CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARIES OF SASSOON

It may be said that the sense of preventibility and the general attitude formed on the determination to prevent large fratricide had not appeared in poetry till 'the vast tragedy' actually descended on the life of Europe. The first spontaneous notes were uncritical due to the excitement of war as an outside event; which little by little was worn out and war became terrible and a recognition that all this was allowed to happen, not as the manifestation of nature's disruptive forces, but, as a failure of the individual's responsibility to control the blind forces of passion. This prompted it possible to take up for an intense moral quest, that positive or pacifism. It is not out of place here to analyse the I world war, though it may not be our purpose to explore it or study it in all its aspects, seriously, which has already been assessed by competent scholars of history. What is relevant here, quite naturally, is to trace that against which poets expressed their grave concern and, therefore, forms an indivisible part of the present study.
BACKGROUND OF THE WAR:

The foreign policies of Bismarck of Germany made that country strong. Kaiser William II devised a policy to regain the lost glory of Germany. He improved the Navy. Austria, Germany and Italy formed into a Triple Alliance. France, England, and Russia formed a Triple Entente. Thus, two power blocks emerged in Europe, and war was imminent at any moment.

Violent national feelings were the causes of the 1 World War. France desired integration of the people living in Alsace and Lorraine with France. Austria occupied Bosnia against the interests of the Serbians who were waiting for vengeance. Bulgaria contemplated to strike a blow on Rumania, Serbia and Greece since it was defeated in the Second Balkan War.

IMMEDIATE CAUSE:

France's Ferdinand, the prince of Austria and Hungary, and his wife were shot dead in 1914. Austria sent an ultimatum to Serbia, but without waiting for the answer, declared war on Serbia on 28th July 1914. Soon, before the war was three months old, all the countries in Europe
joined the war. The war was unprecedented in human history.

**TYPES OF GOVERNMENTS IN EUROPE:**

Autocracy in Germany, Turkey and Italy; Democracy in Britain, France and America.

**STATESMEN DURING THE WAR:**

Kaiser William II was the ruler in Germany. He was a man of action whose patriotism was intense. He was endowed with eloquence, and he was dualistic in nature—reason and ambition. His religion was primitive. He was excited by martial display. His policy was expansion. By temperament, at times he was neurotic. He had more personal energy than foresight. He believed that the future of Germany was dependent on Naval Power. If Germany was to stand alone, she would have to create an alliance with other powers like Britain, France and Russia. Single handed, he held at bay the other great powers.

Lloyd George was the Prime Minister of Britain. He was natural and simple, ready to argue but could listen to any discourse; far different from orthodox liberalism.
Clemenceau was the most trusted and acclaimed leader of the parliament of France. He was conciliatory, considerate and endowed with an iron will and yet desirous of goodwill.

Woodrow Wilson was the president of America. Autocratic in temper, a spacious philanthrophist and a democrat. He had a complex of personal superiority. He felt that differences among the countries were trivial and easy to be accommodated with a little goodness and charity.

TEMPERAMENT OF THE PEOPLE IN THE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES:

The Germans were intelligent and docile; dependent on their leader and ruler; and yet quiet, safe and home-loving. The French were simple but fickle, ambitious and dangerous. The British were considered conservative, imperialistic and self-centred in the interest of the nation, patriotic, kind and home-loving.

GENERAL CONDITION OF LIFE IN EUROPE:

By the beginning of 20th century, science had unfolded secrets to suit the demands of the people; world-wide
trade had flourished. There was a large credit resource. Agencies and apparatus for all practical purposes came into force. Transport and communication made life more easy. Science made it possible to control epidemics and famines. Droughts were dealt with adequately.

RELIGION:

Religion had avoided conflict on the fundamental issues; offered its encouragement and consolation, through all its forms, impartially to all combatants.

There was optimism. But owing to the reasons best known to themselves, enterprises for the slaughter were being planned.

OBJECTS OF WAR:

Pan-German-ideal became dominant for the German; Pan-Islam for Turkey; Defence of Democracy for England and France. Balance of power—England and Russia suddenly declared that France shall not be suddenly taken at a disadvantage and crushed; colonial competition, in which Germany joined belatedly, by its industrial developments, had become an object for other powers. To defeat Germany in that enterprise became their target.
The slaughter of human race was to be planned and executed with precision. Marvellous organization in the conduct of war upon a large scale was required for the process of the waste. In other words nothing was wasted that could contribute to the process of waste.

