

RUPERT BROOKE: A RE-APPRAISAL

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ALTHOUGH the present war has inspired much excellent reporting, and one or two outstanding novels, it has become a commonplace to say that it has produced no poets. Like most commonplaces the assertion is misleading, for there is an abundance of contemporary war poetry, some of it of a very high order. But this at least is true, that no poet born of the present conflict has attracted public attention or quickened popular sentiment to the same degree as did at least half-a-dozen of the war poets of 1914-18, notably Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves,—above all, Rupert Brooke.

Before the outbreak of war in August, 1914, Brooke, although popular and generally admired within a rather narrow circle of Rugby and King's College associates, was in no sense a public figure. He had published a volume of poems which had attracted the serious attention of several prominent reviewers, but which had sold no better than such firstlings usually do; he had written, for the *Westminster Gazette*, a series of letters—much too subjective to appeal to a popular audience—recording his impressions of America and the South Seas; and he had contributed irregularly to such periodicals as *The Cambridge Review* and *The Nation*. Less than a year after the outbreak of war his name was a household word in England, and the man had become a legend.

It is now comparatively easy to explain the phenomenon of Brooke's popularity. In the first place, he was the very embodiment of that physical beauty which the romanticist feels should be—but so seldom is—the poet's birthright. The "golden-haired Apollo" of Francis Cornford's brilliant epigram was splendid to look upon; and when he wrote the sonnet sequence *1914*, which every schoolboy was soon to know by heart, it seemed as if the flesh and the spirit were made one. His death on active service occasioned some bitter regret for a great talent destroyed, but for most people it was the logical—one might almost add hoped-for—consummation of a glorious life. Who could conceive of a Rupert Brooke grown old? Whom the gods love die young, and Brooke was of all men beloved of the gods. What could be more fitting than his death in Apollo's own land, on the day of Shakespeare and Saint George?

It was Winston Churchill who through the columns of the *Times* told the nation of Brooke's death, and the Churchillian genius for the simple, forthright word charged with the most intense emotional significance has seldom been more effectively employed:

Rupert Brooke is dead. A telegram from the Admiral at Lemnos tells us that this life has closed at the moment when it seemed to have reached its springtime. A voice had become audible, a note had been struck, more true, more thrilling, more able to do justice to the nobility of our youth in arms engaged in this present war, than any other—more able to express their thoughts of self-surrender, and with a power to carry comfort to those who watched them so intently from afar. The voice has been swiftly stilled. Only the echoes and the memory remain; but they will linger . . .

The thoughts to which he gave expression in the very few incomparable war sonnets which he has left behind will be shared by many thousands of young men moving resolutely and blithely forward into this, the hardest, the cruellest, and the least-rewarded of all the wars that men have fought. They are a whole history and revelation of Rupert Brooke himself. Joyous, fearless, versatile, deeply instructed, with classic symmetry of mind and body, he was all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is that which is most freely proffered.

In England, and to a lesser degree in America, the press and the critical reviews echoed Mr. Churchill's tribute; and Brooke's fellow-poets were generous in their praise. Lascelles Abercrombie, writing in the *Morning Post*, said of the sonnet sequence 1914: "I am strangely mistaken if the accents of the noblest English poetry do not speak to us in these lines." John Drinkwater wrote that "There has not been so grievous a loss to poetry since the death of Shelley," and Walter de la Mare, Wilfred Gibson, Edward Thomas and J. C. Squire were equally extravagant in their eulogies. Professor Gilbert Murray summed up the prevailing sentiment when he wrote in the *Cambridge Magazine*: "I cannot help thinking that Rupert Brooke will live in fame as an almost mythical figure. Among all who have been poets and died young, it is hard to think of one who, both in life and in death, has so typified the ideal radiance of youth and poetry."

For obvious reasons, Brooke's popularity has suffered a marked decline, particularly during the past decade. Part of the decline is due to the inevitable reaction which always follows excessive praise; but in addition Brooke, more than most

poets, has been the victim of that sincere but sometimes fatal form of flattery—imitation. As a rule, wide-spread imitation ultimately creates antagonism towards the thing imitated, and at least two of Brooke's poems, *Grantchester* and *The Great Lover*, have suffered an undeserved fate. Since the appearance of Brooke's collected poems, prefaced by Edward Marsh's sensitive memoir, in 1918, a thousand earnest versifiers, mostly female, have proclaimed in halting iambs their passionate devotion to assorted tastes, smells, feels, articles of household furniture and kitchen crockery, until *The Great Lover* has come to be judged not on the basis of its own very considerable merits, but on those of the unspeakable brood of whimsies to which it has given rise. To a lesser degree *Grantchester* has been similarly damned.

