MAX EGREMONT

Some Desperate Glory

The First World War the Poets Knew

PICADOR

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Preface

We know the war through their poetry. Siegfried Sassoon's scathing satires; Wilfred Owen's compassion; Edmund Blunden's gentle but shocking lyricism; Julian Grenfell's joy in battle; Rupert Brooke's surge of patriotism; Isaac Rosenberg's mystical vision: all these have shaped how we see the western front. Then there's the tragic sacrifice: Brooke and Grenfell dead in their twenties, Charles Sorley killed when hardly out of his teens, Edward Thomas older but not yet three years into his time as a poet, Robert Nichols breaking down during the battle of Loos, Owen and Rosenberg victims of the war's last year. All this makes for a powerful myth in which a poet's imagined life can be as moving as his poems.

The poets of the First World War have a memorial in Westminster Abbey, recognizing their place in Britain's last century as a world power. But some historians believe that much of the best-known poetry of the war is defeatist, symbolizing loss of will, even decline – that it misses the spirit that led to victory. The poets have been accused of contributing to a climate of appeasement that led to a second world war. Critics have said that their work is too dominated by its subject, leading to a kind of lyrical journalism.

What remains true is that they were made by the war and then made a lasting vision of it. Their lives reflect its emotion and its history; their work shows how it was, for them, to be there. They also show some of the hopes and disappointments of early twentieth-century Britain.

In this book, I have chosen eleven poets who fought. I have set their poems in the year that they were written. Rupert Brooke and

Charles Sorley are there strongly at the start of the war; Sassoon enters after his first experience of the trenches at the end of 1915; Isaac Rosenberg's war also starts in late 1915; Edward Thomas writes from England, not reaching the front until some two and a half months before his death in 1917; Wilfred Owen isn't represented until the war's last two years; Ivor Gurney and Edmund Blunden have many poems in the Aftermath chapter, a reflection of how long their war lasted. Some poets feature less: Julian Grenfell because he wrote only one memorable war poem; Robert Nichols through his erratic quality, although I admire some of his work and wanted to include a poet thought of at the time as a new Byron.

I began writing about the first two decades of the twentieth century some forty years ago. The First World War featured in my books about the soldier and writer Sir Edward Spears and about the politician Arthur Balfour, and particularly in my biography of Siegfried Sassoon. In the 1980s and 1990s I wrote novels set in contemporary Britain, but the characters felt the two wars – the First and the Second – strongly in their lives, either in their own memories or in their country's idea of itself. Having also written about Germany, I believe that for Britain – especially for quite prosperous Britons (which many of the war poets were) – there was something uniquely shocking in the reality of the First War. For almost a century, most British lives had been more sheltered from threat and conflict than their European counterparts, even if the nation was becoming less confident as the twentieth century began.

Britain's recent wars were part of my childhood during the 1950s and 1960s. The First World War memorials at my schools and at Oxford astonished me with their quantity of names. I leafed through old bound copies of the wartime *Illustrated London News* that we had at home, awed by the many photographs of officers who'd been killed (other ranks didn't feature) and drawings of artists' ideas of the Somme or Ypres.

Both my grandfathers had fought: one in the Royal Navy, the other as a young officer in France and Belgium. To them it had been

the Kaiser's War; they didn't speak much about it, although the name showed whom they blamed. It was the poets who evoked the war most vividly for me when, as a schoolboy, I first read them. They gave dramatic and clear shape, and emotion, to the change from enthusiasm to pitiful weariness – from Brooke to Sassoon and Owen: a reflection of how an adolescent might see the arc of life.

Later I learned that Brooke's enthusiasm was fading as he sailed towards the Dardanelles, that Owen's last letters to his mother from the front said that there was no place where he would rather be. Trying to fathom their feelings and experiences has become one of my obsessions as I searched for an intimate glimpse of what had been perhaps the most significant and far-reaching European event of the twentieth century.

The poets in this book range from the aristocratic Julian Grenfell to Isaac Rosenberg, the son of a poor Jewish pedlar, and Ivor Gurney, whose father was a tailor. Most of them were uneasy in the pre-war world. Many were formed by those powerful institutions, the late-Victorian public schools (or, more accurately, private schools). Some saw war as a rescue.

Those who survived couldn't leave the war. Robert Graves wrote a brilliant memoir of it, *Goodbye to All That*, and then left England, as if to shake off the past, disowning his war poems. Yet the trenches stayed in his dreams until he died in his eighties. Ivor Gurney and Edmund Blunden wrote some of their best war poems after 1918. Neither Robert Nichols nor Siegfried Sassoon again found poetry strong enough to match what they'd written about the western front.

Other poets wrote about the war – Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats, Wilfred Gibson, Laurence Binyon – yet saw no fighting. Through these eleven, you can see the war's course through their writing and their lives. All were warriors.

PRELUDE

At least one poet had been looking forward to war. In the summer of 1913, Julian Grenfell was a twenty-five-year-old army officer returning to his regiment in South Africa after some months of home leave. Grenfell had the best that Edwardian Britain could offer. He'd joined the Royal Dragoons, a cavalry regiment, in 1910, after Balliol College, Oxford, where he had gone from Eton. He had glamour; clever, strong and handsome, he was a hard-playing sportsman. But there was also violence; he boxed ferociously, he chased a Jewish millionaire undergraduate round the quad with a stock whip and beat up a cab driver who overcharged him. The Balliol authorities, perhaps in awe of his aristocratic status, brushed off complaints from other students about his rowdiness.

Yet Julian Grenfell was no mindless hearty. His mother, Lady Desborough, was a renowned hostess; her children grew up with cabinet ministers, writers and generals. At Balliol, he read Greats, or classics and philosophy; he drew and wrote essays challenging the complacency of his parents' world – that of conventionally cultured Edwardian high society. Resentment of the power of this world, and its relentless pressure, drove him to have a nervous breakdown. Apparently trapped by his position and success within it, and its strong, predictable expectations, he thought of suicide. The violence, the loaded shotgun beside him during his convalescence in his parents' country house, betrayed anger and despair. All this was before he became a soldier.

Why had Grenfell joined the Edwardian army? The Boer War, some thirteen years earlier, had demonstrated how stupidly led this

army was. Rudyard Kipling might glorify 'Tommy', the long-suffering private soldier, but it was harder to praise the High Command, although Kipling did write a poem about Lord Roberts, the British general who had broken the chain of disasters against the Boers. Julian Grenfell – intelligent and brave – liked the wild country of India and South Africa but told a friend that he 'hated' the army. What he wanted was to break out. But the Grenfells were so glorified, so sated, that it was hard to know what might be better. Only a complete upheaval – exile, collapse, even death – could bring it all down and give an alternative.

