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VERSED IN WAR  
THE PRESERVATION AND PUBLICATION OF SECOND WORLD WAR POETRY  
BY THE SALAMANDER OASIS TRUST

by  
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A dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School–New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Graduate Program in Literatures in English

Written under the direction of

Derek Attridge

And approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

January 2009

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Versed in War: The Preservation and Publication of Second World War Poetry by  
the Salamander Oasis Trust

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This dissertation describes the collection of poetry by men and women in the British and Commonwealth armed forces written during the Second World War. The project which ultimately became the Salamander Oasis Trust Archive began in Cairo, Egypt in 1942, when three low-ranking servicemen decided to gather poetry for an anthology *Oasis: The Middle East Anthology of Poetry from the Forces*. Following the war, the editors and contributors gathered to re-form their group, republish the anthology and, over the next twenty years, produce four more. Despite the efforts of the Trust and the vast store of poetry and letters amassed in its archive at the Imperial War Museum, Duxford, the Salamander Oasis poems are relatively unknown in literary scholarship. “Versed in War” explores the literary scene in Cairo, the importance of reading and writing among servicemen and women, the writing practices of novice poets as well as the reasons for the unfortunate obscurity of the SOTA poems, including publishing conditions in wartime London, competing beliefs about the place of culture in war, and fixed ideas about poetry which devalue novices’ verse.

Drawing upon archival materials, published anthologies and contemporary journals and reviews, this dissertation is intended not only to broaden awareness of the collection and its value to scholars and readers of poetry, but also to frame the poems in ways which suggest their potential as historical and cultural artifacts for enriching our understanding of what poetry means to those who choose it as their mode of expression in the most desperate circumstances of their lives, and to develop a set of questions which make these poems meaningful and relevant to post-war generations of readers.

## Dedications

Offered with gratitude to those who fought, some of whom wrote these poems:  
improbable products of war and artifacts of humanity in an inhuman time.

With deep appreciation,

for M.F.

who helps, mostly.

## **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful for the support of my program staff, the direction of my director, the commitment of my committee, and the encouragement of my friends and relations.

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## Introduction

The archives of the Imperial War Museum in Duxford, Cambridgeshire hold the Salamander Oasis Trust Archive, a staggering collection of Second World War poems—over 17,000 documents written during the war by British and Commonwealth servicemen and women of all ranks, in all branches of the service, in every theater of the war. The story of the Salamander Oasis poems begins in late 1942 in Cairo, Egypt as the battle of El Alamein raged to the west and Monty's Eighth Army began to prove itself against Erwin Rommel. Three enlisted men envisioned a collection of poetry: about the war by the men who were fighting it. With a few connections and some free publicity, word of their project spread and the poems began to arrive. By 1995, these men together with others, had reconnected, formed the Trust, collected a vast record of war writing and published six anthologies of verse.

Readers of Second World War and 1940s poetry may recognize a score of names among the thousands of contributors, but the majority of them are unknown in literary studies for the simple reason that they were novice poets. Unlike the First World War, which made soldiers out of poets, the Second World War made poets out of soldiers. Consequently the Salamander Oasis poets do not spring to mind when one hears the designation “war poet.” The anonymity of the individual contributors accounts for some of the relative obscurity of the poems. The vast majority of which were written without thought to publication. While some contributors have literary reputations, their reputations do not depend upon their contributions in the archive. The split between soldiers' war poetry and civilians' poetry in wartime is rooted in the division between the ‘high standards’ of civilian writers and the often patchy work of soldier-poets. Those soldier-poets who are judged the best—those who come nearest to the standards of the civilian poets or rival the

best First World War poets—are known, while the majority are unrecognized and unread. Consequently most extant Second World War poetry is neither studied nor taught nor known to the academy or the reading public. While Second World War poetry has enjoyed a recent surge in critical interest, many of the critics working to recover these texts and to situate them in the literary canon have overlooked the Salamander Oasis poems.

