Somerville, Love and Loss during the First World War

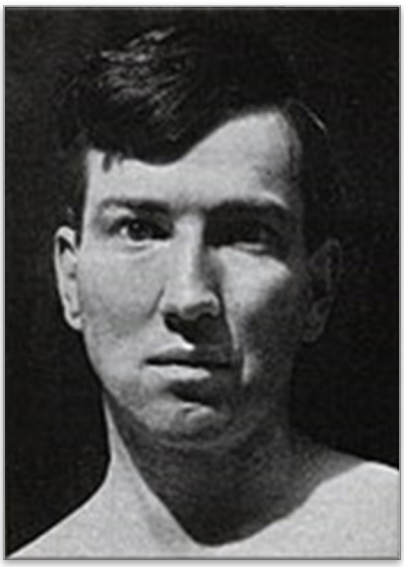
Harry Stewart Dilley

You can't believe that British troops "retire"
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.
O German mother dreaming by the fire
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.
- 'Glory of Women', Siegfried Sassoon

Perhaps more than any other British war, the First World War has been remembered through its poetry. Certainly, aside from the Crimean War, the bellicosity of Britain's modern history has been remarkably absent from its poetry. Therefore, the poets of the First World War assume an important role in shaping and perpetuating its historical legacy. This provides the LGBTQ+ historian an incredibly exciting opportunity: after all, in placing poets such as Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen at the centre of our narrative of the First World War, we put queer history there too.

Therefore, this essay concerns itself with three remarkable men and their experience of surely the greatest and more avoidable of wars. It seeks, appropriately, to uncover the role of Somerville College in their wartime experience – both Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves having convalesced there when converted to a hospital during the Great War. Perhaps most of all, it seeks to recover the complex relationships between the three poets, their sexualities and their literary work, examining how their identities shaped their writing and thus our historical memory of the First World War.

Robert Graves



In his autobiography *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Robert von Ranke Graves (1895-1985) describes a comfortable if unconventional bourgeois upbringing in the Wimbledon suburbs, then part of Surrey. On his mother's side, he descended from a line of notable Bavarian gentry. His mother – Amalie Sophie von Ranke – was the grandniece of the great historian Leopold Von Ranke and Robert writes that it is "To him [he] owe[s] his historical method"; though given the lacunae in his autobiography, one cannot be sure. His father's side of the family was Irish, with "a pedigree that dates back to the [Cromwellian] Conquest, but is good as far as the reign of Henry VII." Though producing the occasional doctor or soldier, Robert says his father's line had been "a sequence of rectors, deans and bishops" – that of the powerful 'Protestant Ascendancy' in Ireland.

His father – Alfred Perceval Graves – was a poet, songwriter and folklorist who made a comfortable living as a school inspector: an important post in the civil service. Alfred cultivated a vibrant 'literary set' and, indeed, one of the "two earliest recollections" which open Robert's autobiography is the memory of "a sort of despondent terror at a cupboard in the nursery, which stood accidentally open and which was filled to the ceiling with octavo volumes of Shakespeare."

Tellingly, Robert said he preferred his German to his Irish relations. In particular, for their "high principles", generosity and seriousness: "the men have fought duels not for cheap personal honour, but in the public interest — called out, for example, because they have protested publicly against the scandalous behaviour of some superior officer or official." This is a sense of honour and duty which served Robert well during the War; however, it also reflected a commitment to the 'establishment' which sat uneasily with his sexuality.

After all, Robert's upbringing was comfortably and conspicuously bourgeois. His autobiography reflects frankly on the lack of "mechanical aptitude" across the family, not that they needed it: the maids and the nannies of the family had tiny rooms without carpets of linoleum upstairs. With its *All-England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club*, Graves' village was characteristic of a stereotypically prelapsarian England before its great convulsion between 1914-18. Indeed, Philip Larkin's vision of a bucolic pre-war countryside in 'MCMXIV' could be straight out of Robert's Wimbledon suburbs:

The place-names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheat's restless silence;
The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,

[...]

Never such innocence again.

Larkin's poem ends on a note of foreboding; however, the immediate worry for Graves was not the War – born in 1895 – but the need to go to boarding school. Despite his own ambiguous sexuality, Rupert Brooke's years at Rugby are said to have been the happiest of his life. In contrast, even his "buoyant temperament and daunting physique" were insufficient to brighten Robert's years at Charterhouse.

He was bullied heavily; though he certainly did not attribute this to his sexuality. Rather, he said it was a mix of other factors. Despite his familial wealth, his parents were penurious with his pocket-money – perhaps reflecting the ascetic tendency stemming from the German *Bildungsbügertum* (middle-class) on his mother's side. This German heritage – made conspicuous by the middle name von Ranke – was a target for the other boys, especially at a time when the Kaiser's high-handed behaviour and the Naval Race were increasing Anglo-German tensions. A rumour spread that Graves was not only a German but a German Jew, making him more unpopular.

However, more than anything, it reflected his temperament. Though confident on the sports field – a trait which would serve him well come the war – he was in other ways quite reserved. First, was absorbed by his academics and won a scholarship, considered a 'swot' by his comrades. But more importantly, he had been taught by his mother to be "prudishly innocent", Amalie having forbidden any discussion of sex and insisted all skin "must be covered". One imagines this caused particular anxieties for Robert who had romantic impulses towards other boys from an early age. He remembers "innocent crushes" on boys at Preparatory School – especially one named Ronny who "climbed trees, killed pigeons with a catapult and broke all the school rules while never seeming to get caught."

Perhaps Robert saw in Ronny tendencies he wished he had himself. After all, he retained a self-conscious, anxious and complicated approach to romantic relationships throughout his life. In part, we might attribute this to his ambiguous identity. He was a product and lover of the 'establishment'; yet, at the same time, retained his cynicism and love for the unconventional – especially in a romantic setting.

During his fourth year at Charterhouse, Robert met his first love: "Dick" (George "Peter" Harcourt Johnstone). Peter became an object of Graves' adoration; but would have to wait until '1915' and 'The Fusilier' to surface in his poetry. Nonetheless, a letter (May 1914) to Edward Carpenter - the pioneer of 'same-sex' relationships - contains a quote from Richard Middleton's 'Hylas', Middleton another homosexual poet. It was almost certainly writing with Peter in mind:

"Ah, dear boy with the lovely head
And silver body of snow
Laugh out again for the gods are dead
And the dead gods homeward go.
Ah dear boy with the red lips

And the breast as soft as a girl
Young love has brought a thousand ships
And the stars are all a-whirl."

In *Goodbye to All That,* Robert recalls how "my love for Dick provoked a constant facetiousness, but they never dared to go too far. I once caught one of them in the bathroom scratching up a pair of hearts conjoined, with Dick's initials and mine on them. I pushed him into the bath and turned the taps on."

His recollections of homosexuality at boarding school fit the stereotype of a permissive if heavily stigmatising environment, attitudes which Robert seems to have internalised. In his autobiography, he attributes homosexual activity at boarding schools to the environment rather than the individual: "In English preparatory and public schools romance is necessarily homo-sexual. The opposite sex is despised and hated, treated as something obscene. Many boys never recover from this perversion. I only recovered by a shock at the age of twenty-one. For everyone born homo-sexual there are at least ten permanent pseudo-homo-sexuals made by the public school system."

That is, Robert's interpretation of his sexuality was that his attraction to men was an aberration brought on by his schooling. However, this conflicts with his writing during the War, which expresses the continued bond between him and Peter. In 'The Fusilier', he wrote:

... the quiet one the poet the lover remaining
Will meet you little singer and go with you and keep you
And turn away bad women and spill the cup of poison
And fill your heart with beauty and teach you to love...

'The Fusilier' would be sent to Edward Marsh, himself a lover of men, in December 1916, but it remained unpublished in Graves' lifetime – partly because by 1917 he was trying to reinvent his relationship to his sexuality. However, that is all to come. At Charterhouse, Robert's relationship with Peter was intense, romantic and urgent. When bullies led Graves to believe Peter had been seen kissing the choirmaster, Graves was so jealous that he demanded the choir-master's resignation; that is, until he found out it was not Peter but another boy. Describing a boxing fight – he was an accomplished boxer – Robert remembers that both he and his opponent fought especially hard because they knew Peter was watching.

Nonetheless, consistent with Robert's socialisation, his relationship with Peter seems to have remained chaste and unconsummated. Graves' poem '1915' provides a telling insight to the way Robert sought to rationalise his feelings.