A year later, in June 1914, a young Jewish man also arrived in South Africa. Isaac Rosenberg, like Julian Grenfell, painted and wrote poetry. But Rosenberg came from an atmosphere of greater intellectual freedom among immigrants in London's Whitechapel. When Grenfell announced that he thought of leaving the army to study art in Paris, his family mocked him; this was not what the eldest son of Lord Desborough did. Rosenberg may have been proud that 'Nobody ever told me what to read, or ever put poetry in my way,' but his father, a Jewish pedlar who had fled Lithuania to escape conscription in the Russian army, was a cultured man. Barnett Rosenberg had trained for the rabbinate and wrote poetry. Isaac's parents were both pacifists.

They were also very poor. At the age of fourteen, Isaac was apprenticed to an engraver, which he hated. He went to evening classes at Birkbeck College, wrote verses influenced by Swinburne, Rossetti and Francis Thompson, and looked back to Keats, Shelley and an earlier engraver and poet, William Blake. In 1911, rich Jewish patrons paid for him to study at the Slade School of Fine Art alongside the artists David Bomberg and Christopher Nevinson. Yiddish had been Isaac Rosenberg's first language; as late as 1913, wanting to enter for an art prize while at the Slade, he was unsure if he was a British subject. Like Julian Grenfell, he felt trapped by what he called 'the fiendish persistence of the coil of circumstance'. Yet he thought, 'it is the same with all people no matter what the condition'.

Grenfell and Rosenberg grew up in an increasingly anxious Britain. The country still had the empire but faced civil unrest at home and competition abroad. Hysteria could burst out, as when, in 1900, the relief of Mafeking – where the Boers had besieged a British garrison for months – set off wild celebrations, at which the young Edward Thomas caught a venereal infection. The disease blighted his final exams at Oxford, perhaps making him miss the first-class degree and fellowship of his college that would have given enough financial security for him to escape grinding work as a hack writer.

Britain wasn't a static society. There was much movement and desire for change during the decade before 1914, although this was hard to see from the fortress of Julian Grenfell's background. Virginia Woolf believed that the world changed in 1910, because of French post-impressionist art and Viennese psychoanalysis. In 1913, Siegfried Sassoon went night after night, usually alone, to the Russian ballet, watched Richard Strauss conducting the *Legend of Joseph* or heard Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, feeling mystified and overcome by 'that yearning exotic music' and its sense of 'the unknown want' that in Sassoon's case was 'deep and passionate love'. He and Robert Graves wrote admiringly to Edward Carpenter, upper-class rebel and pioneer of homosexual freedom; Wilfred Owen broke down before the demands of evangelical Christianity; Rupert Brooke joined the Fabians; Ivor Gurney fell into depression; Isaac Rosenberg met revolutionaries; Charles Sorley wanted to work with the poor; Grenfell and Edward Thomas yearned for death.

They would all be part of Britain's Greatest War. More than twice as many British were killed in the First World War as in the Second. From 1914 until 1918 British forces were essential to the Allies' success whereas, after 1942, most of the fighting against Germany and Japan was done by the Russians or the Americans.

The western front in particular came as shock to a people that hadn't been involved in a war on the European continent since the

time of Napoleon. The country had never known conscription, when young men were forced to fight. The war damaged Britain, perhaps fatally, through massive financial indebtedness; and there began to be stirrings in the empire, in India and among what were called the colonies of white settlement such as Australia, after battlefield losses in the British cause during incompetently planned campaigns. The old idea of imperial Britain, safe from European involvement, had gone. Britain, still a great power, seemed more vulnerable – a drifting and declining force.

The war ate deep into the nation's sense of itself; every family was affected through death or wounding. Such was the war's extent that the break with an earlier peace became a powerful myth, of shattered calm or beauty, of broken illusion. Its relentless course, the reason why the heirs of western civilization began it, still seems a mystery. Could it really be that the great nations of Europe had let themselves drift into such chaos?

War was not generally expected until a few days before it began. The European crisis was acted out among politicians and diplomats, away from the people. A typical response was that of H. G. Wells's fictional literary man, the well-informed Mr Britling from the novel *Mr Britling Sees It Through*, who sat in the garden of his country house imagining that yet another flare-up in the Balkans must soon fade.

Hadn't war held off for forty years? 'It may hold off forever,' Mr Britling thought, in the early summer of 1914. He admitted that if Germany attacked France through Belgium, Britain would have to go to war ('of course we should fight') because of treaty obligations. But the Germans knew this and 'they aren't altogether idiots'. 'Why should Germany attack France? … It's just a dream of their military journalists …' The impasse over Ireland, where the Ulster Protestants in the north would not countenance the British government's plans for Irish Home Rule, seemed much more serious. Not until 29 July and the bank holiday weekend did things change.

News of the German ultimatum to Belgium came on 3 August. What had brought about this switch from years of British aloofness? Britain had watched while Bismarck humiliated Austria and France and created the German empire. There'd been trouble in the Balkans for years, among the peripheral lands of the declining Ottoman and Habsburg empires, places that to most Britons were as fantastical as the late-Victorian best-selling novel *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Crises provoked by assassinations, even small wars, had been resolved peacefully before, or at least with the bloodshed of others. Surely this time would be no different.

To protect her imperial position and to preserve the balance of power in Europe had been Britain's aim; Lord Salisbury, Prime Minister at the end of Queen Victoria's reign, tried to ensure this while staying free of continental entanglements. But the unification of Germany, after Prussia's victory over France in 1870, had begun the disruption by creating a strong, neurotic, assertive presence at the centre of Europe. A new economic, military and would-be imperial power surged ahead of France and challenged Britain. Germany felt vulnerable, threatened by encirclement, fearful of the French desire for revenge and of the potential of a vast and mysterious Russia.

The British ventured tentatively into foreign alliances as the twentieth century began. A treaty was signed with Japan in 1902; there were understandings – or ententes – with France in 1904 and with Russia in 1907. Military and naval talks – unofficial, not known even to most of the cabinet – began with France, senior British officers cycling across Flanders and Picardy to assess possible battlefields. The concern about Germany was fuelled by its Emperor William II's aggressive speeches, by his foolhardy posturing and by German naval expansion. As early as the 1890s, novelists were imagining a German invasion. The German army, buttressed by conscription, had been building up for years, in an atmosphere of brash nationalism, dwarfing the small British all-volunteer force designed principally for colonial wars; now the Royal Navy, seen as

Britain's ultimate protection, was threatened perhaps with future parity with Germany, even with eclipse.

Britain began to seem weak, old-fashioned, against this new, rich and fascinating giant. In E. M. Forster's *The Longest Journey* (published in 1907) an elderly woman questions a Cambridge undergraduate who'd been to Germany. Was the country's scholarship overestimated? Had it impressed him? 'Were we so totally unfitted to repel invasion?'

A campaign in favour of conscription was launched, under Lord Roberts, the hero of Kipling and of the Boer War. To the Liberal government, ideologically opposed to militarism or to state intervention, this seemed wrong and, at a time of high spending on the new welfare state, too expensive. In 1911 and 1912, senior British diplomats at the Foreign Office wanted an open alliance with Russia and France. It was thought, however, that neither the public nor Liberal opinion would stand for this, particularly if it involved Tsarist Russia, the great autocracy and oppressor of her own and subject peoples such as the Poles.