But the main reason for the decline of Brooke's popularity is to be found in the lack of spiritual identity between him and his successors. The faith in the ultimate triumph of Justice, the conviction that one can do no better than to die for one's country, implicit in at least three of the five sonnets of the 1914 sequence, find no echo in the work of those who came after. For the disillusioned poets of the 20's, whose prophet was T. S. Elliot and whose testament *The Wasteland*, life was without meaning:

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas,
 Our dried voices, when
 We whisper together,
 Are quiet and meaningless
 As wind in dry grass
 Or rats' feet over broken glass
 In our dry cellar.

To men like Eliot, Sassoon and their fellows, the faith of Rupert Brooke must have seemed like the naivete of a child brought up on William Ernest Henley and the laureate poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Nor is there any more in common between Brooke and the militant revolutionists of the 30's. It is true that while at Cambridge he had been a member—ultimately President—of the Fabian Society, but his radicalism was evidence not so much of a social conscience as of a boyish desire to shock his conservative friends. In the early 1900's most of the Cambridge

undergraduate intellectuals joined the Fabian Society as a matter of course, but in Brooke's time at least their interest in social and political reform was rather superficial. Brooke was at heart essentially conservative, and after leaving Cambridge does not seem to have bothered his head very much about the state of society. An occasional doctrinaire cliché—"In strikes the men are always right"—adorns his correspondence, but his interest clearly lay in other directions. For this and other reasons, most of the poets of the 30's, profoundly agitated by the class struggle, and by the seeming need of evolving new techniques through which to communicate their ideas, have found little in Brooke to admire.

More than a quarter of a century has passed since he died, so that it should now be in a measure possible to separate the reality from the myth and pass impartial judgment upon the nature of his achievement. On the one hand—although even to-day it is difficult to re-read Edward Marsh's fine memoir without emotion—we are far enough removed from Brooke in time to be unaffected by considerations of personality; on the other hand, we are still sufficiently aware of the spiritual trends of the last two decades to see how far Brooke's loss of reputation has been the consequence of a critical attitude not primarily concerned with aesthetic values.

A re-reading of Brooke is likely to confirm the impression that for some years following his death he was absurdly overpraised. Certainly there is little in the poems which precede the 1914 sequence to justify the eulogies of Abercrombie and Drinkwater. It is true that Brooke usually exhibits the technical competence which is one of the distinguishing attributes of Georgian verse, and the authentic poetic note is frequently present. But much of his early work is marred by imitativeness, not merely of phrasing—a characteristic fault in young writers—but of actual substance. Too often he seems to record the emotional and imaginative experiences of someone other than himself. He had read widely, and his mind sometimes gave back what it had received before the process of transmutation was complete. The verses of a hundred poets echo in his own, —John Donne in such a passage as:

. . . we love, and gape,
 Fantastic shape to mazed fantastic shape,
 Straggling, irregular, perplexed, embossed,
 Grotesquely twined, extravagantly lost
 By crevice paths and strange protuberant ways
 From sanity and from wholeness and from grace—

Alice Meynell, in the delicate opening lines of *Day That I Have Loved*:

Tenderly, day that I have loved, I close your eyes,
And smooth your quiet brow, and fold your thin dead hands—

and Ernest Dowson in the sensuous sentimental melancholy of *The Wayfarers*:

Oh, I'll remember, but . . . each crawling day
Will pale a little your scarlet lips, each mile
Dull the dear pain of your remembered face.

Too much, however, has been made of Brooke's indebtedness to Keats. Such a poem as *The Great Lover* undoubtedly shows the poet rejoicing in the bands that bind him to the earth,—but this, after all, is a joy common to many men. Lines such as:

. . . the cold
Graveness of iron; moist black earthen mould;
Sleep; and high places; footprints in the dew;
And oaks; and brown horse-chestnuts, glossy-new;
And new-peeled sticks; and shining pools on grass;—

have the unadorned concreteness of portraiture. In them there is none of the sensuous music of:

The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves,

or

. . . magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn.

In his own time Brooke enjoyed some reputation as a rather daring realist, and at least two of his poems, *Lust* and *A Channel Passage*, aroused a good deal of criticism on the grounds that the first was indecent, the second disgusting. Edward Marsh, after reading *A Channel Passage*, "expressed an apologetic preference for poems that [he] could read at meals," and Brooke was moved to defend himself. "There are common and sordid things—situations and details—that may suddenly bring all tragedy, or at least the brutality of actual emotions, to you. I rather grasp relievedly at them, after I've beaten vain hands in the rosy mists of poets' experiences. Lear's button, and

Hilda Lessways turning the gas suddenly on, and—but you know more of them than I. Shakespeare's not unsympathetic—'My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun.' And the emotions of a sea-sick lover seem to me at least as poignant as those of the hero who has 'brain-fever' . . ."