Dear, you've been everything that I most lack
In these soul-deadening trenches – pictures, books,
Music, the quiet of an English wood,
Beautiful comrade-looks,
The narrow, bouldered mountain track,

The broad, full-bosomed ocean, green and black,
And Peace, and all that's good.

That the poem's love is homosexual explains its emphasis on the platonic sharing of common experiences – through "pictures, books, music" – and also the attempt to accentuate its purity. The looks are between "comrades" rather than lovers and they sustain "peace, and all that's good." Any erotic undertones are firmly set aside, consistent with Graves' attempts to justify a relationship which he increasingly presented to himself as "pure" homosexual friendship, "solid and clean" and "essentially moral." This is consistent with his 1914 letter to Edward Carpenter.

In his final year at Charterhouse, Robert won a scholarship to St John's College, Oxford; however, just a week after leaving Charterhouse – on 4 August 1914 - Britain declared war on Germany. Eight short days later, Robert enlisted in the British Army at the age of 19 years and 19 days. It was to put an abrupt end to a youth which he had expected to ebb more slowly during three years at Oxford.

He entered the Army as a second lieutenant, placing him in charge of a platoon of "fifty men". He wrote to his parents of the men, "many of them old enough to be my father, a [...] schoolmaster, doctor, parson, foreman, general lawyer, official newsagent, and tyrant, with genuinely despotic powers [...] and this is rather a strain on my youth." A greater strain on his youth was what was to come. He had enlisted – like so many men – having unquestioningly accepted the sort of newspaper claims Wilfred Owen would come to satirise so vehemently. Despairing of the prospect of three further years studying and taking exams, Robert felt three months' holiday after Charterhouse was "not long enough", declaring "a vague intention of running away to sea." For Graves, therefore, War was a 'vacation' supposed to delay further study – exactly the language which the early narratives of the War sought to encourage. A classic poem by Jessie Pope reads:

Who's for the game, the biggest that's played,
The red crashing game of a fight?
Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he'd rather sit tight?
Who'll toe the line for the signal to 'Go!'?
Who'll give his country a hand?
Who wants a turn to himself in the show?
And who wants a seat in the stand?

One imagines such rhetoric fed into Graves' respect for the establishment and his martial credentials cultivated through boxing. Nonetheless, he was disabused of such notions quickly. After a period training, he was sent to France in May 1915, just in time for the ill-fated Battle

of Loos. On his first night, he found a man apparently sleeping. He turned his flashlight on him and ordered him to get up, barely noticing that one of his feet was bare. Graves shook him until he realized that the man "had taken off the boot and sock to pull the trigger of his rifle with one toe; the muzzle was in his mouth." He had blown off the back of his head. Suicide was common in the trenches and this 'Baptism of Fire' set the tone for what was to follow.

The Battle of Loos was the British Army's unsuccessful attempt at a major offensive in 1915. It was the chaos and the bloodshed of Loos which led to the replacement of Marshall Sir John French by General Sir Douglas Haig as head of the British Expeditionary Force. The Battle would haunt Graves for the rest of his life. He describes trenches full of bodies, their overwhelming "gas-blood-lyddite-latrine smell," and the agony of the wounded who were unreachable in the barbed wire. He concludes one of his poems from this period: "The sky looks green, and the world's a horrible place."

He came to recognise the pointlessness of the suffering:

"Fall in!" A stir, and up we jump,
Fold the love letter, drain the cup,
We toss away the Woodbine stump,
Snatch at the pack and lift it up. . . .
Where are we marching? No one knows.
Why are we marching? No one cares.

Nobody had written poetry like this before. His disillusion motivated a searing dislike and scepticism of his military superiors for their narrow worldview; however, characteristically, this sat uneasily with his desire to be accepted as one of them. In this sense, his satirical criticism of the military higher-ups assumes a quality like that of Evelyn Waugh in the next World War. Due to his rank, Graves ate and interacted with the notables, enabling him to see through their bluster. In 'The Adventure', Graves likens it to a child boasting of impossible feats – such as "killing a tiger near my shack" – made especially sinister by the jarring comparison between War and innocent children's games: he thought the leadership's disregard for individual life truly was this flippant.

By contrast, Graves retained a tight bond with his own troops, tied to a sense of duty which persisted throughout the war. He was popular due to his daring, his physical prowess and his attentiveness to others' needs. He recognised, so hard to express in historical aspect, that the war was the cumulative suffering of millions of individuals. A death was not a number but a personal agony; it was the loss of a family member or a friend, something irrevocable. Shortly after the death his friend David Thomas - described as Graves' "best friend" in the battalion - he wrote the first draft of what became 'Goliath and David':

A crash, a cry, a sudden shout
And running feet by my dugout.
A wild face torn from cheek to chin
Spurting blood in jets broke in
Spurting long jets of red breaks in
And gurgling blood, I'm killed he cries
Throws forward blindly, choked and died
David's clean beauty ripped away
The man who wrote the Bible lied.

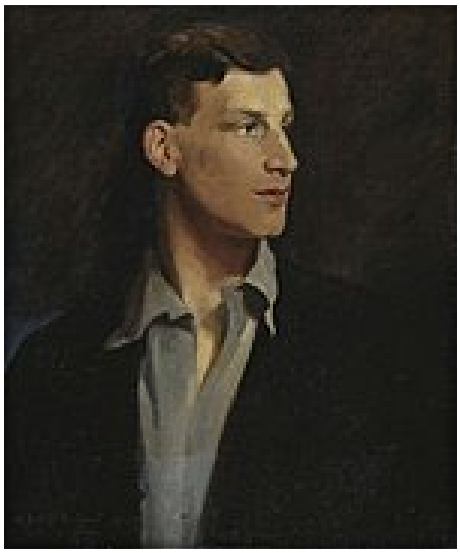
This poem implies 'Goliath and David' originated in Graves' grief at the death of a close friend – perhaps something more. Indeed, Graves was not the only one to write poetry about David Thomas, nor to feel a romantic bond.

He turned to me with his kind, sleepy gaze
And fresh face slowly brightening to the grin
That sets my memory back to summer days,
With twenty runs to make, and last man in.
He told me he'd been having a bloody time
In trenches, crouching for the crumps to burst,
While squeaking rats scampered across the slime
And the grey palsied weather did its worst.

But as he stamped and shivered in the rain,
My stale philosophies had served him well;
Dreaming about his girl had sent his brain
Blanker than ever—she'd no place in Hell….
'Good God!' he laughed, and slowly filled his pipe,
Wondering 'why he always talked such tripe'.

This poem, 'The Subaltern' was written by Siegfried Sassoon, an Army Captain and fellow poet with whom Graves developed an intense bond.

Siegfried Sassoon



Siegfried Loraine Sassoon (1886-1967) was nine years older than Robert Graves. He was born to a Jewish father and an Anglo-Catholic mother, both of significant standing. Though he disliked being thought of as rich, he grew up in a neo-gothic mansion in Matfield, Kent. His father – Alfred - descended from the legendary Sassoon family dynasty, a wealthy Baghdadi Jewish family who had been the chief treasurers to the pashas of Baghdad at the end of the eighteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, they were prominent in royal circles with links to the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII). His mother, Theresa, belonged to the Thornycroft family – well known in England for its lineage of sculptors, artists and engineers.

Siegfried held his family identity insecurely. He made anti-Semitic remarks about his family's "Jewish gold", made "in the east by dirtying trading" – likely reflecting what Marion Kaplan calls 'overadaption' or the tendency of many upper and middle-class Jews in western Europe to evince their discrimination through the very vociferousness of their attempts to assimilate. One of the books Siegfried brought with him to war was Robert Smith Surtee's *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour,* a classic mid-Victorian fox hunting novel. In his first three decades, then, despite his inner anxieties, he transformed himself into a "horsey, sporting English country gentleman with a passion for cricket, a persona that he kept throughout a long and in other ways flamboyantly unconventional life." Like Robert, Siegfried's is a story of liminality – of being both within and without.