In Germany, there was doubt that Britain would fight for Belgium or join France and Russia in a war. In August 1913, the British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey had, with German co-operation, mediated successfully between Austria and Russia and Turkey at a London conference on the Balkans. As late as July 1914, as Serbia was rejecting Austria's demands following the assassination at Sarajevo of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne, Asquith's cabinet was confident that Britain could keep out of any conflict, even if Germany, Austria's ally, sent troops through southern Belgium into northern France. But the ministers of the old world proved unable to force or to guide Serbia and Austria – and their allies – back to peace. So the generals – men like Siegfried Sassoon's 'cheery old card' who 'did for' the men by 'his plan of attack' – went to war as a result of political and diplomatic failure. Britain's small, poorly equipped army had been given to its commanders by the politicians.

On 2 August the Germans demanded clear passage through the whole of Belgium to enable them to attack France. The King of the Belgians refused the demand and asked for British support, under the treaty that guaranteed his country's neutrality.

It fell to the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey to guide Britain's declaration of war through parliament. He feared that elements of his own Liberal party would be against the war, although he knew he could count on the support of the Conservative Opposition. On 30 July the Liberal paper the *Manchester Guardian* had opposed the idea that Britain should guarantee 'the peace of Europe'; the parliamentary Liberal party also resolved against being 'dragged into conflict'. But once Belgium – poor little Belgium – had been invaded by the bully Germany the cause became almost a liberal one, of maintaining treaty obligations and international order.

Sir Edward was thought to be the steadiest of hands, not at all showy, personifying a serene Britain that was the opposite of the bumptious German Reich. The reality was rather different. In fact the country was in the grip of a series of strikes; women demanding the vote were resorting to violence; there was open rebellion against British rule in Ireland; and a new artistic modernism arriving from Europe had moved even the young, fox-hunting Siegfried Sassoon. The Foreign Secretary's passions, however, were fly-fishing and watching birds. He was a countryman who loved his cottage garden on the banks of the River Test and could quote endlessly from Wordsworth – a man whose refusal to be bamboozled by foreigners was shown by his inability to speak any of their languages.

The Conservatives liked Grey who, although a Liberal, had imperialist sympathies that had been shown in his support for the Boer War. On becoming Foreign Secretary in 1905, he mostly continued with the policies of the previous Conservative government but became more involved in Europe, agreeing to unofficial staff talks with the French. Grey should feature alongside bungling generals in the questions asked by poets and very many others. Had

there been enough preparations for the war? Could it have been avoided? Was the country incapable of sensing a new world?

Victorian complacencies and confidence may have been fading, but Britain was still proudly set apart from the continent as head of the greatest empire in history. It was to India with its military life of pig sticking and retinues of servants that Julian Grenfell went as a young army officer, to get away from his parents' world of slippery brightness, what his mother called 'the gospel of joy'; then he went to South Africa.

Both countries formed part of the pre-1914 army's duties as an imperial police force. In South Africa, he found his work – facing down strikes in the mines of what he told his mother was 'this utterly abominable country' – disappointing. It showed 'the utter beastliness of both sides – the Jews at the Rand Club who loaf about and drink all day, and the Dutch and Dagos who curse and shoot in the streets'. Grenfell sought relief in challenging all comers at army boxing matches. He dreamed of farming in remote Kenya.

Britain had begun to seem ugly and constricted. E. M. Forster's early novels – particularly *Howards End* and *The Longest Journey* – show a regret for the suburbanization of the country near London and the vulgar commercialization of English life. Near the end of *The Longest Journey* the suburbs of Salisbury – 'ugly cataracts of brick' – are condemned as neglecting 'the poise of the earth … They are the modern spirit.' Forster admits that 'the country is not paradise … But there is room in it and leisure.' Towns seem 'excrescences, grey fluxions, where men, hurrying to find one another, have lost themselves'.

Howards End pits the cultured, sensitive, liberal and brave Schlegel sisters against the crude, materialistic Wilcoxes. Forster admits that it is the Wilcoxes who make things happen, even if they have no poetry, no sense of the past. Who owns England, the novel asks, the people who are narrowly practical or those with imagination? The Schlegels are half German, with the German concern for *Kultur* and the spirit. In London restaurants there's talk of how the

German Emperor wants war. The sisters' father had left the new Germany after 1871 because he hated its vulgarity, power hunger and materialism. To the Schlegels, the British equivalent of this is jingoistic imperialism, the religion of the empire.

The Schlegels get the better of the Wilcoxes. But worrying questions are asked. Is the country – the fields and woods of Hertfordshire, near Howards End, that are encroached on by London – now irrelevant? Can't countrymen, who work the fields, still be England's hope? Are the English reduced to being comrades, not warriors or lovers, scorned by visiting Germans for their dreary music or inability to engage in intellectual discussion? Where is the greatness? Even old London is being pulled down, sacrificed to developers' greed.

H. G. Wells showed similar disdain for pre-1914 England. Wells's character Mr Britling is a successful writer who lives in a comfortable country house in Essex yet senses complacency and frivolity, an intellectual laziness. *Mr Britling Sees It Through* describes a drifting place, beset by unaddressed problems such as a rebellious Ireland and uncompetitive industry, a soft country of gentrified farm buildings and a political philosophy of wait and see, a slack but lucky country where too many intelligent people passed 'indolent days leaving everything to someone else'. To a German visitor, it's pleasant but not serious, an informal, quite chaotic place where people are kind but not polite. The whispers of change – from Ireland, from the empire, from Germany, 'intimations of the future' – were there to be heard, while the British, like 'everlasting children in an everlasting nursery', played on.

Even in the Whitechapel of Isaac Rosenberg's childhood, there were dreams of the past – of the lost vast spaces of the Russian Jewish pale of settlement. London's East End was far from any quaint notion of English country life, but Isaac's mother made gardens at their various homes. Rosenberg wanted to move from the city to the country if he survived the war. Many in Whitechapel had

an ultimate yearning – that of a new life in the United States, seen as the golden land.

Isaac Rosenberg had an outsider's oblique vision. He met the artists David Bomberg and Mark Gertler at the Slade and resembled them in his bold use of colour but held back from their experimental art in favour of traditional representation of people and nature. Introspective, unable to afford models, Rosenberg went in for self-portraits, for conventional landscapes, partly because these were more likely to sell. Unlike Bomberg, he painted nature rather than the city.

In November 1913 he found himself in different company when Mark Gertler introduced him to the civil servant, art collector and friend of writers Edward Marsh. They met at the Café Royal, once the haunt of Oscar Wilde and London's *fin de siècle* decadents, still a place where Isaac could also meet Yeats and Ezra Pound. The sociable 'Eddie' Marsh featured in many poets' lives; the boy from Whitechapel, some of whose friends were Marxists, was now within reach of Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon (Sassoon's rich Sephardic Jewish Iraqi forebears were quite different to the Lithuanian Ashkenazim Rosenbergs).