There were professionals and volunteers. The standard height required was 5' - 5" and later to 5' - 3". Permanent commission's were usually offered to the professionals, chiefly to the boys who returned from the public schools. Hence there was wide dissatisfaction between ranks and their subordinates in all aspects. This distinction at the front and lack of knowledge of the actual condition on the line brought troup against troup. Soldiers were made to imagine that they were brave; fighting for a good cause and above all, patriotic; the soldier had to look at enemies, as Blunden said, as "grotesque", "inhuman" and of "gigantic stature."

Frontline officers' uniform was different from the men: riding boots; or leather pattees and riding breeches; plain
skirted; turkish belts. The other ranks were belts; haversacks and strap pattees; straight breeches blowned below the knee. Seaked caps were used. Steel helmets came into practice in 1915.

**RATIONS:**

Rations were supplied as follows; 1¼ pounds fresh meat; 1¼ pounds bread; 40ozs bacon; 30ozs cheese; 1 pound fresh vegetables; tea sugar and jam. There was butter and tinned beef; tinned meal and vegetable stew. In the off-day, hot food was served.

**KIT:**

Working men in the army had to carry 68 pounds of equipment.

**DUTIES:**

The day started at 4.30 A.M.; then stand-to-arms. In full times, when there was no attack, time for preparing breakfast in groups. During the day, men cleaned weapons; repaired damaged trench ports and wrote letters or slept. The officers encouraged the other sundry duties to maintain army discipline.
The army of the First World War was a collective enterprise. Roads were laid to facilitate the movement of large numbers. It was extremely difficult to feed large numbers, once they were concentrated. Air opened quick transportation; steamships, railways, and motor vehicles were widely used; postal communications were rapid. Letters and parcels normally took 3 or 4 days. Telephone and wireless were in extensive use. But the pity was that letters of soldiers were censored; they wrote few letters about war.

The press kept the public in touch with news from the war. Journalists or correspondents, who were stooges, were allowed to visit the front. There was much abuse of the press. There was ceaseless war of words between enemy countries. A portion of the press indulged in unseemly diatribes against the Germans for their harshness in the conduct of the war.
MEDICAL AID:

Doctors, nurses, and medicines were arranged; surgeons were drafted for the soldiers who returned with wounds; there were stretchers for the maimed. For the shell-shocked and for the wounded, sound medical aid was provided. The necessary psychological treatment was provided.

LEAVE FACILITIES:

Leave facilities were available; the payments of the salaries were regular.

DISCIPLINARY ACTION:

Soldiers were made to imagine that they were fighting for a good cause. If any soldier was disheartened, he would be court-marshalled and in order to preserve the spirit and morale and discipline, the soldier in question would either be shot dead or sent to the hospital for a shellshock.

ACTION IN THE FRONT AND NATURE OF THE BATTLE FIELD:

In the initial stages, the soldiers were not far way from home; then they were removed from home. In the front, the soldiers were locked up in the zigzag trench system. The trenches were dug for the mobility of the soldiers.
There were three lines in the trenches. The front 50 yards or so was about a mile from its enemy counterpoint. Several hundred yards behind it was the support trench line; several hundred yards behind was the reserve line. Sand bags were laid on either side of the trenches. Soldiers wore using periscopes from inside the trench. Barbed wire fencing was laid in front of the front line of the trench.

Sometimes the trenches were dug where the water table was the highest and the annual rainfall was copious and the trench would be wet and flooded; pumps were of no use. Boards and planks were used either to cross the wet trench or to transport the necessities.

Bunks were built with wooden planks with the support of sand bags. They were used to store foodstuffs and armaments etc. It was a resting place during off duty.

Lice and rats were the constant trouble. They fed on the flesh of the dead limbs. Rats ate the body of men. They smelt bad. The gas was unappetizing. It was a nauseating atmosphere. Torches and candles were used in the night. Germans introduced electric lights in their bunks.
The common sights in the battle field were: dead bodies bulged, mutilated and unkempt; broken legs, tins and craters. It was a waste land. It was a lonely spot. The only visible theatre of variety was the sky; bare, vast, stretched and silent. Almost alone, that had the power to persuade a man that he was already lost in a common graveyard. Sunset and sunrise played an important role in the life of a soldier. But nights were torturing and gloomy. Soldiers welcomed drizzle. But heavy rain was dreaded because the wet mud made it impossible for transport and mobility. Gales over the barren land was troublesome.

Soldiers, when removed to faraway places, would become homesick and sex-starved. It degenerated their morale. Many of them became homosexual. Officers were closely attached to their subordinates.

Sassoon was very much attached to Wilfred Owen. It was impossible to live in such conditions.