Despite his familial wealth, Siegfried did not have an untroubled upbringing. In his memoirs, he describes his childhood as "a queer and not altogether happy one." "Circumstances conspired to make me shy and solitary", he adds. His father was resolutely adulterous, finally leaving the family for good when Siegfried was four. On Alfred's subsequent visits, Theresa

would lock herself in the living room and refused to acknowledge his presence. One wonders what impact this had on the young Siegfried. It certainly failed to blunt his romantic impulses and like his mother he would be hurt by those he felt loved him less than he loved them. Yet, perhaps his detachment and vicious sense of irony – which he came to use with considerable brutality in his war poetry – were a natural coping mechanism, as seen in the historian Edward Gibbon or even Oscar Wilde. In any case, Siegfried reflected aspects of both his parents. He absorbed the cricket, and tense if convincing personability, of Alfred while taking on the softer traits of his mother too – specifically, her interest in gardening, art and music.

He also seems to have taken on some of her sadness. The pair were close: his notebook of poems from 1896 has the dedication 'For mamsy from Siegfried 1896'. An early poem, written when he was no more than eleven, hints at a troubled mind:

There rose the sun without a shiver
On the brightly tinted earth.
Like a silver thread, the river
Prattled on, as if in mirth ...
Came a ripple, moving slowly.
As it came, the rushes trembled.
'Crush us not, oh cruel ripple!!
Said the ripple, I am death.

Like Robert, Siegfried had an unpleasant time at boarding school – in this case Marlborough. He describes the "absence of companions of [his] own age" while at home, which cannot have made the intensity of boarding school easy. Indeed, he recalls that due to his "loneliness", he created "in [his] day-dreams an ideal companion", described as one of his main memories from life at home before Marlborough. His description of his childhood temperament mimics the strains of anxiety and unease in Robert's character; though the latter masked them better.

"It is no use pretending that I was anything else than a dreaming and unpractical boy. Perhaps my environment made me sensitive, but there was an "unmanly" element in my nature which betrayed me into many blunders and secret humiliations. Somehow I could never acquire the knack of doing and saying the right thing: and my troubles were multiplied by an easily excited and emotional temperament. Was it this flaw in my character which led me to console my sense of unhappiness and failure by turning to that ideal [imaginary] companion whose existence I have already disclosed?"

It is understandable, then, that he made such an effort to turn himself into a successful horseman. The first forty pages of his memoirs – aptly titled *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man* – read like an introduction to his first ever day's hunting.

He arrived at Marlborough in precarious health, unfortunate in an environment where athletic ability was a near proxy for status. There is a – possibly apocryphal – story that he used to carry knuckle-dusters to fend off anti-Semitic attacks from the other boys. Halfway through his first term he caught measles that became double pneumonia. His mother rushed down with steaks to make beef tea and she summoned a famous doctor from London. This cannot have done anything for his popularity, but his Housemaster believed it saved Siegfried's life. He went home to recuperate and returned only in the summer.

It was in this first summer at Marlborough that Siegfried started to receive recognition for his poetry, winning half a crown from the Master. He broadened his reading, his doting mother even allowing Siegfried to sell his father's books to fund it; but the young boy was still more interested in the books' aesthetic arrangement on the shelves than their contents. In the summer of 1904, Sassoon left Marlborough. He had missed too much school and – having returned home intermittently in the years after his arrival – his reports were unflattering: little "intelligence or aptitude for any branch of his work".

Nonetheless, Marlborough had done something important for Siegfried. It showed what set him apart; namely, his physical delicacy, his Jewishness and his sexuality. It cannot be accidental that he would attempt to mask all three at various points in later life. After Marlborough, Siegfried went to a "crammer" for nearly a year – a boarding school which coached for Oxbridge admissions – before embarking on a Law degree at Clare College, Cambridge in 1905 at his uncle's insistence. As his schooling had shown, though, Siegfried was not one for working at things he did not enjoy, and he dropped out after two years.

Finding himself idle, he started writing poetry in large quantities but struggled for lack of life experience on which to base it. It was in this period, though, that Siegfried began to move in fashionable literary circles. This occurred through Edward Carpenter, whose influence might be seen to mark an important turning point in Siegfried's life, forcing him to finally look beyond home and his mother. For a man still coming to terms with his sexuality, Carpenter was a transformative influence: a utopian socialist, proselytizer of homosexual freedom and sexual liberationist described not inaccurately by Fiona MacCarthy as "the gay godfather of the British left."

In a letter of July 1911, Siegfried wrote about the influence of Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) upon him:

"Before I read 'Intermediate Sex'... what ideas I had about homosexuality were absolutely prejudiced, & I was in such a groove that I couldn't allow myself to be what I wished to be, and the intense attraction I felt for my own sex was almost a subconscious thing, & my antipathy for women a mystery for me. [...] I am a different being, & have a definite aim in life & something to lean on..."

Through Carpenter, Siegfried met Edward Marsh and Rupert Brooke, though his interaction with the latter was barely thirty minutes before Siegfried rushed off, overwhelmed by Brooke's "radiant good looks" and Brooke's disagreement with his negative judgement on Rudyard Kipling. It was in this period that Siegfried produced some of his more overtly homoerotic verse, in the dramas *Hyacinth* and *Amyntas.* Above all, however, he remained directionless. At 28, his sexuality – unlike Carpenter's – remained firmly personal; his poetry was prolific but self-published; and though increasingly athletic and good-looking he still lived at home with his mother. Therefore, as for Graves, it is possible he saw the War as a useful opportunity: he joined the Army a few days *before* Britain declared war on Germany and enlisted in the ranks rather than waiting to seek a commission – atypical for someone of his class.

After a horse-riding accident in training, he had time to reconsider and receive a commission, arriving in France just after the Battle of Loos. It was here – to bring our protagonists together again – that Siegfried met Robert Graves, and both fell in love with David Thomas. Though Graves was distinguished by having experienced the brutality of war, he too loved David Thomas and had sent letters expressing his admiration for Edward Carpenter.

Love? Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon

Siegfried's descriptions of Thomas make his feelings clear. 'Dick', he wrote, "had the obvious good looks which go with fair hair and firm features, but it was the radiant integrity of his expression which astonished me." His companionship was "like perpetual fine weather" and one can only imagine how Siegfried felt when Dick "wound up his watch [and] brushed his hair" for him. The pair's relationship became even closer after sharing a room when sent on a course for Captains to Pembroke College, Cambridge.

His death almost certainly marked a change in Siegfried's poetry and his perspective on war. He returned to the company just in time to see David's body lowered into a shallow, muddy grave, bundled up in a sack. His diary entry for this day – 19 March 1916 – is incredibly moving:

"This morning came the evil news from the trenches [...] my little Tommy had been hit by a stray bullet and died last night. When last I saw him, two nights ago, he had his notebook in his hand his hand, reading my last poem. And I said good night to him, in the moonlit trenches. Had I but known! — the old, human-weak cry. Now he comes back to me in memories, like an angel, with the light in his yellow hair, and I think of him at Cambridge last August when we lived together four weeks in Pembroke College in rooms where the previous occupant's name, Paradise, was written above the door.

Grief can be beautiful, when we find something worthy to be mourned. To-day I knew what it means to find the soul washed pure with tears, and the load of death was lifted from my heart. So I wrote his name in chalk on the beech-tree stem, and left a rough garland of ivy there, and a yellow primrose for his yellow hair and kind grey eyes, my dear, my dear."

He concludes the entry:

> *"So Tommy left us, a gentle soldier, perfect and without stain. And so he will always remain in my heart, fresh and happy and brave.*
>
> *For you were glad, and kind and brave;*
> *With hands that clasped me, young and warm;*
> *But I have seen a soldier's grave,*
> *And I have seen your shrouded form."*

Siegfried had lost his first true love and watched him lowered into the ground in a sack. He would never be the same again. Up to this point in March 1916, Siegfried's poetry had taken on a Gravesian cynicism and irony. He wrote of his men:

> *I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,*
> *And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain.*
> *[A soldier] pushed another bag along the top,*
> *Craning his body outward; then a flare*
> *Gave one white glimpse of No Man's Land and wire;*
> *And as he dropped his head the instant split*
> *His startled life with lead, and all went out.*

Of a fellow officer who boasted of killing German prisoners while shirking real military duties he wrote: "And here you are / still talking big and boozing in a bar." However, David's death filled Siegfried with a new rage and grief. He developed a passionate desire to hurt Germans and began taking audacious and unnecessary risks. He was recommended to a Military Cross after risking his life to retrieve a wounded man lying disabled in concentrated enemy fire. Robert Graves – who stood beside Sassoon at Thomas' burial, "his white whimsical face twisted and grieving" - wrote of the new Siegfried:

"He distinguished himself by taking, single-handed, a battalion frontage which the Royal Irish Regiment had failed to take the day before. He went over to the top with grenades in broad daylight, under covering fire from a couple of rifles, and scared away the occupants. A pointless feat, since instead of signalling for reinforcements, he sat down in the German trench and began reading a book of poems which he had brought with him. When he finally went back, he did not even report. Colonel Stockwell, then in command, raged at him. The attack . . . had been delayed for two hours because British patrols were still believed to be out. 'British patrols' were [merely] Siegfried and his book of poems. 'I'd have got you a D.S.O., if you'd only shown some sense,' stormed Stockwell."

