

## Mass Civilisation/Mass War: Eliot, Woolf and Owen

All text and illustrations C Jonathan Brockbank, unless noted.

*The Waste Land* does not emphasise the details that fix this poem in the years following The Great War: 'When Lil's husband got demobbed' (*The Waste Land* II. 139). Nevertheless the notoriety the poem achieved may be because the images of collapse and decay would be familiar to many men returning from the trenches: 'in rat's alley/Where the dead men lost their bones,' (*The Waste Land* II. 115), 'White bodies naked on the low damp ground' (*The Waste Land* III. 193).

The 'hooded hordes swarming/Over endless plains' suggest refugees displaced by modern warfare (*The Waste Land* V.368). Read swiftly the lines

Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air

Falling towers

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

sound like bombardment or an air raid rather than a vision (*The Waste Land* V.372).

*Mrs Dalloway* is clearer in its engagement with the problems of 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare. Woolf recognises that the total wars of the twentieth century have eroded the distinction between soldier and civilian. The mass armies of the First World War were civilians made into soldiers who were then made back into civilians. Septimus stands for so many young men of all nations. His shell-shock brings the horror of war into the heart of peaceful London; the inability of this society to cure Septimus' psychological disturbances functions symbolically as an indictment of man's inability to stop war. As Woolf's angry book-length essay *Three Guineas* makes clear she sees war and fascism as phenomena deriving from male not female psychologies. The text is online at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91tg/>

One of the most sinister features of modern war is the targeting of civilians and the use of terror to try to break civilian moral. Yorkshire was introduced to such tactics in the early months of WWI. On Wednesday December 16<sup>th</sup> 1914, battle cruisers from the German fleet bombarded Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool. Of these only Hartlepool was a defended military target; the six inch guns of its battery hit but could not damage the attacking battle cruisers. The main targets were civilian. The Grand Hotel in Scarborough was hit more than thirty times. The total casualties for Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool were 135 civilians killed and 500 wounded. There were no military casualties. Statistics from *Bombardment: The Day the East Coast Bled*, Mark Marsay, Scarborough, Great Northern Publishing, 1999.

The shelling of Scarborough is the focus of two post-Great War novels.



*Woodend: the Sitwells house in Scarborough. Osbert, his brother Sacheverell, and sister Edith were poets and writers. They edited the poetry anthology Wheels 1916-21 and knew Wilfred Owen.*

Osbert Sitwell's *Before the Bombardment* uses the bombardment to signal the end of Edwardian complacency:  
*'death darted at her from the sea, and Mrs Waddington, and her bedroom with her, was pulverised, fading with a swift, raucous whistling and crashing into the murky air.'*  
(London, Duckworth, 1927, p310).



*The Grand Hotel, Scarborough, sea-view. Built in 1869 to accommodate the mass tourism made possible by the development of railways, the Grand Hotel boasts 365 rooms, one for each day of the year.*

By contrast the shelling awakens Muriel Hammond, the heroine of Winifred Holby's *The Crowded Street*, to a new world in which women will no longer define themselves by the men they marry or fail to marry:

*'Crash! Crash!*

*Hugh sounds, flat and ugly, dropped into the silence of the room. Slowly she turned and sat up in bed.'*

*(The Crowded Street, London, Virago, 1981, [1924] p119).*

### *Wilfred Owen in Scarborough*

Wilfred Owen served as in Scarborough from November 1917 to March 1918 and June to August 1918, (*Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, Dominic Hibberd, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002, 284-306/ 326-331). It occupied the interval between the best-known parts of Owen's life, his treatment at Craiglockhart and his death on the Ouse-Sambre Canal.

His feelings at the time were not simply pacifist. On September 4 1917 a German submarine surfaced in Cayton Bay and attacked armed trawlers in South Bay for 10 minutes. It missed the trawlers but hit the town, killing 3 and injuring 6.  
<http://www.scarboroughsmaritimeheritage.org.uk/asubmarine1917.php>

The attack may have inspired Owen's comment 'I wish the Bosche would have the pluck to come right in & make a clean sweep of the Pleasure Boats, and all the stinking Leeds & Bradford War-profiteers now reading *John Bull* on Scarborough sands.' ( *Wilfred Owen*, 327)





*Clarence Gardens Hotel, now Clifton Hotel. Owen was billeted in the corner turret (Nov to March. His job was to help organise the Officers' Mess. On the wall above the dark car to the right of the door you can see the blue plaque commemorating him.*



*Site of Burniston Barracks. The barracks and the tents where Owen and troops slept before being sent out to join the final victorious Allied offensive (June-August) were on the headland above the large white building.*

More obliquely, when Septimus looks up to see an aircraft fly overhead, Woolf reminds London readers of the air attacks on London during WWI. From 1914-1925 aircraft were primarily weapons of war. Britain was attacked by bomb-dropping Zeppelins throughout the war but from 1917-18 London was targeted by more accurate, and more lethal, bomber aircraft the Gothas and Giants. The aeroplane attacks killed 837 people and wounded 1,983. (*The German Air Raids on Great Britain*, Captain Joseph Morris, Cirencester, Nonesuch, 2007, [1925])

H.G. Wells had been writing stories about the destruction of civilisation by aerial attack for years before WW1. The most pessimistic is 1908's *The War in the Air* where a world war involves every nation from America to Japan and forces civilisation back to a pre-technology tribalism. In 1913 he wrote the optimistic *The World Set Free*, where an irrational war fought with atomic bombs leads to a rational World Government that ends war. The prophetic element is

**undermined by the fact that Wells' atomic weapons have to be armed by letting air reach the radioactive core. This is done by mouth:**

***'Then he had to bite to let the air in upon the inductive'***

**(*The World Set Free*, San Diego, the book Tree, 2007, p48).**

**The most disturbing short story to emerge from the '14-18 air-war is Kipling's 'Mary Postgate' (*Friendly Brook and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, pps80-96 [1915]**

**In WWII York was one of the main sites of Bomber Command airfields, mostly employing Halifax heavy bombers. The headquarters of 4 Group Bomber Command was Heslington Hall:**



*Heslington Hall Memorial tablet, by the stairs to the toilet in the entrance hall.*

One of the Gotha officers who attacked London in WWI was Fritz Lorenz. On the upper wing of his plane he painted EISERN UND IRRE 'Iron and Insanity'. (*First Blitz*, Neil Hanson, London, Transworld, 2008, p268). It is a fit epigram for the twentieth century.



*Moon and Twilight: Skeldergate Bridge, 29.07.12*