1. Note: "And you have fixed to my life however short. You did not light me. I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I span round you a satellite for a month. But I shall swing at soon, a dark star in the orbit whereas you will bloom. It is some consolation to know that Jupiter himself some times sways out of ken."

LETTERS OF OWEN TO SASSOON 5th Nov. 1917, P. 504.
Ed. by GREGSON, J. M. | POETRY OF FIRST WORLD WAR, P. 40.
To live in such conditions was miserable to a soldier, and the civilian at home was also unhappy. In the critical stages of the war, the whole nation was united. It was honour and patriotism that were the ideas which caught the mind of the public. They thought their country was fighting for a right cause. Parents were living on the inherited myth of patriotism. Mothers were proud of themselves of their sons' death at the front. Factories worked overtime. Priority was given for armament production. Ration was introduced; and home consumption was minimised. Military budget was enhanced. But this enthusiasm soon disappeared when war prolonged unnecessarily. People felt that they were living on a live wire. Psychological tension prevailed. The economy was upset. Food products were hoarded; prices went up. Parents realised the gravity of the situation. Millions had lost their lives to the unhappiness of their mothers.

**Duration of the War:**

England fought for four years and 4 months. In April 1917, America fought against Germany in support of the allied powers. Ferdinand Foch was the general of the staff. The allied powers won many victories. Bulgaria
sued for armistice. Turkey followed next. On November 11th Germany sued for Armistice. Then the World War came to an end. The victory was complete.

In the Armistice Woodrow Wilson proposed fourteen points for peace. \( \text{\textsuperscript{1}} \)

There was a demand to hang Kaiser. In the following treaty at Versailles the world crisis came to an end. The League of Nations was established.

LOSS:

80,000,000 men perished and an equal number were maimed.

DEMobilisation: rehabilitation: after-effects:

It was an enormous feat to demobilise the army. Men were enlisted as individuals; the army had grown up gradually. After the crisis, they had to be dispersed in great masses. After all the methodically executed butchery and barbarism of years war, the acts of murder pillage and brutality of war soldiers had to resume their civic duties. In Britain, four million had to find homes and employment. Once the supreme incentive was removed,
everyone became conscious of the severity of the strain.
A vast and general relaxation and descent to the standards of normal life was imminent. On every side, exhaustion became evident. Millions were thrown into idleness. The whole situation after the crisis required a knowledge of what each step involved and how it could be carried out. Compromise solutions such as lavish holidays, abolition of overtime, suspension of payments by results, employment donation, removal of war notions were suggested. The brave had suffered much. The crippled and mutilated darkened the streets. The prisoners told their hard stories.

Out of the fleeting triumphs of the war, it is essential to draw the knowledge and comprehension for the future. Was it for this barren land that countries fought? It may be accepted that there were efforts to establish peace in the world. But they were partial and disjointed. For long-lasting peace, and to put an end to the drum it is essential that all big powers should evolve a suitable remedy. Till that goal is achieved, it is wise to be reminded constantly of those who protested and became pacifists and did what they could to prevent further conflict.
If the organization of warfare is wide and complex in nature as observed in the earlier context, it remains now to survey whether the weapons of the letters were competent to meet that challenge, expose its realities and ensure peace or dissuade the warring nations from colossal waste while other demands of life were on the waiting list.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century is described as decadent following the demise of the great Victorians, in spite of the diverse movements and techniques such as the "Arts for Arts sake", "Symbolism", "Vortexism" "Imagism" and the "Pre-Raphaelite", movement; they are of no consequence nor did they exert significant single influence; which envisaged for withdrawal of poetry from the realm of literature and a more enduring one which does not tax the imagination, since most of the readers were not sharply critical of the actual content which could have been said in prose, fiction, amusing and smart, and drama were firmly established. It was a
time fertile for prose and drama and the public were not serious about poetry; nevertheless if they returned to poetry, they expected it to follow the romantic tradition. Thus poetry was ignored and fell into neglect and contempt. But prose fiction which was established firmly by 1900 had reached a dead end only to give way to new techniques and, therefore, a poetic revival was envisaged. It was expected that the bloom would be heralded with the Georgian School of poetry, took over by Marsh and Rupert Brooke, which was expected to become a major poetic renaissance and a pre-war event. According to Pinto, "Georgian poetry is a strange collection to represent English poetry at the moment when Europe was preparing for the First World War and England's stability was rocked by the constitutional crisis and the impending disruption".

