

Helen Gifford: Choral Scenes: the Western Front, World War I (1999)

Biographical notes by Helen Gifford

RENE ARCOS (1881-1959) French poet and novelist, Arcos was one of the founder members of the Abbaye community, a group of young writers, painters and musicians who lived in an old house at Créteil, outside Paris. Most of these had recently completed military service and had enjoyed the communal life without the pressures of genuine warfare. Their aim in setting up this cooperative in 1906 was to become self-supporting, growing and selling garden produce, printing their own publications for sale, and sharing the labour of running and maintaining the press they had installed at the Abbaye. The house was originally leased by Rene Arcos, Albert Doyen, Georges Duhamel, Albert Gleizes, Henri Martin-Barzun, Alexandre Mercereau and Charles Vildrac. Other writers and artists later chose to associate themselves with the commune without becoming full-time residents, so widening the spread of their influence. One of the most significant was the writer Jules Romains. The Abbaye press issued his 'Vie unanime' in 1908, and through his work the group was brought into contact with the doctrine of 'unanimité', based on the principle of universal brotherhood and on psychological theories of group emotion. Unanimism was one of the poetic and social movements formed in opposition to materialism and the mystic introversion and individualism of the symbolists. The unanimists sought to merge the personality of the individual into the group, and laid emphasis on a brotherly love that owed nothing to theology. They formed links with socialist groups who sponsored plays and lectures. Arcos' optimistic belief in the eventual progress of mankind towards a better world is evident in his collections of poems, such as 'La Tragédie des espaces' (1908), and 'Le Sang des autres' (1918), as well as the novels 'Pays du soir' (1918), and 'Autrui' (1926).

August STRAMM (1874-1915) Stramm studied at Berlin and Halle, then in 1893 he became a postal official. After compulsory military service he received a commission in the army reserve, and in 1902 he married the successful novelist Else Krafft. At this time his own writing was fairly conventional, but by 1911 he had developed a unique literary style, remarkable for its originality in both his poetry and plays. Stramm's work took to an extreme point the radical experimentation of that generation of writers whose style came to be termed expressionist. His economy of language, abrupt rhythms and unorthodox use of syntax and form in plays such as 'Sancta Susanna' and 'Die Haidebraut', written between 1912 and 1914, made it hard for him to find a publisher. Eventually Herwarth Walden recognized his value and was responsible for 'Der Sturm' publishing his work on a regular basis. From mid-1913 to mid-1915, 75 poems, 7 plays and 2 prose monologues appeared in that magazine, the play 'Geschehen' (1915) being considered one of the most innovative. With the outbreak of war he was sent to the Western Front as Company Commander, then in April 1915 to the Eastern Front. After refusing an offer of release arranged for by his publisher, he was killed in Horodec (David Gorodok), in southern Byelorussian SSR. The posthumous publications of his work include the series of poems 'Du' (1915), a collection of love poems, the war verse 'Tropfblut' (1919), and the lengthy poems 'Die Menschheit' (1917) and 'Weltwehe' (1922), while in 1920—21, two volumes of dichtungen appeared.

WILFRED OWEN (1893-1918) Born in Shropshire and educated at Liverpool and at Shrewsbury Technical College. From an early age Owen was interested in the technicalities of poetic construction and he would experiment with new methods. He qualified as a teacher, and in 1913 left England to teach English in Bordeaux. In 1915 Owen returned home to enlist in the army, in which he was soon commissioned. In fighting on the Somme in 1917, Owen was concussed, suffered from shell-shock and also had trench fever. He was invalided to Craiglockhart War Hospital in June, where Dr W H R Rivers treated shell-shocked soldiers, with the new method of psychoanalysis devised by Freud.

Siegfried Sassoon arrived at the hospital in August and the two poets met for the first time. Owen benefited from their discussions, which were important in enabling him to find his own voice as a poet in the trenches. The popular poet of the First World War was Rupert Brooke, whose poetry reflected the conventional patriotic sentiments generally held at the start of the conflict, but which gradually became eroded as the war dragged on. Owen's poems disclosed new and profound insights, revealing the lot of the soldier and conditions of trench warfare in an entirely new light. Only five of Owen's poems were published in his lifetime, and most of those that led to him being regarded as the outstanding English poet of the First World War were written during its last two years. In a letter to his mother Owen had referred to himself as a 'conscientious objector with a very seared conscience'. He nevertheless decided to return to the Front and on 4th November 1918, a week before the Armistice, he was killed.