As the Salamander Oasis Trustees and editors collected poems and published anthologies, others explored their own interests in Second World War poetry, frequently focusing their efforts on a core group of writers. Ian Hamilton's 1965 stirring anthology *The Poetry of War 1939-45* features Drummond Allison, Kingsley Amis, Donald Bain, Norman Cameron, Charles Causley, Robert Conquest, Herbert Corby, Paul Dehn, Keith Douglas, Roy Fuller, Bernard Gutteridge, Norman Hampson, Hamish Henderson, Sidney Keyes, Alun Lewis, H.B. Mallalieu, F.T. Prince, John Pudney, Henry Reed, Alan Ross, Julian Symons and Americans: Richard Eberhart, Randall Jarrell, Howard Nemerov, Louis Simpson, William Jay Smith and Richard Wilbur. The book's most remarkable feature is its inclusion of "prose statements from a number of the poets themselves" which Hamilton hopes "will compensate for whatever seems too literary and speculative in [his] own approach to the period these poets lived through" (4). The poets' statements are remarkable, enlightening and often humorous, as the men describe their attitudes toward poetry as the war began, during and after, as well as their experience of the service and their goals for their writing. These remarkable accounts represent only a handful of the thousands of men and women who wrote during the war. The unpublished letters of contributors to the Salamander Oasis Archive tell similar stories, albeit without the familiar names which readily attract notice.

Vernon Scannell's 1976 study *Not Without Glory* discusses the constellation of well-

known poets: Keith Douglas, Alun Lewis, Sidney Keyes, and Roy Fuller each get a chapter. Alan Ross and Charles Causley appear together as do “Henry Read and others,” including Drummond Allison, Jocelyn Brooke, Norman Cameron, Roy Campbell, Herbert Corby, R.N. Curry, Hamish Henderson, John Manifold, and F.T. Prince. In the final chapter, Scannell discusses “American Poets of the Second World War,” specifically Richard Eberhart, Anthony Hecht, Randall Jarrell, Lincoln Kirstein, Howard Nemerov, Karl Shapiro, Louis Simpson and Richard Wilbur. The overlap with Hamilton’s collection is notable and unsurprising. In 1986 Catherine Reilly, a bibliographer of poetry from both World Wars, published an exhaustive biobibliography; *English Poetry of the Second World War*, lists “some 2,679 poets who have contributed to 2985 individual listed works and 87 anthologies” which includes everything, from “the poorest quality verse . . . privately published by local newspapers and by jobbing printers” to poets of the highest standing. The bibliography is an invaluable research tool. In analysis of her findings, Reilly sketches the breadth of poems and poets produced by Britain alone. One telling detail Reilly brings out is the habit of “successive war poetry anthologies . . . to perpetuate the original selection of poems chosen by earlier anthologists” (xiii). Reilly’s reports the most frequently anthologize poets and the number of anthologies in which they appear as follows: “Roy Fuller (25), Alun Lewis (24), Sidney Keyes (21), Stephen Spender (19), Keith Douglas (18), John Pudney (18), Alan Rook (18), Louis MacNeice (15), Henry Reed (15), W.H. Auden (14), G.S. Fraser (14), Dylan Thomas (14), John Waller (14), Emanuel Litvinoff (13), Henry Treece (13), Cecil Day Lewis (12), Herbert Corby (11), Nicholas Moore (11)” (xiii).

More recent studies have begun the work of recovering the reputation of under-represented poetry from the 1940s. In the 1989 volume, *The War Decade: An Anthology of the 1940s*, compiler Andrew Sinclair “illustrates the experience of the war decade as seen by the

writers and poets and artists of the nineteen-forties” and draws upon “disparate sources to create pictures of the period from its beginning until the dispersal of this brief culture at the end of the decade” (xxi). Simon Featherstone’s 1995 study, *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader*, “challenges the dominance of English officer poets in the canon of war poetry” with “a diversity of voices, many of which until now have not been heard, and all of which participated in the major cultural and intellectual arguments of their times” (i). Although these and other valuable works include lesser-known poems, they either overlook or dismiss the Salamander Oasis poems.