Eddie Marsh, a homosexual made impotent by mumps in adolescence, had a chirruping, squeaky voice and could seem afloat on a wash of anecdotes, quotations and social urbanity. Yet even Marsh knew there had to be change, although he thought that this had to be grafted on to the best of the past. 'Nine-tenths of the Tradition may be rubbish,' he wrote, 'but the remaining tenth is priceless, and no one who tries to dispense with it can hope to do anything that is good.' A classical scholar and son of a successful surgeon, he was mocked by Julian Grenfell's Eton and Balliol set. Patrick Shaw-Stewart, a friend of Grenfell, was invited to breakfast by Marsh and jokingly left a cheque under his plate as a tip for the host.

Eddie never introduced Rosenberg, a shy, stammering, awkward man, to Sassoon or to Brooke. But his patronage, using funds

granted by the government to the family of the early nineteenth-century assassinated Prime Minister Spencer Perceval (from whom he was descended), ranged quite far. Marsh bought pictures from John and Paul Nash, from Stanley Spencer, Isaac Rosenberg, Mark Gertler and William Roberts. He hung Rosenberg's painting in the spare bedroom of his London flat so that every guest would see it; in 1913, he paid for the publication of Rosenberg's second book of poems; he used his influence to get the poet an emigration permit to visit his sister in South Africa; he found rooms for the young Siegfried Sassoon near his own in Gray's Inn; he read (and didn't particularly like) the early poems of Robert Graves. In August 1914, he persuaded Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty whose private secretary he was, to let the untrained Rupert Brooke become an officer in the Royal Naval Division.

Marsh disliked post-impressionist art and wasn't moved by Imagist or modernist writers like T. E. Hulme. The anthology that he edited and published in 1912 – *Georgian Poetry* – was the apotheosis of his influence. Launched at the new Poetry Bookshop near the British Museum, the book included work by D. H. Lawrence, John Masefield and Rupert Brooke as well as limper verses by other poets about landscape or love. Marsh, aided by Brooke, defined the Georgians by choosing poems that were more colloquial in style and more down to earth in subject matter than the lushness and high language of Swinburne or Francis Thompson. Rupert Brooke contributed a poem that included a precise description of being sick at sea.

It was possible to move between different worlds – that of Julian Grenfell's parents (who had Marsh to stay) and that of the Whitechapel Yiddish theatre where Gertler and Rosenberg took him – and to be private secretary to the Liberal cabinet minister Churchill while loving the Fabian socialist Rupert Brooke (who wrote 'I HATE the upper classes'). Ford Madox Ford delighted in a London that was a 'great, easy-going, tolerant, lovable old dressing gown of a place'. At the height of the row over the powers of the

hereditary House of Lords in 1911, the party leaders, Asquith and Balfour, had been fellow guests at a fancy-dress ball.

But on the eve of the First World War divisions outside the world of the arts (which in Britain wasn't taken particularly seriously) were hardening; it was difficult to imagine that amiable scene two years later. By 1913 politics had become much more vicious. The 1911 House of Lords crisis seemed good-natured compared to the strikes, the violence and suicides of suffragettes and the threat of armed rebellion if Home Rule for Ireland was forced upon Ulster.

Britain had once been the most modern country, a pioneer of democracy. Now it had the most restrictive franchise in western Europe. There was also, in the English public schools, a system of education for the rich that was confident, rigid and circumscribed. Most of the poets whose work features in this book went to public schools (the exceptions are Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen and Ivor Gurney) and imbibed the public school creed of patriotic sacrifice, of imperial greatness, of the overwhelming importance of character. Britain was the modern incarnation of ancient Greece and Rome; the classics were still the foundation of school work; the poets thought of ancient heroes as they went to war. The power of these places was immense. Robert Graves kept the welterweight boxing cup he won at Charterhouse brightly polished on his desk in Majorca until the end of his life. Boxing had saved him from the bullies. It had made his nightmares cease.

These schools could be grim. In *The Longest Journey*, E. M. Forster, once a day boy at Tonbridge, describes the horrors of 'Sawston': how what had been a free grammar school for locals had over the years turned into an expensive philistine monstrosity whose credo was 'patriotism for the school' and 'patriotism for the country'. At Sawston, the sight of the original Jacobean part of the chapel makes a visitor rejoice that his country is 'great, noble and old' – so much so that he exclaims, 'Thank God I'm English,' before adding, 'We've been nearly as great as the Greeks, I do believe. Greater, I'm sure, than the Italians, though they do get

closer to beauty. Greater than the French, though we do take all their ideas. I can't help thinking that England is immense.' Even this is not enough for his schoolmaster guide who worries that it is too rational, for 'genuine patriotism comes only from the heart'. The spirit of Sawston is said to derive from a quotation from Aristophanes about bodily perfection and placidity of mind: 'perhaps the most glorious invitation to the brainless life that has ever been given'.

The buildings and atmosphere of these schools were overpowering. Gradually during the nineteenth century they had changed. Marlborough – where Charles Sorley and Siegfried Sassoon were educated – had been founded in 1843, with a weak headmaster, brutal staff and appalling conditions that set off a mass rebellion in 1851. A new head adopted the methods of Thomas Arnold, Rugby's legendary headmaster, appointing a responsible Sixth Form and younger masters and promoting games as well as work so that, according to the school historian, 'a civilized out-of-door life in the form of cricket, football and wholesome sport took the place of poaching, rat-hunting and poultry-stealing'. Mid-Victorian gothic architecture, soaring chapels and stained-glass windows with martial boyish saints vanquishing forces of darkness showed a revival of romantic chivalry. Marlborough chapel, built in 1886, has memorial windows to the dead of the South African and Crimean wars and glass by the Pre-Raphaelites Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris.

All this affected even those who had escaped it; Wilfred Owen, after weeks of treatment for shell shock at Craiglockhart sanatorium with Siegfried Sassoon (an old Marlburian), wrote to his mother in February 1918 about a novel he was reading, *The Hill* by Horace Vachell, set in Harrow School: 'a tale of Harrow and the hills on which I never lay, nor shall lie: heights of thought, heights of friendship, heights of riches, heights of jinks. Lovely and melancholy reading it is for me.' In August, during Owen's last hours before embarkation for the western front, when he had less than three

months to live, what moved him was a vision of 'the best piece of Nation left in England': a homoerotic swim in the Channel with 'a Harrow boy, of superb intellect and refinement, intellect because he detests war more than Germans, and refinement because of the way he spoke of my going away; and the way he spoke of the Sun; and of the Sea, and the Air: and everything. In fact the way he spoke …'

The public-school accent gave immediate identification. Some fifteen years later, when his dead friend, his 'little Wilfred', was reaching new heights of admiration, Siegfried Sassoon, perhaps out of jealousy, said that Owen's Shropshire accent had made him 'an embarrassment'.