'Exposure' is thought by some to be his finest poem. Technically complex, its dense imagery interrelates diverse ideas and feelings in a moving account of a soldier on watch in a desolate winter landscape. It has been said that had Owen written only this poem he would have been recognised as a major poet.

RUDYARD KIPLING (1865-1936) Kipling was born in India, a country that inspired some of his most profound and evocative writing. It has been said that he wrote the finest story about India—in English, and this was *Kim* (1901). Kipling's children's books, especially the *Jungle Books* and the *Just So Stories* (written in the 1890s for his own children) made him a world famous literary figure, and together with his other stories, short stories and verse they led to his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907.

During the Boer War Kipling had acted as a war correspondent, so in 1914 he again undertook this work, first sending reports from the Western Front and then from the Italian Alps. His first-hand accounts from both these theatres of war appeared in the leading English newspapers. In 1915 his only son John chose to enlist at the age of 17, and was one of the 20,000 who fell in the battle of Loos that year. Kipling had already lost his eldest daughter Josephine through illness at the age of 7, but it is strange that even before these tragic events he should have written the stirring and prophetic 'Recessional' in honour of the Queen's Jubilee in 1897, ending each verse with the words used to commemorate the dead of the wars in the following century: 'Lest we forget -- lest we forget!'

FREDERIC MANNING (1882-1935) Born in Sydney, Manning received almost no formal schooling due to asthma and poor general health, but his high intelligence was apparent. In 1895 his father Sir William Manning, was fortunate in being able to engage Arthur Galton, an eminent scholar and secretary to the new Governor of New South Wales, as Frederic's tutor. In 1898 he went with Galton to England for three years, and after another trip back to Sydney Frederic Manning returned to England to live permanently.

Manning soon established himself in the literary world of London, becoming friends with Laurence Binyon, W B Yeats, Ezra Pound and T S Eliot. Eventually he was made chief reviewer of the *Spectator*. In 1909 Manning produced a book of philosophical dialogues, *Scenes and Portraits*, which made his reputation. Through imaginary conversations held between famous historical figures such as Socrates and Euripides, St Francis and Pope Innocent, Manning examined ideas on human suffering, transience and the belief in a benevolent God. The work was praised by reviewers, with Max Beerbohm saying that he could think of no better collection of short stories.

In 1915 Manning enlisted as a private in the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, and later saw action at Guillemont near the Somme, which he said 'gave me matter for a lifetime'. He was sent to Ireland in 1917 where he was commissioned as second lieutenant in the Royal Irish Regiment, but his military career came to an end when a medical board decided that he was suffering from delayed shell-shock. In 1919 he was fortunate to survive influenza followed by pneumonia. Ten years later he wrote one of the most celebrated books on World War I. A friend, Peter Davies a young publisher, had asked him to write down his war experiences as an infantryman, and in 1929 he wrote the first version, a limited unexpurgated edition called *The Middle Parts of Fortune: Somme and Ancre*, which represented the language of the ordinary soldier as frankly as possible. The following year the expurgated edition appeared, *Her Privates We*, which conformed to the English obscenity laws. In both books he concealed his authorship by using his army rank and number, 'Private 19022' as a pseudonym. T E Lawrence was the first to recognise Manning's style in the writing, having greatly admired *Scenes and Portraits*. Lawrence called the later book 'a masterpiece', and Ernest Hemingway said that it was 'the finest and noblest book of men in war that I have ever read', while its exceptional qualities were also acclaimed by Arnold Bennett and E M Forster.

During the 1920s Manning's health had deteriorated further with regular bouts of influenza, until by the 1930s he had developed emphysema. He finally died of pneumonia in February 1935.

SIEGFRIED SASSOON (1886-1967) Sassoon was educated at Marlborough and Clare College, Cambridge. His early years living in Kent and Sussex were to become an important source for his later writing. By the time that he was sent to France in 1915 his brother had been killed at Gallipoli. At the Front he became friends with the poet Robert Graves, another officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. In April 1917 he was wounded in the shoulder, and while convalescing in England he wrote a statement against the continuation of the war, which was read out in the House of Commons and reported in *The Times*. He also threw his Military Cross into the river. At an initial hearing, Robert Graves interceded with the military authorities, and in August a medical board decided that Sassoon was shell-shocked and sent him to Craiglockhart, a psychiatric war hospital near Edinburgh. Here he became a patient of the famous anthropologist Dr W H R Rivers, who employed Freudian theories of psychoanalysis in his treatment. Another patient there was Wilfred Owen, and Sassoon was able to give encouragement to the younger poet.