Paradoxically, as Robert and Siegfried's friendship blossomed, their poetry diverged. Though they came to serve on different battalions, the pair exchanged letters. In a letter from May, Graves laments the pair's separation:

"This is the first day that I have felt really strong enough to write you the letter you deserve, being now more or less recovered from the amazing lot of blood I lost last month. Well, old thing, I'm really desolated at having deserted you and the battalion but I couldn't help it."

Another, of early July, opens:

"It's heartbreaking how Fates keep us apart [...] That messenger you sent disappeared before I could give a written answer: I do hope you weren't hurt and didn't think I was being casual. I want to go home to a quiet hospital ward with green screens and no cracks in the ceiling to make me think of trenches. Best love, old man"

On leave at Flixécourt in May 1916, Sassoon wrote 'A Letter Home' addressed to Robert:

[...]
Robert, when I drowse to-night,
Skirting lawns of sleep to chase
Shifting dreams in mazy light,
Somewhere then I'll see your face
Turning back to bid me follow
Where I wag my arms and hollo,
Over hedges hasting after
Crooked smile and baffling laughter,
Running tireless, floating, leaping,
Down your web-hung woods and valleys,
Where the glowworm stars are peeping,
Till I find you, quiet as stone
On a hill-top all alone,
Staring outward, gravely pondering
Jumbled leagues of hillock-wandering.

You and I have walked together
In the starving winter weather.
We've been glad because we knew
Time's too short and friends are few.
We've been sad because we missed
One whose yellow head was kissed
By the gods, who thought about him
Till they couldn't do without him.
Now he's here again; I've been
Soldier David dressed in green,
Standing in a wood that swings
To the madrigal he sings.
He's come back, all mirth and glory,

Like the prince in a fairy story.
Winter called him far away;
Blossoms bring him home with May.

[...]

Robert, there's a war in France;
Everywhere men bang and blunder,
Sweat and swear and worship Chance,
Creep and blink through cannon thunder.
Rifles crack and bullets flick,
Sing and hum like hornet-swarms.
Bones are smashed and buried quick.
Yet, through stunning battle storms,
All the while I watch the spark
Lit to guide me; for I know
Dreams will triumph, though the dark
Scowls above me where I go.
You can hear me; you can mingle
Radiant folly with my jingle.
War's a joke for me and you
While we know such dreams are true!

It is possible that Siegfried sought to use Robert to retain – in some small sense – his romance with David. In July 1916, Graves sent Siegfried a verse letter imagining their post-war life. Betraying his continued love for Peter Johnstone, Robert writes of his excitement to introduce Siegfried and for them to become a trio. Whether this had any sexual connotations is not clear, Graves going on to have open relationships in later life.

"(This Peter still may win a part
Of David's corner in your heart
I hope so). And one day we three
Shall sail together on the sea
For adventure and quest and fight –
And God! What poetry we'll write."

Robert wrote the letter still stung from the fact Peter's "terrible old mother" – on finding the pair's correspondence – was so "shocked at finding quotations from Samuel Butler and [Edward] Carpenter and people in them and at such signatures as 'ever yours affectionately, Robert' and 'best love, R' that she has extracted a promise from the poor lad that he will have nothing to do with me till he leaves Ch'house." In a letter (May 1916) describing the "hardly bearable disaster" to Siegfried, Robert laments of "Complications too long to enumerate leave no loopholes of evasion for either of us, so I am now widowed, laid waste and desolate. However, Peter in his last letter said that he'd never forget me and after these few years all will be as before: and perhaps he'll be able to rebel sooner, and it's better than him being killed anyhow."

In this context, the verse letter to Siegfried is especially interesting given it is sent with both fully conscious of the homosexual relationship between Robert and Peter, and by extension surely that between Siegfried and Robert, even if it wasn't physical.

Events moved quickly in the summer of 1916, but not in the direction expected. Two days afterwards, Robert was (falsely) declared dead of wounds. Shell splinters had pierced his lung and he'd been taken to a dressing station where the medical officer decided he would not survive the night, leaving Graves for dead. The next day he was discovered still alive and taken away by stretcher screaming in pain, eventually sent to a hospital in Rouen. Out of the news, Siegfried produced the poem 'Died of Wounds' with its heart-rending last cry "They snipe like hell! O Dickie, don't go out!" Shortly after, Siegfried contracted trench fever and was sent home to England, specifically to Somerville College, Oxford.

Siegfried Sassoon and Somerville College

Siegfried slept on the train on the way back to England and remembered people waving at the carriages as he arrived back: he was a hero. He was given a small white room on the ground-floor at Somerville where he could see chestnut trees, hear distant bells and – with poignant memories of his mother at home – a piano. He later wrote: "to be lying in a little white-walled room, looking through the window onto a College lawn, was for the first few days very much like a paradise."

In his diary, he wrote: "Reached Southampton about noon. Got on train and came to Oxford about 4 p.m. - No 3 General Service Hospital at Somerville College. Paradise. Strange thing getting landed at Cambridge in August 1915 and Oxford in August 1916." He moaned about the music played by the pianist across the lawn, "someone strumming emotional trash". Under August 2nd, there is also a cryptic entry about the journey back from France – written in the third person - which hints at springs of pride and patriotism in the wounded Siegfried:

"Lying in a hospital train he looks out at the hot August landscape of Hampshire, the flat green and dun-coloured fields-the advertisements of Lung Tonic and Liver Pills the cows-neat villas and sluggish waterways— all these came on him in an irresistible delight, at the pale gold of the wheat-fields and the faded green of the hazy muffled woods on the low hills. People wave to the Red Cross train— grateful stay-at-homes, even a middle-aged man, cycling along a dusty road in straw hat and blue serge clothes, takes one hand off handlebars to wave feeble and jocular gratitude. And the soul of the officer glows with fiery passion as he thinks 'All this I've been fighting for; and now I'm safe home again I begin to think it was worth while'. And he wondered how he could avoid being sent out again."

Nonetheless, the day's entry ends with a return to type: "No need to think of another winter in the trenches, doomed though I am to endure it. Good enough to enjoy the late summer and autumn. And then, who cares?"

Both Siegfried, and later Robert, would spend a short time at Somerville and in Oxford. However, in both cases, the brief period belies a greater significance. Siegfried spent just two weeks at Somerville, sharing his room with another old Marlburian whom he found boring. In fact, the 'notes for Satire' compiled in his diary from this period scorn the other men convalescing: "boring and 2nd rate" officers obsessed with racing, hunting and snobbery. Soon, though, he was well enough to escape the hospital and make visits to friends around Oxfordshire. He was visited by Robert Ross – an open homosexual and believed to be Oscar Wilde's first male lover in 1886 – who took him to the large Manor House at Garsington.

Siegfried's experiences while convalescing provide an interesting counterpoint to the usual picture of early twentieth century queer identities being repressed, isolated or hidden. To be sure, homosexuals like Robert Ross suffered intense hardships due to their sexuality. Nonetheless, what Ross introduced to Siegfried at Garsington could be called – without particular hyperbole – a blossoming queer scene.

Garsington was the country residence of Lady Ottoline Morrell and became a focal point for queer relationships, leftist politics and conscientious objectors. Ottoline was the great-great-niece of the 1st Duke of Wellington and in 1899 she had started studying political economy and Roman history as an out-student at Somerville College. She became a renowned hostess and artistic patron, cultivating a circle including Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence, Dora Carrington, Bertrand Russell and Virginia Woolf.

In 1902, Ottoline had married the Liberal MP Philip Morrell; though the match seems to have been more political than romantic. They enjoyed an open marriage throughout their relationship, and Ottoline cared for the several children produced by Philip's other relationships. Ottoline herself had a vibrant romantic life, including relationships with Virginia Woolf, Dora Carrington, Bertrand Russell and – infamously – a young stonemason who carved plinths for her garden statues which would allegedly become the basis for *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). It was to this highly unconventional but determinedly liberated set that Robert Ross introduced to Siegfried while he was convalescing at Oxford.

