CHAPTER III

PREDECESSORS OF SASSOON

A note on the predecessors of Sassoon is relevant here for the purpose of this survey, for it is their thought, to a large extent, that has contributed to the made possible, later developments. It was true, however, that the social government of their age, the standard of values accepted, and adhered to, by the common man, the sense of law and the means by which it was put into practice may have entered into English poetry. From the dawn of the young world, warfare had been the original expression of physical (consciousness) and poetry was the first sign of that spirit. Its entire function was to excite the heroic emotion by means of imaginative or passionate language which was a very echo of the elementary passions, thus allowing the noble and the ignoble to get hopelessly mixed up. A brief survey of Sassoon's predecessors invariably leads to the recognition of man's desire to prevent wars, a determination to put an end to mass fratricide, and the responsibility of the moderns to their successors.
Heroic literature has its roots in the poetry of the oral tradition which is often regarded as being divine in origin. The whole poetry is clothed in a colour of mysticism. Age after age repeated either the praise of prowess or the satirization of those that lacked manly, and heroic, qualities. This continued till nation after nation got converted to Christianity which preached the gospel of love, a concept which was rarely seen in ancient poetry. It was only after the advent of Christianity that the inadequacy of the old thought was felt, lawless passion came to be regarded as primitive, and violence came to mean the violation of the sacraments of the church. When Christ walked on earth, he said, "Put your sword back in its place. Do you think I will not drink the cup of suffering my Father has reserved?" He foiled the victory of human nature on the cross. But despite Christianity, literature did continue to extol and admire warlike qualities. Fighters were promised a paradise, crowned and decked. Abraham, in the Genesis, described as a 'bold Earl'; though being fundamentally Christian, is yet pagan in feeling.

"Beowulf" is the story of glorification of a bold enterprise. Yet it introduced the Christian ideas of
earthly life - the emptiness of mortality and its little worth at the very moment at which Beowulf celebrates his mortal glory. This presents perhaps the first distinct break with the pagan tradition which eulogised the noble and the heroic - the two distinguishing qualities of warfare. The succeeding ages, however, do not seem to have evinced much interest in this direction except as part of the noble and heroic tradition itself. The outbreak of the 1914 war at last brought about a serious change in outlook for the first time. Nevertheless, it would be pertinent to refer here to a few landmarks in English poetry and the attitude of poets.

Shakespeare, in many of his plays, surveys, with superhuman detachment, the fates of his protagonists. He reveals that the tragedy of his heroes are invariably brought about by intolerance, ambition, or savagery. At the same time, Shakespeare also depicts the many-sidedness of events which constantly find expression in the thoughts and actions of his characters. In Hamlet, Hamlet emerges as a noble hero who is great in his sacrifice; exhibiting the human standard admired throughout. Such a Hamlet, however, would not stand the scrutiny of the post-war
pacifist modern. For, when Hamlet undertakes upon himself a social responsibility, he himself uses the weapons of evil resulting in the slaughter of the innocent for whom he feels nothing more than a passing pity. Not that he does not dislike murder, but he never questions its inevitability. In King Henry V, the problems of war and peace are examined at length. The king says that 'his cause being just and his quarrel honourable' every subject has a duty in the king's; he thus takes responsibility for the suffering of his followers. This is clear proof of the fact that the leader's conscience has nothing to do with the making of war or with the suffering of the innocent multitude who had no personal interest in the war. On the other hand, the king says,

've there is some good in things evil would men observe sincerely distil it out this'

The instinct to distil goodness out of evil is rather to seek justification for evil which is camouflaged under the so-called benefits that derive from war and bloodshed. It is noticeable, though, that in this very play, the cry for peace is perhaps expressed more strongly than in any other Shakespearian play. When the war is over, for instance the Duke of Burgundy says,
'Why that naked poor and mangled peace,
Dear nurse of arts................
............... put up her lovely visage'.