Both *Lust* and *A Channel Crossing* are likely to strike coldly on the reader to-day. *Lust* is a self-conscious attempt, on the part of an emotionally immature poet, to shock his elders:

. . . I starved for you;
My throat was dry and my eyes hot to see.
Your mouth so lying was most heaven in view,
And your remembered smell most agony.

It is not likely that even Brooke himself intended such lines to be taken as a serious record of intense physical experience. *Lust* smacks of an academic exercise in which the poet sets himself the task of creating a certain pre-conceived effect and doesn't quite succeed. The same is true of *A Channel Passage*. The poem might revolt the reader, if its strict attention to physical detail was not so patently designed to achieve precisely that end.

The fact is that when Brooke attempted to write in realistic vein he went against the grain of his own temperament. For he was not primarily a realist at all, as he himself would have us believe, but an out-and-out romanticist. But a boyish love of sensation, of being reputedly worldly and cynical, is responsible for a spiritual dichotomy apparent in much of his early verse, and most obviously in such a poem as *Menelaus and Helen*, where the true romanticist and the cynical pursuer are exhibited side by side:

Hot through Troy's ruin Menelaus broke
To Priam's palace, sword in hand, to sate
On that adulterous whore a ten years' hate
And a king's honour. Through red death, and smoke,
And cries, and then by quieter ways he strode,
Till the still innermost chamber fronted him.
He swung his sword, and crashed into the dim
Luxurious bower, flaming like a god.

High sat white Helen, lonely and serene.
He had not remembered that she was so fair,
And that her neck curved down in such a way;
And he felt tired. He flung the sword away,
And kissed her feet, and knelt before her there,
The perfect Knight before the perfect Queen.

This is an admirable example of poetry in a traditional romantic vein. The sonnet is complete in itself, but it is necessary to shock the reader, and so a second part is added, showing Menelaus and Helen in old age:

. . . Menelaus bold
 Waxed garrulous, and sacked a hundred Troys
 'Twixt noon and supper. And her golden voice
 Got shrill as he grew deafer. And both were old.

Often he wonders why on earth he went
 Troyward, or why poor Paris ever came.
 Oft she weeps, gummy-eyed and impotent;
 Her dry shanks twitch at Paris' mumbled name.
 So Menelaus nagged; and Helen cried;
 And Paris slept on by Scamander side.

In the first sonnet the real Brooke speaks; in the second, the poseur. Happily, towards the end of his life, when he was profoundly stirred by the great emotional experience of participation in war, he had wisdom enough to speak only the truth.

Grantchester and *The Great Lover*, both belonging to the years immediately preceding the first World War, are fundamentally romantic. There is a good deal of artificially engendered sentiment in *Grantchester*, but there can be no questioning the sincerity of *The Great Lover*. In the expression of joy in the common things of life—in the passionate yearning for immortality which breaks through in the line, "O never a doubt that somewhere I shall wake!"—*The Great Lover* is the spiritual antithesis of those poems in which Brooke struggled to achieve stark reality and seldom got beyond adolescent affectation.

Of the remaining poems which precede the 1914 sequence several seem worth remembering; in particular, *Heaven*, a brilliantly conceived little satire on the anthropomorphism of popular theology, and the fine sonnet, *The Hill*, in which Brooke for once succeeds in striking a true realistic note. *The Hill* is an artful and moving expression of the poet's awareness that the things he cherishes most in life are not enduring, and of his wistful regret at the passing of the fine and lovely dreams that transfigure youth:

"We are earth's best, that learnt her lesson here.
 Life is our cry. We have kept the faith" we said;
 "We shall go down with unreluctant tread
 Rose-crowned into the darkness" . . . Proud we were,
 And laughed, that had such brave true things to say.
 And then you suddenly cried, and turned away.

Otherwise there does not seem to be a great deal in the early Brooke that is likely to survive, although even his most commonplace poems are frequently illuminated by fine individual lines, like

And evening hush, broken by homing wings—

and

One face, with lips than autumn-lilies tenderer,
And voice more sweet than the far plaint of viols is,
Or the soft moan of any grey-eyed lute-player.

