Audio file

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Transcript

00:00:01 Speaker 1

Welcome to a writers war, a National Lottery Heritage fund, First World War Centenary project produced by Chrome Radio for the University of Oxford, faculty of Mediaeval and Modern Languages. In partnership with year 10 students from Oxford, Spires Academy in the next group of podcasts.

00:00:21 Speaker 1

We learn about different responses to the First World War in Britain, France, Germany, and former colonies of the British and French empires we hear now from prize fellow Andrew Winnowing and Senior research fellow, Professor Shantanu. Das of All Souls college, about the British response.

00:00:39 Speaker 1

Gas gas quick boys.

00:01:00 Speaker 3

I'm Andrew and.

00:01:01 Speaker 3

I'm I'm a fellow here at All Souls College and I write some poetry in addition to my work as an English literary fellow.

00:01:10 Speaker 3

I'm here with my friend and colleague Shantanu, I'm.

00:01:14 Speaker 4

Also Phil at All Souls. I work on war literature including wall, poultry and Andrew and I.

00:01:21 Speaker 4

Had been having an ongoing conversation because after I came to All Souls at the beginning of this year, Andrew had been showing me around Oxford.

00:01:29 Speaker 4

We would often talk about poetry, and sometimes Edward Thomas.

00:01:33 Speaker 3

Who has a wonderful poem about a particular Maya particular Eastertide, that we both greatly?

00:01:40 Speaker 3

In memoriam Easter 1915 by Edward Thomas.

00:01:45 Speaker 3

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood. This Eastertide calling to mind the men, now far from home, who with their sweethearts should have gathered them and will do never again.

00:02:00 Speaker 4

Edward Thomas is very interesting because he puts pressure on the very definition of war poetry. He wrote all his poems in England before going over to France.

00:02:11 Speaker 4

Obviously there has been poems about war. You can go right back to the Iliad and we have the charge of the Light Brigade by Lord Alfred Tennyson.

00:02:22 Speaker 4

But war poetry as a distinct genre, evolved with the extraordinary outpouring of verse between 1914 and 1918.

00:02:32 Speaker 4

More poetry is often conflated with trench poetry, but I think that generation by generation the whole concept of war poetry has loosened so that we now include civilians such as Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, Women, Poets.

00:02:48 Speaker 3

We discussed with the students may weather in Cayman span wrong.

00:02:52 Speaker 3

She was a nurse at Somerville College here in Oxford and wrote a poem about wrong which captures some of the excitement that she felt about the war but also at the terrible undercurrents of sadness that were also going on for her.

00:03:06 Speaker 4

The horrors of the war test the traditions of English verse on Easter Sunday, 1915. Dean Inge at Saint Paul's Cathedral raid out from Rupert Books. The soldier anointing the soldier poet. Of course. The irony is that book didn't get.

00:03:25 Speaker 4

To see action it died of a mosquito bite which developed into sepsis before he got to Gallipoli.

00:03:33 Speaker 3

That poem operates with a very interesting kind of pre war heroism that becomes discredited in the course of the war.

00:03:42 Speaker 3

Brooke didn't see trench warfare, whereas Eoin does, and he writes about its horrors lucidly and terrifyingly. It would be rather harsh to call Rupert Brooke.

00:03:54 Speaker 3

A propagandist, because he was speaking from his heart, but he was certainly speaking in favour of.

00:03:59 Speaker 3

War and there are plenty of war propagandists who are doing that, like Jesse Pope who is addressed and announced at the end of Bones.

00:04:07 Speaker 3

Dulce ET decorum estate. About a group of soldiers who are gassed. He sees them guttering, choking, drowning beneath the gas. Then at the end he turns.

00:04:19 Speaker 3

To reflect on the kinds of lies that are being told about heroism and the war by the shallow propagandistic versifiers at home.

00:04:28 Speaker 3

And he says, no, you shouldn't be telling that terrible lie that it is sweet and right. That word decorum.

00:04:37 Speaker 3

To die for your country.

00:04:39 Speaker 3

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest to children, ardent for some desperate glory. The old lie dulce ET decorum estate, pro patria Mori. And there's something very grim about the way glory rhymes with nori there and ecit with zest.

00:04:58 Speaker 4

There is a very dark strain, I think in Wilfred Owen. We think of him as the pacifist or anti war poet, but at the middle of dull shared economist when he talks about the horrific gas attack, gas, gas, quick boys and ecstasy of fumbling, why ecstasy?

00:05:18 Speaker 4

Sick fits as.

00:05:18 Speaker 4

Soon put a question mark next to the word.

00:05:21 Speaker 3

There's something deliberately tasteless about it, isn't there? And it's a parody of the hidebound, nassen callousness of many of the ideas about what is fitting for the decorum of verse, because that word had longstanding lieben, one that referred to the compound of form and content.

00:05:38 Speaker 3

That is fitting for a poem, so it's not just a parody of outmoded morays on behalf of the British propagandists and home society butts the tradition in English verse.

00:05:49 Speaker 4

And I sometimes wonder whether it's a fusion of Woodhall.

00:05:53 Speaker 4

Where as well as a sort of nervous energy, or is it a sense of bodily release? Terrible, yet exhilarating.

00:06:02 Speaker 4

After being cooped up in the trenches for months asked to describe violence, Wilfred Owen in a way, is trapped in the whole musicality of language.

00:06:14 Speaker 4

Replacing real life horror with a sort of linguistic pleasure.

00:06:18 Speaker 3

As if the only response to a situation so horrifying was some.

00:06:22 Speaker 3

Lyric flight away from it. The word ecstasy actually means standing outside yourself.

00:06:27 Speaker 4

It's also standing outside oneself because he's remembering that moment of gas attack from his hospital bed in Craiglockhart in Scotland, where soldiers were sent to be treated for shell shock or neurasthenia, which.