It does not mean, however, that Shakespeare gives the
indication of being a pacifist anywhere though evidence, as
he has been cited, is found occasionally that he was aware of
the necessity to prevent that which hurts persons and halts
the progress of sanity. The combination of virtue and
heroism as associated with war, and as in operation during,
and even after his time, was obviously shared by him. In
modern times, with the growth of civilization, and the
experience of global wars, violence no longer satisfies.
It just happens that the values accepted and adored during
his time had not reached the stage which is prevalent in
the modern world.

The stand that Milton takes in regard to war can be
seen in Book III of Paradise Regained (lines 71 - 92) - a
passage, in his whole poetry, that exposes war in all
vividness. In Book II (lines 549 - 51) there is a reference
to the responsibility of the individuals for their own doings;
however heroic their wars may have appeared to be.
It is a wellknown fact that Wordsworth hated despotism and tyranny which promotes war. His law of peace is that which unites men with the cosmic nature and not simply which is related to rules of conduct. That state of consciously harmonized living alone, he believed, could prevent the blind forces from surfacing. Wordsworth could not have shared Shakespeare’s or Milton’s attitudes to war. What was necessary was that, whatever might be the causes of war, and whatever might be the nature of war, war must be prevented. Otherwise, moral defence of war becomes a convenient tool in the hands of all warmongers.

Tennyson, in his war poems, expresses sentiments relating to the duty of a soldier - that it is not for him to question or reason out the causes of war, but merely offer himself at the sacrificial altar in blind obedience. This definitely is not in the same line of thinking as the present day sane statesmen for whom war has become an anathema. It may also be of interest to note that the same Tennyson also makes fervent pleas towards the promotion of peace and removal of war:

‘I would that wars should cease

........................

I count them all
My friends and brothers sons
With all the people great and small
that wheel between the poles'

This is clearly a passionate expression of his love of peace and dislike of war. Yet, elsewhere, he sings in praise of war. He praises heroism and gives due honour to those who have nobly sacrificed themselves and what they cherished on this earth for what they thought was a clear call of duty:

'Who loves war for war's own sake

but let the soldier Patriot take its
his deed of fame in verse.'

Thus, a contradiction is found in Tennyson's poetry. Yet, this should not lead us to consider peace enthusiastically. His faith in peace. The very fact that he recognises the value of peace is a move in the positive direction.

Kipling, who has written so much about the soldier, curiously, does not enter into a discussion of the rightness or wrongness of war or peace. He only describes them. He identifies himself with the primitive
of the 'Neolithic Age' who lent his muse to elaborate the event. Kipling was the poet of the temper of the day, which was predominantly scientific. As an 'ivory tower' artist, he refused to move beyond the limits he had drawn for himself. He believed that his art serves the world best conserves the national inheritance of righteousness. In 1915, Kipling lost his only son in war resulting in a broadening of his vision and a deepening of his insight. His poem 'For All We Have and Are' is the utterance of a stern resolve that a power known for its advanced civilization had bartered its honour for dominion and forced the sword into the hands of nations committed to peace.

Kipling's contemporaries like Hasefield have shown a balance that the poetry of action can also admit higher values. Yeats, who began as a nationalist, dared to break away and, in his later phase, blended various elements of the modern age.

Thomas Hardy was the first poet who consistently and comprehensively looked into the problem when Europe was in war. His poetry makes a new evaluation of war and peace and of the various moral and social problems involving the individual. This is clearly seen in his 'Satires of
Circumstances, and The Dynasts. In the volume Satires of Circumstances, the dominant themes are death and war. References to actual warfare, to war graves, to parting and bereavement occur in poem after poem. According to Hardy, it is the advance of reason and compassion that ultimately stops war. His conception of the 'Immanent Will' is related to the problems of individual struggles.

In offering the application of the Will idea, Hardy made poetry possible of a moral equivalent of war. The poems of the young war-poets could hardly have been written if Hardy had not made his generation more self-conscious and than ever before through his writings. The critical philosophy contained in his works penetrated into the minds of the nation, and poets like Sassoon, Owen, and Blunden, to name only a few, of the youthful poets, produced poetry in which fundamental issues of war were seen in their most poignant form. They carried on Hardy's initiative when the terrible catastrophe descended on Europe. The next chapter is devoted to a discussion of this particular aspect.