It is in the 1914 sequence that Brooke for the first time speaks with the assurance that is born of faith. Hitherto all had been uncertainty and doubt, but Britain's entry into war and the tragic slaughter that so quickly ensued inspired Brooke to moving and passionate utterance. What he had to say he said with a conviction, an intense moral earnestness, that commanded immediate attention. And never was his control over his medium more flawless, never his choice of words more subtle. As technical achievements, the five sonnets which make up the sequence are beyond praise.

But technique is not enough in itself to win either passing popularity or enduring reputation. The popularity of the 1914 sequence is accounted for by the fact that through it Brooke expressed perfectly the mood of the moment. He was the mouth-piece of the generation who, in Mr. Churchill's words, were moving "blithely and resolutely" forward into battle. He said what the young men of 1914 wanted to say, and what their elders wanted to hear. To those who doubted that the youth of England were prepared to pay the full price which freedom demanded, the second sonnet, *Safety*, offered ready assurance:

We have built a house that is not for Time's throwing.

We have gained a peace unshaken by pain for ever.

War knows no power. Safe shall be my going,

Secretly armed against all death's endeavour;

Safe though all safety's lost; safe where men fall;

And if these poor limbs die, safest of all.

To those who mourned, the third sonnet, with its majestic and thrilling note of pride in the achievement of the dead, offered courage and consolation:

Blow, bugles blow! They brought us, for our dearth,

Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.

Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,

And paid his subjects with a royal wage;

And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.

But the great poet is more than the voice of his generation; he is a prophet as well. Indeed, many of the greatest poets have been in revolt against their time, as witness Milton in his last years, Burns, Wordsworth, Shelley, Browning, Tennyson before he assumed the Laureateship. But Rupert Brooke is not a prophet. The faith he proclaims is the simple nationalistic faith of his own day, perfectly expressed in the opening lines of the concluding sonnet of the sequence:

If I should die, think only this of me;
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.

But traditional patriotism has largely ceased to be an inspirational force. Hence it is that the reader of to-day, acutely conscious of the fact that the forces of good and evil are not separated by international boundaries, and haunted by the dream of that universal brotherhood or at least understanding which alone can ensure lasting peace, finds little in Brooke that is of importance to the present generation.

But it is not fair to suggest that none of the sonnets of the sequence has meaning beyond its own time. The fourth sonnet, *The Dead*, has little relation to any particular time or place. It makes clear that the poet of *The Great Lover*, who yearned for the things of earth and lamented their passing, has developed spiritually to the point where he is able to accept without regret the fact of death, and to find in it a beauty surpassing anything that he has found in life. There is no other poem in Brooke which quite matches *The Dead* in its spirit of austere, passionless serenity, and there are few in English poetry:

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
Washed marvellously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
And sunset, and the colours of the earth.
These had seen movement, and heard music; known
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,
Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

THE REAL THING

L. W. HENDERSON

THE distinguished man walked down the gang-way into the battery of flashlight cameras that usually greeted him on his return from a mission abroad. He blinked behind the defences of his public smile, and came to a stop as the pack of head-line hungry reporters surged about him. There was no way of escape. He would have to say something. It was expected of him—now more than ever, after what had happened.

"Welcome home, sir," the ingratiating voices barked at him.

"Congratulations on your fortunate escape!"

"The Nation is waiting for your story."

He thought: "What can I tell them that they will understand? They are looking for sensation, romance, unreality. They know nothing, they want to know nothing of the real thing."

"The real thing." He had written in his diary shortly after the disaster as follows:

* * * *

Nothing could be more unreal, more unnatural than what happened. Our voyage had been singularly peaceful for wartime. We seemed to sail without volition of our own, like the Ancient Mariner, on a glassy sea. By day we stood on the open deck, and calculated our course by the direction of the sun. And at night we sat under the stars, watching the constellations on their undeviating course to the ultimate objective.

Nothing in Nature prepared us for the sudden savagery of man. The day was quiescent, the sun sinking into a desolate sea, the waves rising in the freshening breeze. Shortly before dinner, while working at my *Report on Post-War Industrial Relations*, I was arrested by three short rings of the attack alarm.

"What a nuisance," I thought, "another drill," as I lazily put on my water bottle and life-preserver. People began pouring out into the corridors to hear the loudspeaker, which was relaying orders from the bridge:

"Attention all on board! Members of the crew will go to their attack stations. Bren gun detail report to the Boat deck. All passengers on the open deck will go below at once. All passengers on or below D Deck will come up above the waterline."