Charles Sorley was the son of a Cambridge professor of moral philosophy. While a boy at Marlborough, Sorley rebelled, giving a paper to the school's Literary Society about John Masefield's colloquial poetry, saying that it was 'the lower classes' – because 'they did not live in our narrow painted groove' – who know 'what life is'. He thought of becoming an instructor at a working man's college and wanted to escape the relentless classics. He feared he might get too conceited when his achievements at work and games raised him to the top of the school. Memories of his time as captain of his house later repelled him.

If you were a success, the public-school experience was intoxicating. Sorley found that Marlborough constantly came back to him while he was studying in Germany before Oxford. When during his schooldays Sorley had cut chapel to walk on the Wiltshire Downs, the master on duty that day had refused to penalize him although Sorley had argued strongly that he should be punished. He liked to think that walks like these unrolled a better land, the landmarks poetic – Liddington, the Vale of the White Horse, the Kennet valley, towards Coate, where Richard Jefferies, the Victorian writer on nature and rural life, had grown up, ten miles from Marlborough, a good place to stop for an hour to read Jefferies's *Wild Life in a Southern County*, with its description of Liddington Castle, site of a Roman camp. But friendships made at school were irreplaceable,

even though Sorley had begged his father to take him away. In fact Marlborough had given him 'five years that could not have been more enjoyable'. This seemed a mystery: 'I wonder why.' Could it have been because 'human nature flourished better in a poisonous atmosphere'?

The German student fraternities – often drunken, aggressive and anti-Semitic – seemed worse. But towards the end of his time in Germany, Charles Sorley wanted to stay on, perhaps go to university in Berlin. He felt he was in a serious country. He liked many Germans that he met, particularly German Jews. He admired their unashamed patriotism and intellectual curiosity, contrasting these with English puritanism, prurience, frivolity and hypocrisy: 'England is seen at its worst when it has to deal with men like Wilde. In Germany Wilde and Byron are appreciated as authors: in England they still go pecking about their love affairs …'

Charles Sorley wrote poetry at school, inspired by the Downs. When Marsh's first Georgian anthology came out in 1912, Sorley showed only mild enthusiasm, liking Lascelles Abercrombie, Walter de la Mare, G. K. Chesterton and Wilfred Gibson ('the poet of the tramp and the vagabond') whose simple language was typical of the group. Already he'd glimpsed Brooke, the most glamorous Georgian, shirtless at Cambridge. This was during Brooke's 'neo-pagan' phase of naked swimming, sleeping in fields, tumbling with girls from the liberal school of Bedales and tossing back his longish hair. To Sorley, Brooke seemed 'undoubtedly a poet', if a slight one. Socialism seemed right to them both. Brooke read reports on poor-law reform and spoke at Fabian meetings.

It was the Victorians that these two brilliant young men wanted to escape. Unlike Sorley, Brooke admired Robert Browning, but the stately laureate Tennyson was too much for them both, Sorley declaring in 1913, while still at Marlborough, that 'all through the closing years of the last century there has been a grand but silent revolution against the essential falseness and shallowness of the mid-Victorian court poets'. Pre-industrial England – a landscape of

imagined freedom – moved Sorley, as it did Brooke and Edward Thomas. Sorley and Thomas approached it through Richard Jefferies. Escaping from Marlborough, the school and the town, Sorley climbed up to the Downs; some years earlier, on his first day as a Marlborough boy, Siegfried Sassoon had fled there, also on his own; Wilfred Owen had looked upon Broxton Hill in Cheshire as a place of mysterious possibility. For Edward Thomas a ghost could come at such moments, an uneasy but vital part of him, an alter ego hinting at dark truth.

Such places of beauty and history were, for Charles Sorley, for Edward Thomas, for Siegfried Sassoon and for Edmund Blunden, what England meant – more than the empire or military glory or past victories. Wilfred Owen wrote: 'Even the weeks at Broxton, by the Hill / Where I first felt my boyhood fill / With uncontainable movements; there was born / My poethood …' For Sorley, patriotism didn't become impressive until he saw some soldiers in Germany returning from a field day, singing as they marched – 'the roar could be heard for miles … Then I understood what a glorious country it is: and who would win if war came.' He told his old master at Marlborough how 'I felt that perhaps I could die for Deutschland – and I have never had an inkling of that feeling for England, and never shall … It's the first time I have had the faintest idea of what patriotism meant.'

Any homesickness was for those long walks: 'it is chiefly the Downs I regret'. The German 'simple day system' of education seemed better than an English boarding school. At Marlborough there had been too much competition over trivial matters and the confusion of 'strength of character with petty self-assertion'. Yet Sorley slipped back, admitting that 'there is something in Marlborough that I would not have missed for worlds …' From Germany, he asked his parents for *The Life in the Fields* by Richard Jefferies; 'in the midst of my setting up and smashing of deities – Masefield, Hardy, Goethe – I always fall back on Richard Jefferies'.

In Germany he stayed with a family in Schwerin, had language lessons and then moved on to the university of Jena. The friendliness of the people, the much greater interest in art and poetry, the unashamed intellectualism, overwhelmed him; only gradually did the heavy bourgeois domestic life, the sultry weather, the boastful and drunken student corps and the shrill celebration of the French defeat of 1870 dull his enthusiasm. The Jews were the liveliest people; every Prussian could seem 'a bigot and a braggart'. Germans wanted to know what England would do. Hadn't King Edward VII 'spent his life in attempting to bring about a German war'? During the Ulster crisis, when British officers threatened mutiny if Irish Home Rule was imposed, Germans thought it 'inconceivable that the army should refuse to obey its government'.

Austria's ultimatum to Serbia that followed the Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination exposed a combustible alignment of great powers, with Russia on the Serbian side and Germany with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By 26 July 1914, the Jena students were shouting 'Down with the Serbs', a new edition of the newspapers came every half-hour 'with wilder rumours' so that Sorley could 'almost hear the firing in Belgrade'. He wrote, 'It seems that Russia must settle the question of a continental war, or no.' A few days later he was put in a German jail, then let out to go back to a Britain that had joined the fight. Aged only nineteen, he volunteered for the army.

Why was Charles Sorley suddenly prepared to die for his country? The outbreak of war caused even those who had rebelled at their schools to snap to attention. Robert Graves came from an exceptionally cultivated family: his literary father was a schools inspector who collected and wrote ballads and Irish folk tales; his German mother descended from the historian Ranke. Winning a scholarship to Charterhouse, the puritanical young Graves had at first loathed the school with its bullying, rampant sexuality and contempt for learning; then a reforming Head and young masters

like the mountaineer George Mallory made it better, helped by the writing of poetry, a crush on another boy and the discovery that he had enough boxing skill to defend himself.