Some war poems of Sassoon's had already been published in 1917 in *The Old Huntsman*, and more in *Counter-Attack*, but the public was not able to accept the bleak realism of his writing and the collections met with little success. By now Sassoon had chosen to rejoin another battalion in France, and in July 1918 he was wounded in the head and invalided out of the army. In the 1920s he produced some more volumes of poetry which finally established a high reputation.

From the late 1920s on Sassoon became increasingly drawn to spiritual matters, now seeing himself as a religious poet. His poetry in 'Vigils' (1935), and 'Sequences' (1956), reveals this spiritual development. In 1957 he became a Catholic. During these years Sassoon's prose writing was attracting attention, and his semi-autobiographical trilogy, ultimately published as one in 1937 as *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, brought him an enduring success.

JOHN MCCRAE (1872-1918) A Canadian physician and poet, McCrae had been a medical officer in the Boer War. At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, he and a Dr Adami had just completed their *Textbook of Pathology*. McCrae was posted to France as medical officer with the Canadian First Brigade Artillery. It was during the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, that he wrote the poem 'In Flanders Fields' (see Klemm). He was in a dressing station established at the foot

of a bank of the Yser Canal outside Ypres, where many of the casualties would fall back down into the station. Although he had been writing poetry since he was a student, there had been nothing to indicate that he would have such a remarkable acceptance with the poem 'In Flanders Fields', which was first printed in *Punch*, on the 8th December 1915. In 1918 McCrae died of pneumonia and a cerebral infection in a hospital in Wimereux, Boulogne.

WILHELM KLEMM (1881-1968) Having qualified as a doctor, he was called up in August 1914 and served in the German army at Flanders. Although a poet prior to the war it was his experience as a surgeon that crystallized his poetic art. Chief among the war poems that made his reputation were 'Gloria. Kriegsgedichte aus dem Feld' (1915), and 'Schlacht an der Marne', later included by Kurt Pinthus in the anthology *Menschheitsdämmerung*, along with 19 other poems by Klemm. His horrifying accounts of the appalling conditions and experiences that soldiers were subjected to at the front, especially his detailed descriptions of the suffering and squalor endured by the sick and wounded in field hospitals, shocked and disturbed Klemm's readers. The stark realism of his writing was far in advance of accounts by most other European writers on the war. With his background culture of the German expressionist movement in art and literature dating back to the start of the century, Klemm's uninhibited and emotional reaction to his surroundings can be better understood. In comparison, the restraint shown by his counterpart in the Canadian army, the surgeon John McCrae, also based in Flanders and observing similar conditions in another field hospital, is more typical of the poetic traditions of that time. In his poem 'In Flanders Fields' (1915), McCrae confines his writing to evoking sights such as poppies and crosses, to a background sound of larks and distant gunfire, avoiding all mention of the horrors of war.

In 1922 Klemm stopped writing and became a publisher. In the Second World War his publishing houses were bombed, and in the same year, 1943, both his sons were killed.

CHARLES VILDRAC (1882-1971) French poet and dramatist, Vildrac was one of the original members of the Abbaye community — (see Arcos), His work reflects the aims of this group, especially their belief in the power of friendship and love to overcome adversity, and their faith in the essential goodness of mankind. In the wider artistic community early in the century, there was an idealistic fervour that saw artists and writers seeking to involve sections of the community normally outside their reach, such as factory workers and peasants. Free universities and community projects in France and Belgium employed lecturers in literature and poetry, while the Professor at the Paris Conservatoire, Gustave Charpentier, held night classes in music and on the voice for women factory workers. Although he was a lifelong pacifist, Vildrac enlisted in the French infantry in World War I, serving both as a soldier and stretcher bearer. Most notable among his poetical works are 'le Livre d'amour' (1910), and 'les Chants du désespéré' (1920). The work that brought him most renown was the play *le Paquebot* 'Tenacity' (1920), a perceptive character study of two ex-soldiers.

EDMUND BLUNDEN (1896-1974) Poet, writer and noted editor and critic, Blunden was born in London. A student at Oxford when war broke out he enlisted in 1914 aged 18. Like Manning Blunden was an asthmatic, but managed to serve throughout the war. In 1917 as second lieutenant he was involved with some of the heaviest fighting in the prolonged Third Battle of Ypres, and a graphic account of those experiences is given in his poem 'Third Ypres'. Another of Blunden's poems on the war years is 'Report on Experience'. These two poems together with his best known work, *Undertones of War*, first published in 1928, and Frederic Manning's own favourite book on the war, came to be regarded as among the best-written and most insightful accounts of their kind. A theme common to all three is Blunden's guilt at his own survival, and this was to characterize much of his later work.