Encouraging progress has been made with respect to the poetry of other groups. Reilly edited an anthology of women’s verse in 1984. *Chaos of the Night* responds to the under-representation of women which she found in otherwise “good general anthologies of World War II poetry” (xxi). Reilly compares “four excellent anthologies,” two from the forties and two from the sixties, of which the best proportion of male to female poets is 5 to 1, the worst 22.4 to 1. Reilly argues, “It might well be that the business of war was still regarded as primarily a masculine concern, yet in this war British civilians, women as well as men, were subjected to as much personal danger from enemy air attacks as servicemen on active duty” (xxi). Reilly claims that holding jobs outside the home, remaining single “because the men they might have married had perished on the Western Front” and “knowledge of how they had proved their worth in that earlier war, ensured that their role would again be a vital and important one” (xxiii). The conscription of women into “auxiliary services, civil defence and essential civilian employment such as work in aircraft factories or on the land” forced a broadening of experience and cultivated a sense independence; the eighty-seven female poets included in *Chaos of the Night* represent the manifold roles women played in the Second War. Like the Salamander Oasis editors, Reilly is concerned with

representation both of more poets' work and of the time which inspired them, and like the Salamander Oasis editors, Reilly sees the poems as "a vivid yet sensitive record of a critical period in our history" (xxiii). Anne Powell's 1999 anthology follows in Reilly's footsteps. *Shadows of War: British Women's Poetry of the Second World War* pursues an interest in women's verse and history, grouping poems by year with an historical introduction to each section. Interest in poetry from the war-time Middle East has also increased over the post-war years. Artemis Cooper's history *Cairo in the War 1939-1945* was published in 1989, followed in 1995 by Roger Bowen's "*Many Histories Deep*": *The Personal Landscape Poets in Egypt, 1940-45* and in 1997 by Jonathan Bolton's *Personal Landscapes: British Poets in Egypt During the Second World War*. The books offer detailed descriptions of war-time Egypt in addition to poetry studies and contribute significantly to understanding the context from which the *Oasis* poems sprung and the literary community into which that the first anthology emerged.

In *The Terrible Rain: The War Poets 1939-1945*, Brian Gardner writes "The First War produced the greater poetry: but there is a great deal more good poetry of the Second War" (xxii-iii). Gardner's anthology includes 119 poets "arranged in an attempt to reveal a particular period of history" (xxii). The book's organization likely influenced the grouping of poems in the later Salamander Oasis anthologies. The editors were certainly aware of Gardner's work. Of the "140 books published both during the war and since" and "the anthologies we are expected to supersede" which the editors read in the preparation of their third volume of verse, *The Terrible Rain* is the only title Victor Selwyn mentions with approbation, calling Gardner's anthology "the finest of them all" (*Poems* xv). Despite their approval of his efforts, the editors appreciated a difference between Gardner's work and their own: "*Ours smells of war. We were there and wrote then, and this is how it was.* In that respect we are unique" (xv). Despite the modest ambition of most contributors, the editors felt the

poems were worth saving and capitalize on their experience to seek out and preserve unheralded verse. What might be dismissed as enthusiasm for a pet project is better understood as the editors' and contributors' feeling that the poems recounting first hand experiences of war had value and should be preserved for a broader readership. They succeeded. The archived and anthologized poems are rich resources suggesting a wide range of inquiries. The anthologies show how different configurations of poems can guide readers as they explore different poets' experiences, different aspects of military service and the war. The anthologies work as a literary open house for the poems: their sections do not deliver extra-textual knowledge but they encourage roaming through the poems and openness to the breadth of experience contained in each volume. The arbitrary organization of the archive frustrates many kinds of research, but it rewards browsing. The volume of poems collected and their range of style and quality raises the question of what poetry meant to the contributors.

