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Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of A War Poet A Biography 1886-1918

Jean Moorecraft Wilson
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“We groped and stumbled along a deep ditch to the place appointed for us in that zone of human havoc. The World War had got our insignificant little unit in its mouth; we were there to be munched, maimed or liberated.” With this passage, written by Sassoon in the bone-chilling wastes of Fontaine les Croisilles, we are treated to a seminal moment in the vast flowing of events in ours, the most murderous century of recorded human history.

There has been a great deal of counterfeit social revolution in this century; so much that revolution is now part of the status quo entertainment in western pop culture. In Wilson’s exhaustive and all-inclusive study of British poet Siegfried Sassoon, readers are introduced to a time in late-Victorian England where the rules of the established order change with glacial slowness, and “revolution” is relegated to savage outpost of the far-flung Empire. In 1914, all of this would change. Sassoon, along with every other compatriot of his generation, would soon be thrown into the boiling cauldron of the European meltdown that came to be known as The Great War.

This meltdown of convention was not wholly unexpected, nor even un-looked for. What came as a complete surprise to members of the landed gentry such as Sassoon, was the utter efficiency with which mankind was able now to wage war. In this brazen efficiency lay true revolution, and a re-alignment of social juxtaposition. In this milieu, Sassoon’s prose cries out, his poetry tears at the soul in a way only those whose world has not only been shredded. But it’s moral tent pegs ripped from the ground. This, it seems, is not only the whole point of Wilson’s biography, but of Sassoon’s life laid bare.

JOHN ARENS (March / April 1999)

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