Robert Graves had also been to Germany, for holidays with his mother's German family in Bavaria. Here the prim young Graves wandered joyfully around the family estate, but, outside it, found riotous beer gardens, thick clouds of cigar smoke and glutinous eating; his fears of hell, instilled by his mother, were inflamed by the 'wayside crucifixes with the realistic blood and wounds, and the *ex-voto* pictures, like sign-boards, of naked souls in purgatory, grinning with anguish in the middle of high red and yellow flames'. Family trips to France, Germany, Brussels and Switzerland made Graves's childhood cosmopolitan – a contrast to Siegfried Sassoon's fox-hunting, Edward Thomas's long English walks, Edmund Blunden's Kent villages and Ivor Gurney's Cotswolds. His British landscape was the bare land and mountains of north Wales where the family had a holiday home.

Graves had been a rebel. He resigned from the Officer Training Corps and spoke up for pacifism in debates. Yet when war broke out he joined up, at scarcely nineteen, incensed by the German invasion of poor little Belgium and reports of atrocities that resembled the bullying that he'd known at Charterhouse.

Robert Nichols had also apparently not conformed to the contemporary idea of an enthusiastic patriot. The son of an atheist, from a family of successful printers, Nichols had a prosperous but awkward childhood, divided between London and a country house in Essex, with a cold father and a mother who could show a startling love, but suffered a series of nervous breakdowns. Brought up to have no belief, he became fascinated by religion although never an adherent to any one faith. The nervous Nichols – who'd inherited the family mental instability in the form of insomnia and manic depression – was unhappy at school, especially at 'hellish' Winchester from which he was sacked for going up to London during term time. At Oxford he became a blood, throwing mangel-wurzels

and dead pheasants at the visiting Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George and getting sent down for failing exams.

Already, however, there was a fanatical dedication to writing poetry, encouraged by a friendship with the composer Philip Heseltine who introduced him to D. H. Lawrence. The verses poured forth from Nichols – about fauns, the Virgin Mary and love, often in bits of projected poetic dramas. Over all this is the sense of a search for a great subject, worthy of so much effort and time. Might his country – and its cause in August 1914 – give new fire to his life? Nichols enlisted in September, aged twenty-one. He felt that he should stand up for England and 'all she stood for', even if she was wrong.

It was Rupert Brooke, a Fabian socialist and friend of the Bloomsbury Group, who became the war's first famous poet. Brooke saw war as a joyous simplification of his and his country's destiny. It was as if he had come back to his childhood. Britain in 1914 was for the status quo. She was aiding France and Belgium which had been invaded by Germany, the disruptive new usurper and challenge to the empire. This was a war to defend the old world.

Rupert Brooke was even born in a public school, growing up at Rugby (where his father was a housemaster) in an atmosphere of Puritanism and success worship. His mother, descended from a Cromwellian fanatic, was the centre of the family; it was said that Mr Brooke was sent out at night to pick up horse manure from the roads for her roses. At Rugby her adored Rupert became head of house and captain of the house rugby team, and won the poetry prize and a sonnet competition in the *Westminster Gazette*. In 1905, while ill at home, he announced, 'I have read the whole of the Elizabethan Dramatists through in 3 days.' The young Brooke admired Wilde and Housman, had adolescent homosexual passions, became a classical scholar at King's, Cambridge (where his uncle was Dean) and a member of the exclusive intellectual society the Apostles, moving in a proudly superior clique, keen – as his correspondence shows – to exclude others.

At Cambridge Brooke was ostensibly a rebel against the old world of Tennyson and duty, of religion and sexual repression. After losing his virginity to a man at the age of twenty-one, he wrote clinically of the love-making to James Strachey, Lytton Strachey's brother; the description must have driven James, who loved Brooke, to a frenzy of frustration. Behind it there may have been an urge to torture, or at least to tease. Rupert Brooke seems to have taken up socialism while at Rugby, partly to shock what he saw as the place's complacency and philistinism.

But there was always the pull of public-school values, of his strong conventional mother, and also the effortless power of his looks. Edward Marsh, after seeing him in 1906 at Cambridge as the herald in a production of *Eumenides*, fell in love. Even the sceptical Leonard Woolf, on meeting Brooke for the first time, thought, 'That is exactly what Adonis must have looked like in the eyes of Aphrodite.' Brooke could be a wonderful companion – witty, clever, teasing, well-read, sympathetic. His taste was wide; it was he who had suggested to Marsh that Ezra Pound should be asked to contribute to *Georgian Poetry*. Friends, however, were surprised later when his letters were published by how different their Rupert could be when he was with others, how quickly he could switch moods.

Rupert Brooke hated getting old. To be twenty in 1907 had filled him 'with a hysterical despair to think of fifty dull years more. I hate myself and everyone … What I chiefly loathe and try to escape is not Cambridge nor Rugby nor London, but – Rupert Brooke.' In 1909, he moved to digs in Grantchester, a village near Cambridge, his enthusiasm for Swinburne weakening in favour of John Donne as he embraced a revolt against materialism and hypocrisy. This 'neo-paganism' involved camping, diving into ponds and rivers (Brooke's party trick was to surface with an erection, impressing Virginia Woolf), wandering barefoot or naked. Yet such a life was by no means idyllic; he found himself caught up in the jealousy and cattiness of a small, self-conscious and arrogant circle. Increasingly

narcissistic and self-centred, he became petulant if challenged, especially by another man.

In 1910, Edward Thomas, a respected critic and writer of prose, not yet a poet, stayed with Brooke at Grantchester. Later that year Brooke was with Thomas at Steep, at the Thomas's cottage. Mrs Thomas was away, leaving the two writers together. Edward Thomas noticed how Brooke moved quickly between 'a Shelleyan eagerness and a Shelleyan despair': also that the man resembled his poetry with his fair hair, laughter, easy 'indolent' talk that suggested he could admire 'as much as he was admired'. Thomas, weighed down by self-pity, self-loathing (particularly over his treatment of his family) and financial worry, was ostensibly very different from his brilliant guest.

Like Sorley and Graves, Rupert Brooke went to Germany. He stayed in Munich, wanting to learn German to help him get a fellowship at King's. Brooke thought at first that the Germans were 'a kind people', then decided, with swooping superficiality, that he was in favour of a larger Royal Navy as 'German culture must never, never prevail. The Germans are nice and well-meaning and they try; but they are soft … The only good things (outside music perhaps) are the writing of Jews who live in Vienna …' Italy appealed to him more. 'I renounce England,' he wrote from Florence.

Sidgwick and Jackson published Brooke's poems in December 1911. This coincided with the poet's collapse, when a love affair with Ka Cox seemed to end before flaring up again. Through the maelstrom he wrote, while in temporary exile in Berlin, 'The Old Vicarage at Grantchester', as if taking comfort from a nostalgic, witty yearning for an ideal England. He was in London for the launch of *Georgian Poetry*, which he had brought about with Marsh and Wilfred Gibson, and the exhibition of post-impressionist paintings. As if to show her that he too could shock, Brooke wrote to Virginia Woolf during his breakdown, describing an assault on a choirboy by two older youths in the church vestry, when the boy's

cries were drowned 'by the organ pealing' and the result so severe that 'he has been in bed ever since with a rupture'.