Nonetheless, we should not assume Siegfried's happy times at Garsington changed his attitude to the War. In fact, it is possible that the extra thinking time *hardened* his attitudes. During his Somerville stay, Siegfried produced a flurry of bleak works. Seeing a father pushing his wounded son in a wheelchair, he thought about the way the War had poisoned personal relations – imagining the father opine "I loathed my sallow son till he went fighting". He imagined this was to be followed, after the War, by a return of loathing and even a sense of paternal triumph in his son's disablement. Sending the manuscript to Edward Marsh, Siegfried wrote "Isn't this ill-natured?"

In 'Christ and the Soldier', Siegfried's belief in the antithetical relationship between the War and religion surfaces. On a lonely French road, Christ is revealed on the Crucifix to a soldier who envies wounds that "would shift a bloke to blighty." 'Night and Rain' describes the "God

made" weather of Flanders and a Jesus who "never dream't there'd be such mud." Somerville allowed Sassoon to hone his new style, brutalised since the death of David Thomas, which evoked Thomas Hardy's *Satires of Circumstances* with their 'knock-out blow' at the end of the poem, often delivered in direct or colloquial speech:

'Jack fell as he'd have wished,' the mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.
'The Colonel writes so nicely.' Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. 'We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers.' Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

Despite his horror at the War, Siegfried was ready to be sent back to France before long – predominantly due to the vengeance and bloodlust inspired by his loss of Thomas. However, he was frustrated by the Army's dilatoriness in returning him. He languished at the depot near Liverpool for weeks and was returned in time for the Battle of Arras in April 1917 – another "murderous mix-up" (Sassoon) in the British Army's attempts to launch a meaningful offensive. Siegfried would later have nightmares about his experiences at the Battle of Arras. For example, "I can remember a pair of hands (nationality unknown) which protruded from the soaked ashen soil like the roots of a tree turned upside down; one hand seemed to be pointed at the sky with an accusing gesture. [...] Floating on the surface of the flooded trench was the mask of a human face which had detached itself from the skull."

He continued with his audacious attempts at glory – perhaps martyrdom – and was ultimately shot by a German sniper while leading a courageous bombing party under fierce German fire. Helped back to the trenches, he was congratulated for his actions and expected to be recommended for a decoration - through none came. This reflects the inner tensions behind Siegfried's attitude to War: he was disgusted by the management of *this* War, but he was not

a pacifist. Indeed, part of his anger at the higher-ups was that he felt his acts of bravery were not being recognised by the decorations he felt he deserved. Michael Korda has described his feelings towards the army as "those of a jilted lover, a combination of resentment, anger and thwarted love."

He was sent back to England – though not to Somerville – to a military hospital for officers in London. By the time he returned to England, he was joining Robert Graves. Graves had already been wounded once during the War, having had a shell fragment through the lung during the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. However, he returned to the trenches too quickly. Having over-exerted himself he caught bronchitis – brought on by a night outside from 4pm to 1am rounding up horses and mules who had bolted under German fire – and was sent back to England. In his autobiography, he recalls being recognised by a Major of the Royal Army Medical Corps before his return saying "What on earth are you doing out in France, young man? If I find you in my hospital again with those lungs of yours, I'll have you court-martialled." It was the last active service Graves would see during the War, and he was sent back to England. Asked where he would like to go to hospital, he remembers saying at random, "Oxford."

Robert Graves and Somerville College

Like Siegfried, Robert ended up at Somerville. Finding out, the former quipped: "How unlike you to crib my idea of going to the Ladies' College at Oxford." Graves' memories of Somerville are generally favourable: "I enjoyed being at Somerville. It was warm weather and the discipline of the hospital was easy. We used to lounge about in the grounds in our pyjamas and dressing-gowns, and even walk out into St. Giles' and down the Cornmarket (also in pyjamas and dressing-gowns) for a morning cup of coffee at the Cadena." Indeed, one of Robert's letters to Siegfried from the previous summer expressed his desire to "go home to a quiet hospital ward with green screens and no cracks in the ceiling to make me think of trenches." Somerville probably provided that relief. He would later recommend to Siegfried that if he ever got ill, he should "get sent to Somerville."

The serenity, however, was undercut by Robert's ailing mental state. Already at the death of David Thomas in March 1916, he had felt his "breaking point was near" and his poem 'A Child's Nightmare' makes clear the way the horrors of War were weighing on him, its protagonist haunted by a shadowy figure uttering "Cat!... Cat!... Cat!" unceasingly. By his arrival at Somerville, he reported being plagued by what he called his "fiddle-stick shell-shock feeling." It would persist for more than a decade and is inseparable from Graves' poetic legacy. By 1924, he had concluded that the only possible cure was incessant work, with no leisure time at all. Writing became his chief and obsessive pastime. Between 1917 and 1926, after which the effects began to wane, he produced nine collections of verse and five prose works. His poetry, too, became part of the cure as he used it to exorcise his past. He described it as "first, a

personal cathartic by the poet suffering from some inner conflict." This goes a long way to explaining why his tone never became so gritty as Sassoon's: he didn't *want* to represent the worst of war.

Somerville was the beginning of this cathartic process; however, the College and Oxford also exerted more profound and specific influences on Graves' life and work. Shortly after his arrival in Oxford (March 1917), Graves became an instructor of young army cadets at Wadham College. As with his return to battle, this seems to have been 'too fast too soon'. By mid-May 1917 he was beginning to feel weak - having "kept [himself] going on a strychnine tonic" - and eventually he collapsed, falling down the stairs at Wadham.

The reasons for the collapse have been heavily debated. In his autobiography, he simply attributes it to overwork and weak lungs, "for which the climate of Oxford was unsuitable." Alternatively, one might attribute it not to 'over-work' but 'over-play'. Like Siegfried, he had spent much of his time at Garsington house and his poem 'Strong Beer' from the period suggests there was a less serious dimension to his time in Oxford too. In a letter to Ken Barrett, sent later in the summer, he complains: "They have picqueted all the illicit entrances to hospital. A voice: 'Shame, Shame'." How many students in the decades before 'Bod cards' thought the same...?!

However, there is another explanation, which may contextualise the other seismic event from Graves' time at Somerville: he fell in love with a woman for the first time. On 22 April 1917 – the day after Graves started his role at Wadham – Peter Johnstone, his great first love from Charterhouse, had been arrested for soliciting a corporal who pressed charges. Johnstone was quickly tried on April 26th, and though he managed to get the charge dismissed with expert help, the local newspaper had already reported it and news spread fast.

This news provoked a crisis in Robert's sexual identity. In his autobiographical references to the period, he deftly obscures the significance of the moment. In *Goodbye to All That,* he predates this whole episode by two years, presumably to dissociate his first heterosexual love from Johnstone's arrest. Nevertheless, for a man never forced to properly interrogate his sexuality in this way, it should not be understated. As Graves' memoirs show, he identified as "pseudo-homosexual"; but if Johnstone was homosexual – and arrested for the fact – what did that make him?

There is a dearth of primary evidence to track Robert's feelings at this moment; but a letter written to Robert Nicholls contains the admission: "Since the cataclysm of my friend Peter [Johnstone], my affections are running in more normal channels." Were these 'normal channels' simply heterosexual ones? He went on to write: "I correspond regularly and warmly with Nancy Nicholson [his future wife], who is great fun. I only tell you this so that you should get out of your head any misconceptions about my temperament. I should hate you to think I was a confirmed homosexual even if it were only in my thought and went no farther."

In a letter to Edward Marsh, he writes of "[his] friend Peter who appears to have taken a very wrong turning and to have had a mental breakdown." It is hard not to characterise this comment as an attempt to abjure the former identity and experiences he and Peter had shared. Graves and Peter would not meet again until after the War, and even then, they would only meet once. Graves described him then as disagreeably pleasant and "so greatly changed that it seemed absurd to have ever suffered on his account. Yet the caricature likeness to the boy I had loved persisted." When Peter left his books to Robert in his will in 1949, Robert refused the bequest.

Oxford, then, was the site for Robert's identity crisis; but Somerville provided him a solution. First, it introduced him to a new friend – the assertively heterosexual Ken Barrett. Robert witnessed Barrett's strong attraction to one of the nurses and, perhaps not coincidentally, found one too. Later discussing heterosexual marriage with Barrett, Robert wrote: "but for you I would never have been where I am now and God bless you for it." The woman in question was Majorie Machin – a nurse with the Voluntary Aid Detachment Service at Somerville.