General Sir John Hackett's description of the criteria for inclusion in an anthology reflects the attitude of the trustees. In order to be considered for publication, a poem

must have been written in time of war and offer clear evidence that it would have been written only under wartime pressure and not otherwise. Literary merit must occupy the highest place in our criteria, *but not the only one*. It is the breathing of the human spirit that we have to hear, in all its many different modes, in anguish, fear, triumph, disgust, boredom, pleasure, friendship, hatred, love, and any other of the infinite variety of emotions and states that make up the distinctive life of man. . . . What has been put together here . . . is a living tapestry of human experience in wartime. . . .

(*Voice xi*)

The collection reflects an inclusive definition of poetry and includes high and low forms. There are lyrics, elegies, and raucous marching songs, concrete poems, jaunty poulter's measure echoing the balladeer and poems in which multiple speakers are each represented by a different form. Some poems are modeled on famous verse or set to popular tunes. The poems depict a broad range of experiences—from skirmishing in the North African desert, to invading Italy, landing on beaches in the South Pacific, flying defensive missions over Britain, languishing in prison camps and convalescing in hospitals. The poems are reflective, escapist, documentary, bawdy, philosophical and raw with emotion. The “breathing of the human spirit” for which Hackett and the others listened not only guided their decisions, it directs our reading. Their requirement is our imperative: we “have to hear” these voices.

Writing can anchor an experience in space—concretizing on a piece of paper something otherwise intangible, so a poem about a missing airman, a fallen comrade, or a road lined with corpses, registers that experience in the realm of public awareness. An obituary, grave marker or photograph could too, so why did so many choose to write in verse? The simplest poems in the archive—saved but unpublished—read as formatted prose; these poems depend upon the appearance of poetry to signal an intentional piece of writing and cue the careful reading that poetry often elicits. Others are so strictly conventional that they lack feeling; their compliance to poetry's rules suggests a belief about the form's power to invest words with meaning. Poetry's traditions and flexibility allow others to play with language and imagery, using poetic devices to express the sense and nonsense of experience that cannot be as well communicated by straightforward means.

The convergence of literature and history—enhanced by the range of writers, breadth of new experiences, time for and interest in writing, and inspiration occasioned by war—

produced an overwhelming array of poetry, as well as other writing. Despite all the scholarly and popular interest in the war and its poetry, only a portion of which is described above, the Salamander Oasis poems and the important strain of writing captured in its archive have been overlooked. The present inquiry works to correct this omission by connecting the Salamander Oasis poems to extant literary history.

The first chapter, “Reading and Writing in the Second World War” describes the genesis and goals of the 1943 anthology *Oasis*, the importance of Cairo as a center of culture and recreation, the importance of reading to servicemen. In addition to bringing the poems to readers’ attention, this project aims to demonstrate the many points of entry into the poems which may interest literary scholars. Chapter two, “Poetry in Wartime: Culture and Responsibility in Conflict” explores the debate about the place of reading and writing in wartime—the value of the book and the difficulty of publishing and the appropriate response of writers to the war. Individuals interested in readers’ attitudes toward books, their use and treatment will find in this chapter fascinating case studies in wartime London and Cairo. This chapter also covers the lively debate about the purposes of war poetry which would shape reception of the *Oasis* poems during and after the war. The disagreement between guardians of high culture and advocates for social engagement are certainly relevant today. The crucible of world war uncovers the extremity of views on both sides.

The second half of the project studies the products and contents of the Salamander Oasis Trust’s anthologies and its archive. The third chapter, “From Battlefield to Book: The Archive and Anthologies” describes the establishment of the Trust, the creation of the archive and the goals and structure of the five post-war anthologies and the competition for control over the criteria by which war poetry is judged. The editors’ ideas about war, poetry, war poetry and war poets play out implicitly in their selection and organization of poems and



other writing, and explicitly in their framing comments on each anthology. This chapter also touches on the critical reception of the anthologies as well as raising questions which can only be answered by the poems themselves. The final chapter “A Picture of War” traces one line of inquiry—how the war challenged identities and beliefs—through a selection of poems from the anthologies. Drawing upon published and archive materials by notable and unknown poets, this chapter explores different moments of questioning prompted by war experience. From the transformation from civilian to soldier to the use and value of memorials, this chapter highlights both the common strains of thought and feeling and the manifold experiences represented in verse, sketching themes and posing questions that open up the archive for further study. The final portion of the chapter focuses on unpublished work, the potential for additional work on the poems and the untapped resources of the archive.