Georgian poetry is marked by portrayal of the people in touch with modern life; local patriotism; love of animals; of country folk; of children, and, mainly, in a short lyric. It revitalised naturalism; a new turn which was really a need in the contemporary situation. The direction and movement was in approximation to that of ordinary conservatism.
With the break of the war in 1914, England entered with a high-minded emotional idealism for which poetry especially was an appropriate vehicle. Any number of ardent civilians wrote poems and any number of them read almost the first contemporary poetry of their lives. From 1914, modern crisis passed into a new phase. Though the bloom began with the war, it was a development of Georgianism; the seeds were there. The English poets of the First War began as Georgians. But true poetry, springing from war both in substance and spirit, came later; when it came, it was very different from the earlier writers. Georgian poetry was unprepared for the complex and mechanised horror. Hence, the poets, especially soldier-poets, adopted the model of their predecessors—incident and irony of Hardy, bitterness of Housman, realism and brutality of Synge.

**American Poets During the War:**

American poets wrote occasionally on the themes.

**Note:** "It must be remembered that in 1914 our conception of war was completely unreal which had childish memories of the Boer War and from there and from a general confusion of Kipling-style sentiments, we managed to infuse into war a decided element of adventurous romance. War still appealed to the imagination."

**Herbert Read:** *Annals of Innocence and Experience*, p. 166.
inspired by war. Robert Frost belongs to the Genteel tradition. When the United States entered war there were patriotic verses. The United States entered the war unwillingly and therefore, the chief desire was to end it as quickly as possible. The state of the American was fixed on the return of peace; when it was assured, life would go on as though the war had never occurred.

**POSITION OF EUROPEAN POETRY DURING THE WAR:***

In 1914, what was the position of European poetry faced with war? In France, Appolli Nature was a major writer. In Italy and Germany, the modern movements in art were far advanced. In Russia, there was already Block and Mayakovsky. In France, Rons Aron denounced war as an interruption of European beauty. Alexander Brok did not justify war. His poems are the records of his struggle of his faith in humanity. In Russia, Mayakovsky was a futurist. He glorified war for its mechanized modernity. Jules Romains' 'unanimism' or 'unanimism' movement was closely associated with the Pan-European of Romain Rolland.

**WOMEN POETS DURING THE WAR:**

At the outbreak of world war, many a woman poet was
active. They had so many different and contradictory opinions and their poetry was characterized by passion, colour and felicity. The themes of love and death were chiefly dwelt upon. Nearly all the women at the outbreak of the world war had been influenced by the Georgian pastoral movement. On the whole, the women poets were out for the battle, as if they had complained very amusingly that they were persecuted and Edith, who wrote in the middle of the war, developed a persecution-complex.

In 1914, when war descended on Europe, it was greeted with enthusiasm in England as an affair of the whole nation and for a righteous cause as a relief from tension and the breakdown of a commercialized civilization. Britain had accepted it with the rest of Europe and the outer world. Many wrote poems and any number read them. The first war-poem of any interest was a lyric by Harold Begbie, published in a Daily, a few weeks after the commencement of the war. It is a moving piece of propaganda and a call to arms. It was effective enough but could not, in any way, stand out for a long time. The other war-poem is 'Antwerp' written by Ford Maddox Hueffers. It is written in the combination of Futurism and traditional mechanics.

There are several other poets who deserve attention.
Reference may be made to a few who produced poetry in which the issues of war were seen in their poignant form and their initiative was carried on by soldier poets.

John Drinkwater, in the poem "We Will'd It Not", expressed his surprise that a power (England, counted among the foremost in the advance of civilization, should have bartered its honour for the lust of dominion and forced the sword into the hands of nations committed to peace. In Laurence Binyon's poem 'Edith Cavell', the foe stands self-condemned before the forgiveness and the pity of the victim of his brutality. Wilfred Wilson Gibson portrayed sometimes the trivial, as in the poem 'Retreat', tragic as in 'Salvage' and pathetic as in the poem the 'Messages'. These portrayals are flashlights on the experiences common to vast masses of mankind, in the upheaval. In general, the poetry of war betrays no murmur, despair, revolt, but rejoices in honour, nobleness and above all, it is patriotic but not voicing blind hatred; not expressed in the old fashioned glorification of national or individual values.