Like Robert, she had shared the difficulties of having a German parent during a war against Germany and, tellingly, she was described by friends as "almost masculine" – perhaps making Graves' transition to heterosexual love easier. Robert did not inform Marjorie of his feelings and soon found out she had a lover; nonetheless, it is clear Robert thought of her as an important stage in his sexual conversion. He admitted to Ken that she was proof he had "the power of falling in love with a girl" and that he could "now [...] safely and happily return unto my friends of my own sex and be happy." These statements jar with the easy confidence of his later treatment of this period in his life.

It is surely no coincidence that, after a whirlwind romance, he was married to Nancy Nicholson by early 1918. Nor, perhaps, that at the August fancy-dress party which Robert describes as "a turning point" in their relationship, Nancy was dressed in a male "bandit costume". In some ways, it was an odd match. She was an ardent feminist, and he still had a heavy streak of chauvinism: "it's not a girl's fault if she encourages people: she doesn't know she's doing it, living as she always does by the heart rather than by the head, and will quite honestly deny that she's been flirting. It's her temperament and men don't understand it, expect her to be reasonable like themselves. But I actually believe that a man can always get a girl he wants by taking a firm line."

That said, this was never a barrier to his later romance with Laura Riding, and in other ways Nancy was a natural fit. She was from a wealthy and highly artistic family which admired Robert's poetry, and echoed the androgenous character of Marjorie. During the War, Nancy worked as a 'land-girl', wearing corduroy breeches whenever possible. When trying to overcome Siegfried's resistance to her, Robert emphasised her sexual ambiguity, describing her as a "capable farmer's boy" and as having "a child's heart, a man's brain and the rest very nice girl – a rare combination."

In fact, only Siegfried's resistance soured an otherwise rosy picture. It seems he took the sudden news as an afront and perhaps a betrayal. He made excuses to skip the wedding and its mentions in his diaries are cursory. Under January 19 1918, he writes: "Robert Graves is married on Tuesday. Sent me his new poem 'The God Poetry' yesterday. Very fine. Hunt Monday, and go to Cork for Anti-Gas Instruction till the end of the week. Hunt Saturday with Jerry Rohan's hounds." This is far from the fulsome account of such events we are usually given, both Graves' poetry and Sassoon's hunting usually described generously. Perhaps the pangs of heartbreak discouraged Siegfried from writing on this day.

A letter to Lady Ottoline (21 November 1917) gives an insight into Siegfried's real feelings:

"Robert Graves writes that he is 'very happy'—and still at Rhyl. I don't seem to remember 'feeling very happy' since before I was wounded. Sometimes I feel as if I were very nearly used up. Funny how one recovers. I don't think R.G. feels things as deeply as some - certainly not as much as Nichols - with all his egotism. This isn't much of a letter, but it's a relief to write to someone who understands things and doesn't raise pitying eyebrows."

The wounds referred to in this letter could easily have been both physical and emotional. Indeed, as Robert spent the latter half of 1917 finding love and recovering, Siegfried was going through his own 'cataclysm' – as Graves described it. In July 1917, Sassoon published his famous 'Soldier's Declaration' in opposition to the conduct of the War. Again, Lady Ottoline's circle at Garsington had an influence: Bertrand Russell, for example, was sent to prison for several months in 1917 for his public comments about the war despite being an heir to an earldom. During the weeks after Siegfried's return from Arras, the anger in his poems had intensified; however, though they received favourable reviews from Virginia Woolf in the *Times Literary Supplement*, he was disappointed that their anti-war feeling did not cause the scandal he had hoped.

Therefore, in July 1917, he published his 'Soldier's Declaration'. The reactions of his friends illustrate the danger he had put upon himself. Hostility to the War's management was hardly new; but for a serving and decorated officer this could provoke a court-martial, imprisonment or even execution for cowardice. Robert Hammer wrote hurriedly: "My dear old Sassons, [W]hat is this damned nonsense I hear [...] that you have refused to do any more soldiering? For heaven's sake man don't be such a fool. Don't disgrace yourself and think of us before you do anything so mad." The reaction of the Garsington set betrays their influence. Lady Ottoline wrote: "I saw Bertie [Russell] in London yesterday and he showed me your statement which I thought extraordinarily good." But even she recognised "You will have a hard time of it."

The Declaration illustrated the tension between Robert and Siegfried's views on the war which manifested in their poetry. Writing to Edward Marsh, Graves wrote "I think he's quite right in his views but absolutely wrong in his action [...] It would be true friendship for me to heap coals of fire on the head of the dog that bit me by turning pacifist myself but you can be quite assured that I'm a sound militarist in action however much of a pacifist in thought. In theory

the war ought to stop tomorrow if not sooner. Actually we'll have to go on while a rat or a dog remains to be enlisted and the remains of the famous Kilkenny cats will look nothing remarkably small compared with ours. 'Better no world than a world ruled by Prussia!' (there speaks my old Danish grandmother!)" Graves retained a sense of duty which had departed Siegfried at the death of Daniel Thomas, perhaps reflecting their different levels of attachment to him. After all, Robert had been in love before; Siegfried had not.

It is revealing that Graves, in his letter to Marsh, concludes "I only wish I'd known about S.S. in time: it would never have happened if I'd been there but I've not seen him since January." This testifies to his influence on Siegfried, but also to their difference of opinion. Despite this, and despite Robert's coterminous breakdown over Peter Johnstone – which sent him from Wadham back to Somerville on convalescence – Robert took it upon himself to ensure the Declaration would not be the end of Siegfried's career (or life!). Though not fully recovered, he recognised that Siegfried's way out of prosecution was through medical diagnosis (neurasthenia) and gave evidence at the medical board himself. He was in such a state that he broke down in tears three times while giving a statement; he was told he was the one who should have been before the medical board.

This was an act of extreme devotion from Robert. It was at a time when even a "sudden strong scent of flowers in a garden" was "enough to set [him] trembling." He got Siegfried sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, with Graves himself as escort. In the end, Robert missed the train, and Siegfried set off for 'Dottyville' – as he called it – alone; there were always limits to Robert's affection. Nonetheless, it was a demonstration of love, care and extreme courage.

Wilfred Owen

It was at 'Dottyville' that Siegfried met a young officer and fellow poet: Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (1893-1918). Unlike Siegfried and Robert, Wilfred was not from a comfortable bourgeois or aristocratic upbringing. On his father's side, he descended from a string of craftsmen and shopkeepers in southwestern England, creeping closer to the lower middle class through generations. On his mother's side, there was a lineage of petty-bourgeois clockmakers, shopkeepers and printers. A certain social anxiety would continue to mark Wilfred's life. It suffused his hero-worship of Siegfried at Craiglockhart and he was known to tell people his father was a baronet who should be addressed as "Sir Thomas." His mother – Susan – engaged in this too, fantasising that her eldest son would become "*Sir* Wilfred Edward Salter Owen".

Susan - anxious and often ill – formed a close bond with Wilfred. She made no secret that he – her firstborn – was the favourite. His letters to her testify a remarkable intensity of feeling and read alarmingly like love letters. In one, sent from France, he reports in detail of his problems with constipation and the photograph of her he carried with him:

"I see that justly proportioned face composed, yet with benignancy bright and active in the eyes; the mouth is set; and yet it ever smiles a gentle smile; With what firmness sits the head upon shoulder-throne! And lo! The arm, seemingly as strong as a Titan's; and when used to succour and sustain, so strong in very truth! With the hand hanging in perfect grace, a lady's hand . . . and not far away, the Kitchen-room, and the whole house She reigneth in as a Queen."

Wilfred became a keen reader and shared his mother's religious calling from an early age. It is also likely that she knew of his homosexuality, a fact his brother Harold – in his autobiography – did everything possible to deny. Indeed, one of the major themes of his three-volume opus is to deny his brother's homosexuality.

Wilfred had a quiet and apparently uneventful schooling before realising his mother's dream of a religious vocation and becoming an assistant to a country parson. Finding himself in large Victorian rooms, eating formal meals and enjoying attentive maids, Wilfred's life changed decisively during his two years at the vicarage. However, he ultimately decided that he did not have it within him to take holy orders. Thus, he found himself at a loose end and became a teacher of English at a Berlitz school in Bordeaux.