Success rolled on. Having become a Fellow of King's and had 'The Old Vicarage' named the best poem of the year, Brooke was sent in May 1913 by the *Westminster Gazette* to write about his impressions of the United States. By October he'd left America for the South Seas, to what was to be perhaps the easiest time of his life and a love-affair with a Tahitian woman that inspired the tender poem 'Tiare Tahiti'. His thoughts on England showed confusion, anti-Semitism and harshness towards women. The problem was, Brooke thought, that it was hard to believe in a place still 'under that irresponsible and ignorant plutocracy', with London full of 'lean and vicious people, dirty hermaphrodites and eunuchs, moral vagabonds, pitiable scum …' By June 1914 he was back. Rupert Brooke's last summer was a packed season, under Marsh's sway.

During the final months of peace, he went down to Dymock, to visit the poets who gathered round this village on the border of Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. Wilfred Gibson was there, as were Lascelles Abercrombie and John Drinkwater, and the predominant tone was Georgian. To Brooke, Dymock was a paradise where, staying in Gibson's cottage, 'one drinks great mugs of cider, & looks at fields of poppies in the corn'. After 1918, the village and its poets became part of the myth of a lost England. Among those who went there were the American poet Robert Frost and the Englishman Edward Thomas.

Edward Thomas had a sense that 'all was foretold', that man was ultimately helpless, even with his vast destructive power. From a large family, the son of a civil servant who had raised himself from a poor Welsh background, he grew up in south London. Educated at various schools, including briefly the private St Paul's, before winning a scholarship to Oxford, Thomas found life with his parents hard. His domineering father was a late-Victorian and Edwardian success story. Mr Thomas pushed his children and was once furious with his son for faltering when about to win a half-mile race. Mrs

Thomas was loving, but her husband ruled. The failure in the half-mile, and his father's refusal to forgive, was etched into Edward, as would a later incident of what he saw as his cowardice in the woods near Dymock.

A mist over Clapham Common could hint at unexplored wildness during his boyhood and there was open country to the south. When Edward Thomas stayed with his father's mother at Swindon, he could reach a wilder landscape, stirring an early romanticism and love of solitude. Always, however, there was pressure. Mr Thomas, in spite of his success, felt thwarted; he had stood unsuccessfully for parliament as a Lloyd George Liberal and his debating skills were restricted to advocating positivism in south London. He became jingoistic and shrill.

Edward married early; this brought escape, but the marriage had been forced upon him. Helen Noble was the daughter of a literary critic who had encouraged Edward's first writings about landscape and walking. While Edward was still at Oxford, Helen told him she was pregnant; Mr Thomas disapproved of the marriage and of his son's wish to be a writer rather than a civil servant. How would they provide for their children?

It was a good question. Edward's failure to get a First barred him from the security of an Oxford academic post. He set out as a writer, desperately seeking work, and the struggle darkened his depression and self-pity. Domestic life was hard, not made easier by platonic liaisons, one with the writer Eleanor Farjeon. But by 1914 Thomas was earning £400 a year from reviewing and writing – the equivalent today of some £30,000 to £40,000 – and had become an influential critic, particularly of poetry. The desired life, however, with his family or having the time to appreciate beauty, to write what he wanted, became impossible. 'I was born to be a ghost,' he wrote.

The Thomases lived in Kent and Hampshire. Edward came to know the south of England, although he still thought himself Welsh. He liked small country churches rather than cathedrals, folk songs

rather than oratorios and took Richard Jefferies to his heart. Like Sassoon, Blunden and Gurney, he saw the rural world romantically, disliking intrusions such as businessmen who bought up hop fields in Kent – and his later poem 'Lob' cherished what might go, as if willing it to survive. On his long walks, he found beauty and escape from a family life, but everything was blighted by his moods and financial uncertainty. Thomas saw a psychoanalyst, but the darkness remained. 'I sat thinking about ways of killing myself,' he wrote. There was one definite suicide attempt.

In 1906 the Thomases moved to the village of Steep, near Petersfield. Near by was the progressive school Bedales, where boys and girls boarded together and where Helen Thomas taught, so their children could be Bedalians at a greatly reduced cost. The house at Steep was on a ridge, buffeted by winds, and he had a breakdown there in September 1911. But work had to go on. Edward Thomas needed to write a stream of books like *The South Country*, *The Heart of England*, *Horae Solitariae* and *Oxford*, his style becoming more natural or Georgian, less influenced by Walter Pater.

A typical journey was that begun on Good Friday 1913, from his parents' house in south London, where he stayed, in uneasy proximity to his father, on visits to the capital to see publishers or editors. Thomas wanted to follow the spring south-west; the account tells of another man met in inns or on the path, symbol of a more elemental self whose strong moods could bring leaden gloom or brilliant joy. This was very different to his father's Edwardian liberal, positivist certainties. Edward Thomas's thoughts of suicide show barely controllable desperation, not faith in progress.

In January 1913, as an important critic, he came to the new Poetry Bookshop, near the British Museum, to a party given to celebrate Marsh's Georgian anthology that had been published at the end of 1912. At the party too was an American, Robert Frost. But Thomas and Frost didn't meet that night.

Edward Thomas reviewed *Georgian Poetry*, teasingly mentioning its feeling for 'the simple and the primitive', as seen in 'children,

peasants, savages, early men, animals and Nature in general', which was, he thought, typical of the age. The collection broke with the Victorians and the aesthetic crimson and velvety world of the 1890s. There was romance and nightingales – but they sang alongside Rupert Brooke being sick at sea or D. H. Lawrence's frank sensuality.

W. H. Hudson declared in 1913, 'I believe he has taken the wrong path', that poetry, not prose, was more suitable for Thomas's voice; the same year, however, Thomas published another account of an English journey, *The Icknield Way*, which didn't sell well enough. He considered becoming a teacher in London or leaving England. More robust types looked down on what Ezra Pound called 'a mild fellow with no vinegar in his veins'. Then, in October 1913, he met Robert Frost.

Over the next year and a half, until Frost returned to the United States with his wife and children, the two writers were often together, usually in Dymock. The Frosts were living there in poverty, alongside Abercrombie, Drinkwater and Gibson. To the American, the landscape's dereliction and its often destitute inhabitants were shocking. British farming had suffered from free trade and the huge influx of cheap American and Canadian wheat. Wages had scarcely gone up since 1870, making lives more like the grimmer parts of Hardy's novels than the nostalgic yearning evident in Siegfried Sassoon's memories of the pre-1914 Weald of Kent, in Ivor Gurney's beloved Cotswolds or in Rupert Brooke's 'hearts at peace under an English heaven'.

Robert Frost felt that Thomas should write poetry, of the kind that Frost wrote, where each word – and the sound of each word – conveyed a sense of natural speech. The atmosphere of Dymock and its poets encouraged friendship; the Georgians, although not the outspoken Frost, were soft in their manners and their verses, gentle and polite.