## Chapter One

### Reading and Writing in the Second World War

In 1942, at a Cairo arts club run by the wife of the city's police chief, three enlisted men envisioned a collection of poetry written by the men who were fighting the war. Only one of the men had a literary reputation, and a modest one at that; their plan enjoyed no military endorsement. With a handful of supporters and some free publicity, however, word of their project spread and the poems began to arrive. Newspapers and magazines in the Middle East published the appeal and Egyptian State Broadcasting read the call for submissions on the radio every day for a week. The editors' efforts were rewarded with 800 contributors submitting 3000 manuscripts via free armed services mail. The men read the poems over three months, pursuing the project in their free time, reading submissions by lantern light in their tents in the desert, and corresponding with one another from different posts across the region. With the support of a local literary group, the Salamander Society, and an anonymous financial backer, the collection of 74 poems by 51 poets was published in September 1943 as *Oasis: The Middle East Anthology of Poetry from the Forces* (*Oasis* ix-xi). The 5000 paperback copies, available at the Navy, Army, and Air Force Institutes for the equivalent of 25 pence, sold out in six weeks. The profits of £E250 were donated to the Red Cross (*Return* 3).

The men who initiated the collection and publication of servicemen's verse were themselves writers and literary enthusiasts and knew firsthand the value of maintaining their interest in poetry during the war. When their project began, Denis Saunders was serving as an airman of the South African Air Force in the Desert and writing poetry under the name Almendro. Victor Selwyn, a lecturer in civilian life, was serving in the British Army with a tented map-reading and navigation unit. David Burk, a journalist, was intelligence officer

and Army newspaperman. According to their preface to *Oasis*, “In the Beginning,” the editors wanted to gather and preserve the servicemen’s poetic responses to their experience of war.

We were discussing and criticizing Denis’s latest poem and the book of verse he intended publishing in the near future, and one of us suddenly said: “There must be a lot of poets in the Middle East. Men who have been encouraged by some inward feeling, induced by the war and by battle, to express in verse the many ideas flowing through their minds. It seems a pity for the gems which undoubtedly will have been produced to remain locked secretly in the poets’ bosoms. Why not collect their works together and publish a Middle East anthology of servicemen’s poetry?” (ix)

The writing process that the editors imagined proceeds from the intersection of private and public history: the collective condition of war and the shared experiences of battle evoke in individuals an urge to structure and express private thoughts in verse. Saunders, Selwyn and Burk wanted to extend this process through collection and publication, effectively delivering the servicemen’s private thoughts, processed into poetry, to the public sphere. Even before the project began, however, they appear to have been aware of the stakes. Taken together, their comparison of the poems to gems and their concern for the fate of uncollected poems indicate their sense that the poems are not only potentially precious but vulnerable. Inspired by the testimonial value of servicemen’s verse, the *Oasis* anthology offers a diverse and surprising body of work reflecting an array of literary influences in a range of poetic styles. The anthology itself does not serve any one aesthetic. Instead, it presents a range of subjects and experiences against a background of war-time conditions which daily threatened both individuality and survival.

Forty years later, the war-time anthology venture developed into a conservation and publication project that has collected servicemen's poetry from men and women in every branch of service and every theater of the war. The original *Oasis* and over seventeen thousand additional poems, letters and documents are now archived in the Imperial War Museum Duxford, Cambridgeshire. Anthologies have been published from the collected poems, and the editors and trustees have worked to publicize the poems and to gain acknowledgement for their fellow veterans' poetry. Despite all the efforts made on behalf of these poems, they and their history and literary value are largely unknown. Their moving first-hand accounts of the war remain unread. The anonymity of the writers, the mixed quality of the poems, and the long shadow of the Great War's soldier-poets have been obstacles for these texts. The anthologies are difficult to find. The poems are not taught in schools. There has not, until now, been a critical study of the poems. How can these poems be brought out of obscurity and into the hands of new readers?

