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Internet Modern History Sourcebook

World War I Poetry:

- **Siegfried Sassoon** (1886-1967): "How to Die"
- **Wilfred Owen** (1893-1918): "Anthem for a Doomed Youth"
- **Wilfred Owen**: "Dulce et Decorum Est"
- **Herbert Read** (1893-1968): "The Happy Warrior"
- **W.N.Hodgson** (1893-1916): "Before Action"
- **Wilfred Gibson** (1878-1962) "Back"
- **Philip Larkin** (1922-1985): "MCMXIV"

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)

"How to Die"

Dark clouds are smouldering into red
 While down the craters morning burns.
 The dying soldier shifts his head
 To watch the glory that returns;
 He lifts his fingers toward the skies
 Where holy brightness breaks in flame;
 Radiance reflected in his eyes,
 And on his lips a whispered name.

You'd think, to hear some people talk,
 That lads go West with sobs and curses,
 And sullen faces white as chalk,
 Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses.
 But they've been taught the way to do it
 Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
 And shuddering groans; but passing through it
 With due regard for decent taste.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

"Anthem for a Doomed Youth"

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
 --Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
 Can patter out their hasty orisons.
 No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,-
 The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
 Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
 Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

"Dulce et Decorum Est "

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! -- An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.*

Herbert Read (1893-1968)

"The Happy Warrior"

His wild heart beats with painful sobs,
 His strin'd hands clench an ice-cold rifle,
 His aching jaws grip a hot parch'd tongue,
 His wide eyes search unconsciously.

He cannot shriek.

Bloody saliva
 Dribbles down his shapeless jacket.

I saw him stab
 And stab again
 A well-killed Boche.

This is the happy warrior,
 This is he...

W.N.Hodgson (1893-1916)

"Before Action"

By all the glories of the day
 And the cool evening's benison,
 By that last sunset touch that lay
 Upon the hills where day was done,
 By beauty lavishly outpoured
 And blessings carelessly received,
 By all the days that I have lived
 Make me a soldier, Lord.
 By all of man's hopes and fears,
 And all the wonders poets sing,
 The laughter of unclouded years,
 And every sad and lovely thing;
 By the romantic ages stored
 With high endeavor that was his,
 By all his mad catastrophes
 Make me a man, O Lord.
 I, that on my familiar hill
 Saw with uncomprehending eyes
 A hundred of Thy sunsets spill
 Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice,
 Ere the sun swings his noonday sword
 Must say goodbye to all of this;--
 By all delights that I shall miss,
 Help me to die, O Lord.

Wilfred Gibson (1878-1962)

"Back"

They ask me where I've been,
 And what I've done and seen.
 But what can I reply
 Who know it wasn't I,
 But someone just like me,
 Who went across the sea
 And with my head and hands
 Killed men in foreign lands...
 Though I must bear the blame,
 Because he bore my name.

Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

"MCMXIV"

Those long uneven lines
 Standing as patiently
 As if they were stretched outside
 The Oval or Villa Park,
 The crowns of hats, the sun
 On moustached archaic faces
 Grinning as if it were all
 An August Bank Holiday lark;

And the shut shops, the bleached
 Established names on the sunblinds,
 The farthings and sovereigns,
 And dark-clothed children at play
 Called after kings and queens,
 The tin advertisements
 For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
 Wide open all day;

And the countryside not caring
 The place-names all hazed over
 With flowering grasses, and fields
 Shadowing Domesday lines
 Under wheats' restless silence;
 The differently-dressed servants
 With tiny rooms in huge houses,
 The dust behind limousines;

Never such innocence,
 Never before or since,
 As changed itself to past
 Without a word--the men
 Leaving the gardens tidy,
 The thousands of marriages
 Lasting a little while longer:
 Never such innocence again.

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