Blunden described the Western Front as ‘no more than ancient siege warfare, [it was] almost a philosophy, but also an abattoir, ... it looked perpetual; and those who neared its firing lines came into a huge and tragic scene’.

Important among his edited publications was a collected edition of the work of Wilfred Owen in 1931. Blunden produced several volumes of poems including, *Collected Poems* (1930), *Poems 1930-1940* and *After the Bombing* (1950). In 1966 he was appointed professor of poetry at Oxford. Ironically it was his celebrated descriptions of the English countryside, and of Kent in particular, that probably brought him his widest readership.

LAURENCE BINYON (1869-1943) Poet, art historian and museum curator, Binyon was one of the three most notable art critics of his time — the others being Roger Fry and Clive Bell. He was educated at St Paul's and Trinity College, Oxford, then worked at the British Museum where in 1909 he became assistant keeper in the department of prints and drawings. During his 40-year career at the Museum he published many works on art, both Western and oriental, building up the oriental collection and acquiring an international reputation as an authority on Eastern art. Binyon spent a lifetime introducing and explaining Eastern philosophy and art to the West. One of his most important publications was *Painting in the Far East* (1908), while another, *The Flight of the Dragon* (1911), revealed a new world of aesthetic and spiritual experience to writers such as Pound and Wyndham Lewis.

Binyon is remembered now for one of the most famous poems in the English language, the 5th stanza of his ‘For the Fallen’ (1914), ‘... They shall grow not old, ...’. This with other poems of his was set by Elgar for choir and orchestra as *The Spirit of England* (1917). During the war Binyon worked as a medical orderly at a French Red Cross hospital near Chaumont in France, where there was no gas, electricity or hot water system. It was heavy labour and Binyon, then in his late 40s, worked a 13-hour day in the old chateau without lifts, often being sent to collect fresh batches of wounded in the middle of the night. He had written some war poetry, and one poem written at the hospital, ‘Orphans of Flanders’, was included in Edith Wharton’s fundraising anthology *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), some other contributors being Henry James, Conrad, Hardy, Cocteau, Verhaeren, Maeterlinck, Monet, Stravinsky, and Santayana.

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE (1880-1918) French-Italian-Polish writer whose original name was Wilhelm Apollinaris von Kostrowitzky. An innovative poet who was regarded as the precursor of surrealism and prophet of later developments in modern art, his highly original collection of poems, *Alcools* (1913), gained him critical acclaim. A resident of France for many years, he enlisted in the French army in December 1914. Early in March 1916 he became a French citizen, and later that month, on returning to the front he was wounded in the head. By 1917 after a long convalescence he was able to write once more: the surrealist play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, staged in June, and what was to become his final artistic manifesto and vision for the future *L'Esprit nouveau*. Congestion resulting from gas- affected lungs caused Apollinaire to return to hospital, (January to March 1918), making him susceptible to the Spanish influenza epidemic which reached Paris later that year. He contracted the illness and died on the 9th November 1918. The cosmopolitan artistic community of Paris lost one of its most important critics, and the arts their principal catalyst for change.

VANCE PALMER (1885-1959) Palmer was born in Bundaberg, Queensland. At the age of 20 he went to London and worked as a ‘Grub Street hack’, then in 1907 he travelled to Finland, Russia and Japan, before returning to Australia and working in a variety of jobs. In 1914 Palmer married the Australian Janet (Nettie) Higgins in London. By 1915 he had already produced collections of poetry

and short stories, and contributed articles to reviews. Back in Melbourne Palmer became a vigorous opponent of conscription in 1917, but nonetheless in 1918 he enlisted in the AIF and was sent overseas.

After the war the Palmers made their chief concern the establishment of an Australian literature. Together they did a great deal to encourage local writers, and for 40 years were unwavering in the pursuit of their vision of an identifiably Australian literature. Aspiring writers from around the country sought their help and advice. By his example as a wide-ranging freelance journalist, and by the volume and variety of his literary output, Vance Palmer endeavoured to show by example how professional status required making the most of what opportunities exist. With his radio talks and regular reviews, Palmer became a prominent figure in Australian cultural life.

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