In February 1914 Edward Thomas received a grant from the Royal Literary Fund. By the spring he was staying at Dymock with

the Frosts or in rented rooms with his own family or in a cottage taken by Eleanor Farjeon, whose love for Edward was encouraged by Helen as it soothed him. In March, Thomas came to breakfast in Marsh's rooms and it was a failure, the host thinking that the poet was sour, superior and critical of the food. Thomas wrote an admiring review of Frost's collection *North of Boston*, some weeks after the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo. They spoke of moving to the United States with their families, to farm together in New England where the Frosts had lived, and failed, before crossing the Atlantic. Edward Thomas was cycling from Steep to Dymock with his son when war was declared.

A new feeling came, stimulated by war, a suspicion of foreigners and the search for spies. The police round Dymock were anxious about a Mr van Doorn who was said to be staying with the weird poets. There were rumours that Frost had been singing German songs. Were Germans so different, or so much worse, than the British whose faults Edward Thomas knew too well? He believed in a version of England. His patriotism was for the land, for what he'd seen or imagined of it and its history.

Since Marlborough and Cambridge (which he'd left without taking a degree), Siegfried Sassoon's life had become a perpetual holiday, a private income letting him do more or less what he wanted. His most successful poem, *The Daffodil Murderer*, a parody of John Masefield, had been praised by Edmund Gosse and Edward Marsh and received some reviews but sold few copies. Convention and timidity had manoeuvred him into a life of fox-hunting, cricket, the writing of sweet, privately printed verse and buried homosexuality.

Through Marsh, Sassoon had met two Georgian poets – W. H. Davies and the 'absolutely delightful' Rupert Brooke, who'd patronized him – but *Georgian Poetry* had none of Sassoon's poems in it. He left London in July 1914, returning to Kent and his mother to wait for the next hunting season. Perhaps he should enlist in the peacetime army and become a cavalry officer; then suddenly war

was at hand. The newspapers foretold British involvement, and this must change his life. While playing in a two-day cricket match at Tunbridge Wells, Sassoon saw telegrams arrive at the ground summoning officers to their regiments.

He recalled the absurdly amateurish training he had received in the Officer Training Corps at Marlborough and thought how near Kent, his home, was to the coast and the Continent. Could it all soon be burned and plundered? Was a new barbarism imminent? The enemy was the Germany of the Kaiser and his generals, not that of Schumann and Richard Strauss, whom he'd seen at Drury Lane. Soon the newspapers were reporting crimes of inhumanity previously unimaginable to a secluded British gentleman. Sassoon had no doubt that he wanted to defend the Weald from this. He enlisted in the army as soon as he could.

Robert Graves saw an opportunity. Graves had been dreading going to Oxford in October; the new war would at least delay that. At Harlech, on holiday with his family, he decided to enlist. He wrote a poem promising revenge for the enemy's burning of Louvain in Belgium in late August.

Another survivor left no record of how he spent that summer. Ivor Gurney never wrote an autobiography, perhaps because he wished to write new poetry and music or because his last years were too tormented by madness.

Gurney was, like Edward Thomas, born a town boy, growing up in Gloucester, the son of a tailor and a powerful mother. Like Isaac Rosenberg, he passed the war as a private soldier; like Rosenberg, he had two arts, in his case music and poetry; like Rosenberg, he was helped by the influence of others; unlike Rosenberg (but like Blunden), his best work came after the war.

Gurney's musical gifts were encouraged at Gloucester Cathedral's choir school. The cathedral organist Dr Herbert Brewer gave him a good grounding but may have sensed the contempt the boy felt for Brewer's own dull compositions as the organist never mentions Gurney, by then a published poet and composer, in his

memoirs. After 1911, when he arrived at the Royal College of Music, Gurney quickly gained a reputation. Marion Scott, a fellow student, noticed 'the look of latent force in him', particularly the eyes, bright behind spectacles, 'of mixed colouring', which 'Erasmus once said was regarded by the English as denoting genius'. She thought this boy 'must be the new composition scholar from Gloucester whom they call Schubert'.

Already suffering from mental illness, perhaps inherited from his mother's unstable family, and brought near to a complete breakdown in 1913, Ivor Gurney found London a trial – but Gloucestershire could heal. A letter describes a spot where the Forest of Dean, the Severn, the Malvern Hills and the Cotswolds could be seen together. 'London is worse than ever to bear after that.' The best hope seemed to be the suffragettes: 'let us hope that the Militants will blow it up soon'.

In July and August 1914, Gurney was probably on holiday in the place that he loved, the country near the medieval city of Gloucester. Dymock was not far away and the poets there fascinated Gurney when a friend spoke of them. He may have gone to readings at the Poetry Bookshop in London, but was too shy to introduce himself to anyone, certainly not to Edward Marsh, who helped him later.

Like Sassoon and Thomas, Gurney fashioned a country of his own that could make even the trenches bearable.

> God, that I might see
> Framilode once again!
> Redmarley, all renewed,
> Clear shining after rain …

In 1913 came the mental collapse and, a year later, a whimsical poem in the style of Hilaire Belloc, before the war, and memories of war, released true poetry. Gurney tried to enlist early on – as Brooke, Graves and Sassoon did – but was turned down because of bad eyesight. He wished to do what he thought of as his duty,

to Gloucestershire rather than to England. Ivor Gurney hoped also that the army might restore the balance of his mind.

Isaac Rosenberg and Ivor Gurney were free of the English public-school world, whereas Edmund Blunden stayed loyal to it all his life.

The son of schoolteachers, Blunden grew up in a village in Kent that perpetually glowed in his memory. He can seem a typical Georgian, with his love of cricket, rural life and villages – and he featured in Marsh's later anthologies. But Siegfried Sassoon was right when he told him, 'Your best poems have a spontaneity which is priceless,' reaching beyond the Georgian movement's more genteel side. Blunden did, however, write often about his childhood, prompting doubts as to whether the sun had really been so golden or the convolvulus so white and miraculous before 1914. He had a passion for country lore, for Kent and Sussex dialect words learned originally during the 'golden security' of King Edward's reign. Leaving this village world to board at Christ's Hospital school was painful; 'farewell the bread-and-butter pudding and toasted cheese round Cleave's fume-emitting stove, farewell the hours as volunteer teacher in my mother's school, farewell the solos in St Peter and St Paul, and those midnights on the frozen ponds in naked hop-gardens under bobbetty-topped pollards and tingling stars!' Edmund Blunden used such memories constantly, sometimes as a contrast with what came later, as in the post-war poem 'The Midnight Skaters' where ponds become possible graves as potential victims dance on their frozen surface, chancing death as in the trenches.

Christ's Hospital changed Blunden's life. 'C.H. was never out of Edmund's mind,' a contemporary wrote later, 'or if it was, the slightest reminder, a name, an allusion, would bring it back.' For Blunden, it was a school of poets and writers – of Charles Lamb, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Leigh Hunt, George Dyer, Edmund Campion and William Camden – and he read all these and could quote from them.