The War broke out while he was teaching; but had little immediate impact upon him. He felt no great urge to enlist; though glares from neighbours in the streets troubled him: as a fit, young man, he had to explain that he was English and not a Frenchman avoiding conscription. Whilst in France, Wilfred developed an important relationship with the poet Laurent Tailhade. Laurent was a fervent anarchist – known for launching a bomb into the Chamber of Deputies – and openly enjoyed sexual relations with both men and women despite being twice married. Wilfred became his student, a relationship which took on pederastic overtones but was probably unconsummated.

Wilfred's letters to his mother about Laurent are extraordinarily frank, especially considering Harold's attempts at censorship. "He received me like a lover. To use an expression of the Rev. H. Wiggins, he quite slobbered over me. I know not how many times he squeezed my hand; and, sitting me down on a sofa, pressed my head against his shoulder." This "imbues [me] with a sensation of happiness," he added. None of this seems to have especially alarmed his mother.

It has been suggested that Wilfred picked up male sex-workers, Bordeaux being a major seaport; however, this is based on a questionable piece of testimony by Robert Graves. Allegedly, on their very first meeting, Owen told this relative stranger about his sex acts while the pair travelled in a taxi to visit Siegfried at Craiglockhart. One suspects Graves' Rankean veracity slips for a moment here. Either way, it is clear Laurent helped Wilfred come to terms with his homosexuality and recognise that it was no passing phase. This makes his yearnings for connection particularly interesting. Are such letters longings for *any* connection, or specifically homosexual ones? "I begin to suffer a hunger for intimacy. At bottom it is that I ought to be in love and am not [...] I lack any touch of tenderness. I ache in soul, as my bones might ache after a night spent on a cold, stone floor."

Appropriately, Wilfred's poems of this wartime period, before he enlisted, were strained and romantic. His poetic style was decadent and old-fashioned – characteristics learned from Tailhade.

> *"Thereby she set a weeping-willow tree*
> *To droop and mourn. Full dolefully it clung*
> *About the form, and moved continually,*
> *As if it sighed; as if it sometimes wrung*
> *Convulsive fingers in sad reverie,*
> *And ever o'er the light blue sand it hung*
> *A purple shade."*

It would take the horrors of war and Siegfried's sharp editing pen to create the Wilfred Owen known today. It is unclear why Wilfred chose to enlist in October 1915. Most probably, he did so because his teaching post – now for a wealthy family – was coming to an end. It is also possible that, like Sassoon, he was in a period lacking direction. He had started receiving letters from his father which complained his "present life was not leading anywhere in particular." Like Sassoon, he had one vocation: that of the poet. But unlike Sassoon, he had insufficient means to be a 'man of letters'. He wrote to his mother shortly before enlisting: "There is one title I prize, one clear call audible, one Sphere where I may influence for Truth, one workshop whence I may send forth Beauty, one mode of living entirely congenial to me." It was that of a poet.

Nonetheless, unlike Graves and Sassoon, he entered with few illusions about what war would be like: the life expectancy of a second lieutenant on the Western Front by 1916 was just six weeks. Wilfred arrived in France – after a lengthy period spent training – in January 1917. His

substantial rank – as an infantry officer – meant he commanded men of much grander origins; though this did not shield him from the horrors. He wrote to his concerned mother of “Sodom and Gomorrah [...] pockmarked like a body of foulest disease and the odour is the breath of cancer.”

At the front, he was tasked with – in line with British policy – the ‘domination’ of no-man’s land. Within his first month, he found himself in an underground advance post in no-man’s land with twenty-five of his men. One of the sentries, despite Wilfred having dug further mud steps for extra protection, was blown down by an explosion and blinded. This was to inspire one of Owen’s first war poems, already taking on their later character:

“We'd found an old Boche dug-out, and he knew,
And gave us hell, for shell on frantic shell,
Hammered on top, but never quite burst through.
Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime
Kept slush waist high, that rising hour by hour,
Choked up the steps too thick with clay to climb....

There we herded from the blast
Of whizz-bangs, but one found our door at last,
Buffeting eyes and breath. Snuffing the candles,
And thud! flump! thud! down the steps came thumping
And splashing in the flood, deluging muck—
The sentry's body; then his rifle, handles
Of old Boche bombs, and mud in ruck on ruck.

We dredged him up, for killed, until he whined
"O sir, my eyes—I'm blind-I'm blind, I'm blind!"
Coaxing, I held a flame against his lids
And said if he could see the least blurred light
He was not blind; in time he'd get all right.

"I can't," he sobbed. Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids
Watch my dreams still; but I forgot him there
In posting next for duty, and sending a scout
To beg a stretcher somewhere, and floundering about
To other posts under the shrieking air.”

He made a friend in the Second Lieutenant Hubert Gaukroker; however, Hubert was soon killed in a German bombardment. In April, a German shell exploded close to Wilfred and threw him up into the air. He landed among the scattered but still recognisable body parts of his

friend, whose body had been "horribly disinterred" from its shallow grave by a previous shell. By this time, Wilfred's shattered nerves were clear, and he was sent home.

It was during his convalescence at Craiglockhart that Wilfred first met Siegfried. In a letter to his mother, Wilfred confided that he wanted to meet Siegfried more than he would Tennyson and eventually summoned up the courage to introduce himself. As in his relationship with Tailhade, there was a certain class element to the relationship. Sassoon was imperious and condescending; but they bonded over poetry and Wilfred helped decipher a handwritten letter from H.G. Wells.

Before a week was up, Wilfred was writing to his mother, "Siegfried called me in to him, and having condemned some of my poems, amended others, and rejoiced over a few, he read me his last works, which are superb beyond anything in his Book. Last night he wrote a piece which is the most exquisitely painful war poem of any language or time. I don't tell him so, or that I am not worthy to light his pipe." One wonders whether Siegfried particularly enjoyed being idolised given he felt he had always been second-place in Robert's heart. Certainly, the relationship was not an equal one: Wilfred was once kept waiting for hours while Siegfried finished his golf, described by Wilfred as "a severe fleshly trial" given that he'd skipped breakfast– this from a man who'd spent fifty hours under fire in a bomb crater.

It is easy to see this as the happiest period in Wilfred's life, and his poetry matured. Michael Korda has written a useful comparison which illustrates the way Sassoon helped strengthen Owen's work. He compares 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' – originally 'Anthem for Dead Youth' – in draft and final form to illustrate how Wilfred internalised Sassoon's characteristic punch:

Anthem for Dead Youth (Draft)

What passing-bells for you who die in herds?
Only the long monotonous [anger] of the guns!
And only the stuttering rifles' rattled words
Can patter out your hasty orisons.
No wreaths for you, nor balms, nor stately choirs;
Nor any voice of mourning, save our shells,
And bugles calling for you from your shires,
Saddening the twilight. These are our farewells.
What candles may we hold to speed you all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the lights of your goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows must be your pall;
Your flowers: the tenderness of comrades' minds;
And each slow dusk, a drawing down of blinds.

Anthem for Doomed Youth (Final)

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, nor prayers, nor 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 goodbyes.
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.

After his death, Harold censored Wilfred's letters so comprehensively that it is not clear whether he and Siegfried ever embarked upon a physical relationship. It *is* clear, however, that the relationship was as close as Wilfred ever came to a love affair. He wrote to his mother: "Spent all day [with Sassoon] yesterday. Breakfast, lunch, dinner." One wonders whether his ambivalent attitude to Robert – this, still in 1917 before Robert and Siegfried's falling out – was because he felt threatened or jealous in having to share 'his' Siegfried:

"He [Graves] is a big, rather plain fellow, the last man on earth apparently capable of the extraordinary, delicate fancies in his books. ... No doubt he thought me a slacker sort of sub. S. S. when they were together showed him my longish war-piece 'Disabled' (you haven't seen it) & it seems Graves was mightily impressed, and considers me a kind of Find!! No thanks, Captain Graves! I'll find myself in due time."