The *Oasis* poems arose out of a particular place and time. Unlike many poems which originate with private experience, however, the context of these poems is, on the most basic level, shared. All the poets have war-time military service in common. How much of the poems' appeal and value depends upon the circumstances under which they were written? Pursuing the answer to that question requires answering many others. How did the British military presence and expatriates shape Cairo's English-language literary culture? How did Cairo and reading and writing practices lead to the creation of *Oasis*? What was the contemporary critical reception of *Oasis*? How do audience, literary quality and the interplay of these two factors influence the reception of *Oasis* and the post-war anthologies?

Through the editors' enterprise, three distinct audiences have had an opportunity to bear witness to the Second World War through the words of the men and women who were

there. Servicemen, the initial purchasers of the collection, could compare their experiences to their peers'. Contemporary civilians could better understand a serviceman's perspective on the war, and future generations of readers can access firsthand accounts of historical events. How do these poems function as testimony for each audience?

### **Cairo in the War**

The conditions in which the poems were written and the anthology was produced were determined by the military action in the region. A basic familiarity with the events in that theater and the strategic importance of securing the Middle East sheds light on the creation of *Oasis* and its contents. Cairo played a vital role as an intellectual and cultural center during the war. The 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty formalized Britain's "quasi-imperial status" in Egypt (Bowen 19). Therefore, when war was declared in 1939, British presence was well established in Egypt and particularly in Cairo, where Britain maintained headquarters of the British Troops in Egypt. Therefore, despite Egypt's neutrality, it was effectively occupied by British and Imperial Forces during the war. Cairo's stability throughout the war in the Middle East allowed the British and their Imperial partners unfettered access to a stable and lively urban environment. The privations of the desert and frustration of see-saw combat could be set aside upon arriving 'home' in the city on the Nile.

In the nine months between Britain's declaration of war with Germany on 3 September 1939 and the Italian declaration of war with Britain in June 1940, the Cairo-based Middle East Command of the British Armed Forces held its territory in relative quiet. As France fell, however, Mussolini began to consider how to eject the British from Egypt, Ethiopia, the Sudan, Kenya and Somaliland. According to Winston Churchill, the Italian Army was well equipped and well positioned to do so.

Even before the war a magnificent road had been made along the coast from the main base at Tripoli, through Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Libya, to the Egyptian Frontier. Along this road there had been for many months a swelling stream of military traffic. Large magazines were slowly established and filled at Benghazi, Derna, Tobruk, Bardia and Sollum. The length of this road was over a thousand miles, and all these swarming Italian garrisons and supply depots were strung along it like beads on a string. (Churchill 419)

Despite their tactical advantages and the dependence of their success upon capturing “the fertile regions of the Delta,” the Italian forces were slow to act. Between 11 and 16 June 1940, British forces successfully fought and captured Italians at Capuzzo, Maddalena and on the Tobruk-Bardia road. Churchill recalled “In this small but lively warfare our troops felt they had the advantage, and soon conceived themselves to be masters of the desert” (Churchill 419-420). In July and August, as British forces under General Wavell awaited reinforcements and essential supplies, Italians occupied Sidi Barrani and Sollum (de Mauny 248). With “vastly superior forces” the Italians drove the British out of British Somaliland in early August 1940 (Churchill 431). The Italian success was short-lived. In December 1940, the British launched a surprise attack driving the Italians back from Sidi Barrani in Western Egypt deep into Libya, finally defeated them near Benghazi in February 1941 (de Mauny 248).