00:06:42 Speaker 4

Today we would call post traumatic stress disorder.

00:06:46 Speaker 3

The show also by Wilfred Owen is particularly interesting for what we're saying about heroism before the war and after the war.

00:06:54 Speaker 3

A figure who looms large over this is WB Yeats who was involved in a different kind of struggle in Ireland at the beginning of the show. Oh, in quotes some lines from Yeats but having fallen.

00:07:07 Speaker 3

In the dreams the everliving. He then takes this outlook to task talks about writhing caterpillars. He turns battalions into these horrible insects.

00:07:19 Speaker 4

And this is where also lies, his difference from Sassoon.

00:07:23 Speaker 3

There's a poem by Sassoon in which he talks about another kind of ramification of the war in the hero. So soon describes a mother being told that her son has died in the war. She's told all sorts of grand heroic lies.

00:07:39 Speaker 3

About his conduct at the end, the narrator says none of it was true, but the officer who went to tell her felt a bit better for having told her these things because she would cherish these things all her days.

00:07:53 Speaker 3

The reader is left with a terrible sense of unease that propagating these narratives about the war will lead onto the exactly the same kind of social strain that led to the war in the 1st place. So very interestingly, biting satirical chilli poem with an emotional kick at the end.

00:08:13 Speaker 3

He thought how Jack cold footed useless swine had panicked down the trench that night. The mine went up, but Wicked Corner how he'd tried to get sent home and how at last he died, blown into small bits and no one seemed to care.

00:08:32 Speaker 3

There except that lonely woman with white hair.

00:08:36 Speaker 3

That was the last stanza of the hero, rather different to the poems by Wilfred Owen.

00:08:42 Speaker 4

And all interestingly, is always writing to a similar old haired woman, his mother, to whom he wrote 500 letters. But in his poems he never mentions that instead he draws us to moments of.

00:08:56 Speaker 4

Extreme bodily experience and waves. Almost linguistic tactile fantasies. He's interested in moments when limbs are knife skewed or for example the blood starts slowly come out of the lips or when the limbs are still warm. Too hard to stir, so he draws us into this.

00:09:16 Speaker 4

Moments where we no longer know whether the person is alive or dead. So it's a very different kind of sensibility that we see.

00:09:24 Speaker 4

One is interested more in society and set our the other one in the recesses of the body. The body in pain.

00:09:32 Speaker 4

There is the famous meeting between Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart Hospital. So soon he was in Aristokraft.

00:09:41 Speaker 4

He was very handsome. He was the public school educated officer poet who slightly maybe pact to Noised Wilfred Owen, who once knocked on Sassoon door.

00:09:52 Speaker 4

So soon let you remember the velvety voice of Owen Owen at that time also had a stammer.

00:09:58 Speaker 4

And was completely in awe with this larger than life figure of Sassoon. The other big factor, which is interesting.

00:10:06 Speaker 4

Both of these writers, they are homosexual and with oh. And there's this surcharged desire that gets translated into the celebration of the male form.

00:10:18 Speaker 4

So soon, on the other hand, talks about the festering buttocks in the mud you have this bodily horror, but with oh and we have an almost perverse aestheticization of the male body as he's recasting Ki.

00:10:33 Speaker 4

It's a kids is the favourite poet of both Will federn answer soon and both of them Rewalk Keats in very different ways.

00:10:41 Speaker 4

In recent years our whole idea of war has expanded. Ward is no longer just combat, but conflict that affects civilians, women, children refuse.

00:10:53 Speaker 4

Geez, and because of the re framing of ideas of war, the poetry of war has also been reconfigured so that now it includes poetry by women. And here we have some extraordinary writers like Rose Macaulay, Margaret Postgate, Cole.

00:11:11 Speaker 4

There are of course heartbreaking lines from some of these poets, very different from those of the male poets. Here, for example, is Margaret Postgate goals Crematory, but the last line reads, but there are ears and ears in which we will still be young.

00:11:29 Speaker 4

So youth becomes a curse because there are not enough men to get married to, and in a previous line she writes.

00:11:36 Speaker 4

But we are young and our friends are dead suddenly and her quick love is torn in two. So our memories are only hopes that came to nothing and the sense of.

00:11:49 Speaker 4

On lived lives is central.

00:11:52 Speaker 4

To the poetry of this women.

00:11:54 Speaker 3

And at the end of weather in Cayman spine wrong you have this line that is about either leaving something or being left behind.

00:12:02 Speaker 3

This image of the trains that go from RAW at the ending of the day, which seems to be the perfect symbol simultaneous for those who feel that due to the war they're now.

00:12:12 Speaker 3

Going to be the ones who are left or they're going to be the ones who are moving on to something else.

00:12:17 Speaker 4

We had been speaking about a variety of poems written in the First World War, from the visceral poems of Wilfred Owen to the satirical poems of Sassoon to some of the heartbreaking poems written by women such as Rose Macaulay, Margaret Postgate, Cole. But 100 years own.

00:12:38 Speaker 4

I think part of the challenge for us is how to read the poems without sanitising the horrors on one hand or even romanticising these writers.

00:12:49 Speaker 4

Since you report Andrew, what relevance have these poems for you?

00:12:55 Speaker 3

While seeing the students working on them, what came through was the importance as an educational tool of these kinds of works for reminding people of the horror of war, the pity of war.

00:13:08 Speaker 3

I suppose for all of us, though, these poems were a reminder that poetry perhaps comes into its own in a particular kind of way. In times of crisis, when it's much needed for accurate utterance and moral witness.

00:13:40 Speaker 1

You have been listening to a writers wall. I do hope you'll join us for the next podcast in the series.