The war poetry, which was to stir the imagination of the public and the attention chiefly, came from the soldiers.
themselves and was written during their military preparations in England or scribbled on bits of paper between their long hours of active service in the trench. The note at first was patriotic enough, supplied by Rupert Brooke; for Brooke, as Perkins noted, war became a supreme one to which relations and purposes must be subordinated. His sonnets are high-minded idealizing war figures as a mode of redemption. He characterizes the old life, before the war, as psychological illness; mere purposelessness and shame; with the war, holiness, love, pain, honour and nobleness have returned. The worst that war can do is only pain of death and death is not terrible to Brooke and the soldier who dies for England is not really dead. "His death of early 1915 was an evidence of the justice of moral crusade on which England felt to have embarked". ¹

Robert Graves at first was shocked at the unreality in the trenches; found it difficult to speak of poetry by the cold attitude of the officers who were envious and suspicious of works of art. Even in that situation, he wrote "TUGGERS AND FAIRIES"; his personal experience

of war. Robert Graves devoted his work which he subdivided into six divisions: (1) Summon (2) The approach (3) battle (4) Farewell to the place of comfort (5) The death and (6) Aftermath. They are effective but there is no passionate outburst and bitterness like in Sassoon.

Though Edmund Blunden being sensitive, there was no bitterness in his war verses. He had not the faculty of Sassoon and Oshen for presenting the ugly experiences with imaginative force. He was not an indignant philosopher nor a rebel.

Charles Hamilton Sorley, a soldier poet of great promise, was killed; he wrote little verse but in what he wrote, he voiced his feeling of forgiveness to the enemy. In the poem 'To Germany', he says, 'You are blind like us'.

1. (a) "Graves ... noted the irony of nature's beauty obstinately amidst the battle.... but content to underline the irony
  But .......... hark
  ................
  Death could drop from the dark
  As easily as a song
  But song only dropped
  Like a blindman's dream
  By dangerous tides."


(b) "He was a poet and artist long before he reached the front and determined to use his experience there to further his development; an aesthetic rather than a social purpose dominates his approach."

Julian Grenfell was a soldier-poet, noted for his lighthearted and lion-hearted courage. He was a joyous soldier and was noble. He was wounded and died the next day. 'Into Battle' by Julian Grenfell, according to Palmar, is an extremely remarkable poem.

And life is colour and warmth and light
And a striving evermore for there,
And he is dead who would not fight,
And who dies fighting has increases.

Many other known contemporary poets of Sassoon, like Isaac Rosenberg¹, wrote verses which were direct, simple, in the best way delightful to those who have no experience of it. They made their contribution but none of them expressed a protest against the war's spirit even after much suffering and disillusionment. Patriotism naturally was held up as a fine and noble sentiment in the human character.

Modern warfare, as examined in another context, sinks

1. "I never joined in the army for patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over. Any how before the war I helped at home when I could and I did other things which helped to keep things going. I thought if I'd join there would be the separation allowance for my mother."

ROEMLING, ISAAC: COLLECTED WORKS, POETRY OF THE 1ST WORLD WAR, P. 56.

ED BY GREGSON, J.M.
the individual in the collective aim and the complicated machinery of the event. The modern soldier, who is an infinitesimal part of some large administrative set up, and no more than a single-cut unit in an army of millions, is lost with little love but an absenteeism. (This will take
him a certain distance.)

It is easy to compare modern soldiers with medieval knights, but the comparison usually is absurd if it is as War is self-perpetuating. The mounting efforts of each side achieve the defeat of the enemy while violence and hatred lead to pursue one another in an ascending spirit. In this way, the First World War lacked a clear goal. The tendency was not to peter out but to drag on to no purpose. Rupert Brooke and his other comrades failed to understand war; which is quite natural; but what they wrote proceeds from a very wrong standpoint. Their notes are uncritical in offering moral equivalents of war when they do come to a point to break up the particular combination of heroic and noble qualities of warfare. The poet has to seek to present those with more rational forms of adventure, and the preventibility of war had not appeared with the first shocks of war. But later, when it came, it was different from Brooke and Grenfell. There is
difference in temper and material which those Georgians were unprepared to confront; the mechanized horror. It was an ardent expression of the individual sanity to resist the collective breakdown that penetrated into the mind of Sassoon and Owen and who felt it was their responsibility to expose the brutal modernistic bullying and brutal savagery of war to bring back sanity to men.¹

The following chapter attempts an examination of Sasson's war poetry in this light.

¹ "Much of the war poetry was pacifist; revolutionary; it was easier to look at suffering if you had somebody to blame for it; or remedy in mind. Many of the poets have called themselves, communists, though I find in their work no trace of the recognized communist philosophy and the practicing community rejects them."

QTD FROM HOLLANDER, JOHN (ed): MODERN POETRY ESSAYS IN CRITICISM
(OK. UNI. PRESS N.Y. 1968), P.101.