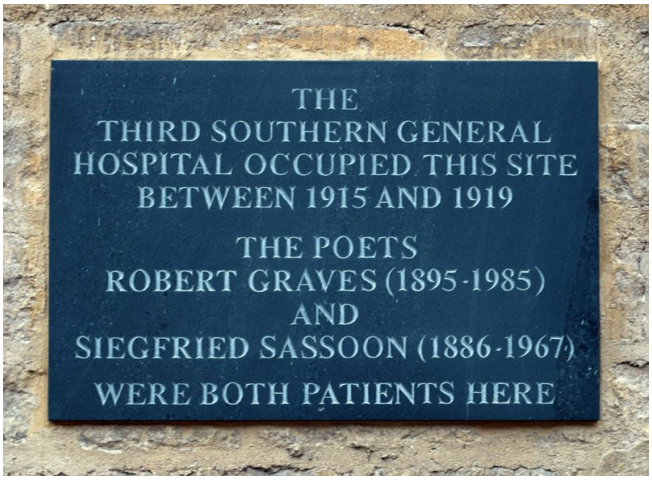
In a letter to Siegfried written just before the end of the war, Wilfred joked "no more exposed flanks of any sort for a long time", perhaps implying the two had shared some form of physical intimacy. It is also compelling that, after Wilfred had returned to the front, Siegfried would complain of being troubled by "a combination of sex-repression, war-weariness, vanity and pride - with a little 'decent feeling,' and a touch of nerves thrown in."

Unfortunately for Siegfried, this would not be sufficient to keep him at 'Dottyville'. He was sent off to Palestine then France, before returning to England in July 1918 having been wounded – reportedly by friendly fire. Owen too was sent back to the Front, via a brief but enjoyable period as a butler for a group of seventy officers. It was clear that he would hang onto his experiences – romantic and literary – at 'Dottyville' for the rest of his short life. On the last day of 1917, he wrote to his mother: "I go out of this year a Poet, my dear Mother, as which I did not enter it. I am held peer by the Georgians, I am a poet's poet. I am started. The tugs have left me, I feel the great swelling of the open sea taking my galleon."

These final letters are made all the more poignant for Wilfred's tragic end. He arrived at the Front in August 1918, earning a Military Cross in October for leading his company out of a besieged shell-hole against a wall of German machine-gunners. By late October, he sensed the War was slowing down. He wrote to his mother: "There is no danger here, or if any, it will be well over before you read these lines." However, before she read these lines Wilfred was dead.

On the 4th of November 1918 – just a week before the Armistice – he and his men were among the 'Pioneers' tasked with placing temporary bridges across the Sambre-Oise Canal. The bridges were successfully built with cork floats; but it was a suicide mission: three-quarters of the 'Pioneers' were killed or wounded, including Wilfred Owen. England lost its greatest ever war poet.

Epilogue



Siegfried and Robert survived the War and went on to live complex and often pained lives. Neither had an uncomplicated relationship to romance and personal intimacy; however, this essay has sought to focus on the Great War. It sought to consider the ways in which the sexualities of these three poets – Graves, Sassoon and Owen - shaped their poetry and in turn how that poetry has shaped the legacy of the First World War: a legacy so often mediated through literature.

In the archives of St John's College, Oxford, there sits a letter sent by Robert Graves to a 'Mr Singh'. It was sent in April 1968 from Graves' home in Mallorca, Spain. In the letter, we can see Graves' complex analysis of this exact phenomenon: the relationship between sexualities, poetry and the memory of War. It also illustrates the complexities of Graves' own identity after the arrest of Peter Johnstone: an event from which he never recovered. In the letter, Graves writes of how "my two best known contemporaries, Sassoon and Owen, were homosexuals, as I am not." In his view, this explains their particularly brutal and vivid approach to war poetry: their homosexuality "accentuated[?] their emotion in a battlefield strewn with male corpses." In contrast to the way "Hardy radiates strength to the end" in his poetry, focusing on beautiful landscape, Sassoon and Owen's distinctive approach was because though "homosexuality is not an immoral affection [...] an homosexual is usually a pathetic figure, as Sassoon became." Thus, for Graves, his writing was more fulsome and less bleak because he was not a homosexual whilst our memory of the War is given its additional pathos by Owen and Sasson's romantic affection to other men on the battlefield.

Though warped by extraneous influences and his own self-fashioning, Graves' letter perceptively recognises the fact Owen and Sassoon's poetry is inseparable from their sexualities. Indeed, he was right about the way Sassoon's romantic affections darkened his poetry; not least because Graves felt the same feelings. Siegfried's distinctive style – laden with brutality and extremes – was the product of his radicalisation after the death of David

Thomas. It was this moment that catalysed his bloodlust against the Germans and his cynicism for the War. Likewise, Wilfred's distinctive style was the culmination of his romantic hero-worship of two queer poets - Sassoon and Tailhade. His respect for them - and thus their influence – was surely intensified by the emotive ties involved.

However, Graves was no more immune. Poetry was a solitude to which he retreated in times of uncertainty, stress or personal introspection. This was central to his more moderate, sanitised and duty-bound depiction of War. His sexuality – and the associated desire to sublimate it - was a central part of Graves' need for relief. It also helped define his liminal position both within and without the establishment, a need for approval ultimately leading him to eschew his homosexuality altogether.

This essay has sought to recognise that the poetry of these men was not produced in a microcosm. It was bound up in personal relationships, love, heartache and loss. It also reflected the real traumas and horrors which these men experienced in 'The War to End All Wars'. The essay started with an epigram:

> *You can't believe that British troops "retire"*
> *When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,*
> *Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.*
> *O German mother dreaming by the fire*
> *While you are knitting socks to send your son*
> *His face is trodden deeper in the mud.*

An extract from Sassoon's 'Glory of Women', this was not the product of Siegfried's imagination. It echoes his real experience lifting a young soldier's head out of the mud and cleaning off his face with his sleeve, only to see – as he and his men fell back – that it had been trampled into the squalor of the trench by other retreating soldiers.

All three men would recognise what occurs daily in Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza and Myanmar today. 'The War to End all Wars' failed in its promise. Indeed, it is often described as the *origin* of horrors to come – the Russian Revolution and Stalin, Hitler and the Second World War – rather than an *end* to horrors past. In this LGBTQ+ History month, I have tried to recover the experience of three men who experienced this most terrible of conflicts. I have done this because it is only through individual experiences that we can discover the true pain and sufferings of war, that most ancient and horrible of humanity's tendencies.

Nonetheless, I have also sought to recover another of humanity's most ancient experiences: love. These men experienced love and loss. They risked and sacrificed for those they loved. Wilfred pulled his comrades from shell-holes under German gunfire to bring them to safety; Robert braved emotional collapse to defend his lover and friend from potential execution at the Medical Board; Siegfried's audaciousness and extraordinary daring was a tribute of devotion to David Thomas.

They understood the key to love: it is active, not passive. To love is to act, to demonstrate, and to sacrifice. These men all 'loved' in this sense, and they 'loved' other men. They are part of

Somerville's vibrant Queer History and they place Queer History at the centre of the Great War. To recover their stories has been to read of anxiety, loneliness, repression, fear and persecution. Would Robert Graves' subsequent romantic life – notoriously complex – have been less painful had Peter Johnstone's arrest not prompted such a forceful suppression of his homosexual feelings? Perhaps. Could Siegfried and Wilfred have lived fuller, less self-conscious lives had they been able to embrace their homosexuality in public? Certainly.

Therefore, we should be thankful for our freedoms and our privileges. Writing this essay has made me incredibly grateful for the freedom, the love and the hope of Somerville College – a refuge for these queer men a century ago, and still a sanctuary for love, youth and hope today. It has also reminded me that such freedoms are fragile, and that in this age of populism, authoritarianism and retrogression, they are freedoms for which we must fight.

Bibliographic Note

This article would not have been possible without several people. Thank you to Matthew Roper of Somerville College library for providing invaluable direction on Sassoon and Graves' diaries and their personal correspondence. Thank you to Rosslyn Johnston of St John's College library for her direction on Graves' correspondence, especially with 'Mr Singh', and for allowing me to examine their letters at such short notice. Finally, thank you to Lucy Pollock, Em Pritchard and Somerville College for asking me to produce this essay and for providing an environment in which such a project is an excitement not a chore.

In the interests of time, accessibility, and navigability, this essay has not been given footnotes. The article has been put together using the primary and secondary sources below and I do hope this serves as an adequate guide. Given I cannot acknowledge debts in the body of the text, it is apposite at this moment to acknowledge my debt to the secondary literature below, especially Michael Korda's new book which is an excellent and sensitive overview. This essay stands on the shoulders of the literature below; but it also seeks to glean new insights from the extensive primary material which I have endeavoured to piece together into a new

narrative – linking sexualities, poetic styles and war – to contribute to historiographies of literary culture, sexuality and masculine identity.

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