"Open deck . . . Waterline . . ." Blanched faces began to chatter, and argue whether this meant attack from the air or from submarine or both. But somehow, it still seemed incredible, theoretical, we looked on it as a mistake, or an over-realistic practice, or just a nuisance delaying our dinner. No one was afraid, because no one believed in the reality of it. It was a sort of spectacle only a little less exciting than Hollywood. Especially as we below the decks knew what was going on only by the sound of the firing, the explosions, and the sharp terse orders over the loudspeaker.

Everything happened in quick succession. The ship shook and shuddered under the impact of near hits, and we could tell when the enemy planes were directly overhead by the rattle of the brens. In less than ten minutes they sheered away from us into the distance. A long silence followed, and we became impatient once more about our dinners.

Then the loudspeaker came on again:

"Attention boat and raft detail! This ship will be taking on survivors. Go to your posts."

Survivors? It was difficult to comprehend what that meant. Death at our elbow. People milling about in the dark water, injured, drowning, struggling for life. And here I still stood in my tidy stateroom, unharmed, my finger marking a place among my papers. Why should it be they and not I out there, facing the end of the world, I wondered. How nearly it was I, I shall never know.

"Boat and raft detail, attention! We are going to lower the ropes and scrambling nets on the starboard side. Starboard side only. Follow these instructions at once . . ."

"Scrambling nets". Gasping, naked forms, clutching at the side of the ship, hauling themselves out of the deep . . . Will they have the strength to climb that gigantic height? No, only the strongest can make it. This is the test of Elementary Training, as the army calls it, known to science as "The Survival of the Fittest."

"Boat and raft detail on the port side: loosen all rafts, and lower the boats. All members of the crew who will volunteer to go out in the boats, come forward at once."

"Volunteers". There is a rush on to the deck to offer our services, to take part in the drama, to enter into the reality of it. It is night now. In the dim light of a quarter moon the hull of a sinking ship looms in the distance. From far away comes the thin echo of shouts and cries in the darkness. But it is too late to man the boats. They are already out, plying back and forth, picking up their human cargoes and returning to the job again. How will they find everyone in the shadowy sea? There is no way. Some manage to catch the gunwales as the boat slips by. Some are trapped in the water between the lifeboats and the side of the ship, and crushed by the action of the waves.

Slowly they begin to arrive, the victims coming over the side staggering, coughing salt water, swaggering, dazed, nonchalant, talkative, some dressed and dry, some naked but for a blanket, and some who miss their footing or lose strength and disappear into the dark again. And any, I keep thinking as I peer into their faces, any might be I.

There is a rush to do things for them, a surge of generosity and sacrifice. We root out all our best clothes, cigarettes, rum, give up our beds and move into the corridors. We need to feel, too, that we are participating, that we are not standing in the wings. We are caught up in a great emotional tide that carries us on, working, fetching, carrying, tending, organizing, regardless of time, far into the night.

But what of those who did not get to the top of the nets and ropes? . . . The girl who reached me her hand (why was I not quick enough?) and fell back sixty feet into a lifeboat below . . . The man who was dashed against the side of the ship and died screaming . . . For them we can do nothing. We do not think of them. We are on the side of the Fittest. But I cannot sleep for thinking: "Would I have been among them?"

At last I doze off, and awaken stiff from the unaccustomed hardness of the floor. I stumbled out on deck to find it is all over. For the first time I survey the scene, the debris, the remains of the party. The glow of enthusiasm has worn off. In the cold grey dawn it all looked monstrous again and unreal. The open spaces are crowded with humanity, wrapped in blankets and canvas, huddled together, sleeping. Splinters and shells lie all over the place. On the sun-deck some tents are pitched out of broken benches and tarpaulins from the life-boats. A terrible weary silence hangs over all.

"By the rail stands a man with an abstracted look on his face, peering down into the water.

"Good morning."

He does not reply.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right. I had a wife on that ship. I was only wondering . . ."

Suddenly a great revulsion overcomes me against the whole show, the human tragi-comedy in which one plays according to a script and not according to the heart, in which one partakes in stupidity, cruelty and evil because these are the "rules of the game." All my efforts to deceive myself, my grooming and social polish, my fashionable marriage, my struggle for success, money and prestige, my *Report on Industrial Relations* which was to win for my country and myself a great industrial empire . . . all my world seemed to have fallen away, leaving me naked to the old, unanswered, lonely "Why?"

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He clung a little tighter to his brief-case, containing the diary and the *Report on Industrial Relations*, and shook his head negatively.

"Have you no statement to make at all?" they asked in dismay.

"No," he said, elbowing his way out of the crowd, "nothing of importance. . ."