in the United States.

On his return to Lollingdon, Masefield turned again to the poetry of peace. The first result was a collection of short poems titled *Lollingdon Downs.* It isone of these that has attracted the attention of Professor Jenkins who argues that the short poem titled *Up on the Downs* is an undiscovered war poem. Ostensibly a lyrical few lines about what a kestrel sees as it hovers over the Berkshire landscape, Jenkins believes that the poem is really about observation aircraft flying over the front lines, their shadows causing the ‘field mice’ to run for cover. He further suggests that the poem layers up words and images of the battlefield – ‘drift of smoke’, ‘glitter of fire’, ‘smouldering skies’, ‘choking smoke’ and ‘burning men in a frame’. The line ‘Crying to the gods of the downs till their brains were turning’ seems to Jenkins to be an echo of Masefield’s prose descriptions of the mental torture of the trenches.

It seems fitting to leave the last word to John Masefield. So here is the poem. Readers may decide for themselves whether they consider Professor Jenkins’ opinion to be a perceptive new reading of ‘Up on the Downs’ or a fanciful academic over-interpretation.

*Upon the Downs*

John Masefield

Up on the downs the red-eyed kestrels hover,

Eying the grass.

The field-mouse flits like a shadow into cover

As their shadows pass.

Men are burning the gorse on the down’s shoulder;

A drift of smoke

Glitters with fire and hangs, and the skies smoulder,

And the lungs choke.

Once the tribe did thus on the downs, on these downs burning

Men in the frame,[[7]](#endnote-7)

Crying to the gods of the downs till their brains were turning

And the gods came.

And today on the downs, in the wind, the hawks, the grasses,

In blood and air,

Something passes me and cries as it passes,

On the chalk down land bare.

§

1. *A social and literary network in North Berkshire around the time of the First World War,* Dillon, Patrick, Journal of the Friends of the Dymock Poets, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brooke was not the only poet to greet the war almost with joy. ‘Happy is England now,’ declared John Freeman. ‘They that love life best die gladly for thee,’ wrote Robert Bridges. ‘Press we to the field ungrieving,’ said Thomas Hardy. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Brook died of sepsis and dysentery following an infected mosquito bite on the way to the Dardanelles. His body was taken from a hospital ship for burial in a peaceful olive grove on the Greek island of Skyros. According to a friend who was there: ‘The sun was shining and cool sea breezes were blowing. No one could have wished for a quieter or a calmer end than in that lovely bay, shielded by the mountains and fragrant with sage and thyme.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘They that love life best / Die gladly for thee’ from the poem *Wake up, England* byRobert Bridges*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This final version of the poem was revised by McCrae before being published in *Punch* magazine. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Landmark in Time – the World of the Wittenham Clumps*, P Adamson, P&LA, 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This seems to be a reference to the pagan rituals of the Druids who in pre-Roman Britain were reputed to erect ‘wicker men’ to sacrifice in effigy. The Romans reported that the wicker man was also used for human sacrifice and there is some archaeological evidence from Ireland to support this belief. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)