Many of the British victories of this period were undone when German divisions, commanded by General Erwin Rommel and trained for desert fighting reinforced the Italian Army in April 1941. Many of the sites and cities already won from Italy, including Tobruk and Benghazi, were recaptured by the German Afrika Korps. December 1941 brought a repeat of the British drive into Libya. In part, this offensive succeeded because German

forces were depleted by Germany's advance on Russia, so when Rommel's divisions were reinforced in May 1942, the British were pushed back through Libya—past Benghazi, Tobruk and Bardia—and into Egypt, as the Axis troops advanced unchecked to El Alamein, within seventy miles of Alexandria. Following a four month lull, General Bernard L. Montgomery drove from El Alamein to expel Rommel's divisions from Egypt. The cities which changed hands most often, Tobruk, El Alamein, and Bardia, are the settings of many poems, and, when in the city name is included in the title, it is often accompanied by a date in order to place the poem in the correct military context: Italian or German, victory, defeat or stalemate. Monty's powerful Eighth Army rolled across North Africa in 1942 and 1943, routing Axis forces from El Alamein in Egypt and pushing through Libya to Tunisia, the last German stronghold in North Africa. The Germans in Tunisia were caught between the American Second Army Corps to the west and the British Eighth Army to the east. The American and British armies joined forces in February and together captured the last of German-held Tunisia in May 1943. The Allied victory in Africa was crucial for several reasons. It secured Egypt and the Suez Canal, which was necessary to supply the Soviet Union, opened the Mediterranean for Allied shipping, checked Italian imperialism in Africa, and left Italy vulnerable to invasion. Following victory in Africa, Allied forces under General Eisenhower invaded Sicily and Italy and began to turn the tide of the war.

The Nile delta and the city of Cairo anchored the Allied Forces in the Middle East and enabled them to succeed. Despite the hardships of fighting in the desert—shortages of water and fuel for fires, dramatic daily temperature changes, and ever present sand—the dusty wastes were viewed by many as a desirable battleground so long as one held Cairo and the Nile. Like an arena or soccer pitch, the desert was vast and empty and consequently, as one soldier described it, the desert was “the ideal location for war. Hundreds of miles of empty

desert, uncluttered lines of communication, a perfect climate and a civilized back-up along the Nile—it was a tactician’s paradise” (Norman 223). One *Oasis* poet, John Remington, confirms that both sides saw the advantage of holding the cities on the Nile Delta as fall-back positions.

Perhaps, though, the best illustration of the special atmosphere of the desert campaigns came from a German Officer whom I met, some thirty years after it was all over, at a business seminar in Switzerland. Finding that we had served on opposing sides during the campaign of 1939 to 1943, we compared notes over a drink. “So you finally won in Africa,” he admitted, “but I always thought the whole thing was rather unfair. We should have changed ends at half time.” (Remington 226)

### **Serving in Cairo**

Although the years of advance and retreat across the desert often ended with frustrating reversals, throughout the military engagement Cairo was a haven for the Middle East Forces. Never invaded, it remained a headquarters for the command and a welcoming oasis for servicemen on leave. Service clubs and tea rooms offered entertainment for servicemen in the city. In addition to physical comforts on offer in Cairo—baths, markets, nightclubs, brothels, and ample supplies of food being strictly rationed at home—intellectual enrichment was available in the fellowship of the servicemen and civilians who gathered at arts and service houses to read library books and view art, attend concerts and lectures, and hear poetry. Servicemen gathered in these establishments for intelligent conversation among themselves and with British civilians employed in Egypt. Troops in Cairo benefited from proximity to (and Army Education enjoyed assistance from) the British Council, Anglo-Egyptian Union and Fuad I University. According to one report, in “September 1942 some



six thousand troops were attending classes of one kind or another” (Hawkins and Brimble 238-239).

Several factors steered servicemen into the company of their peers. British military culture in Cairo encouraged the forces to stick together and form self-selecting groups. Both racism and nationalism played a part in the social lives of British Forces in Egypt and later Middle East Forces. The Co-Ordinating Council for the Welfare of Troops in Egypt published a *Services Guide to Cairo* for the Middle East Forces “with a view to providing useful information for Officers and men of His Britannic Majesty's Forces staying in and coming on leave to Cairo” (1). The *Services Guide* reads like a tour book but it also implies that the relationship between the servicemen and Egyptians is best mediated by established organizations—that the welfare of troops in Egypt with which the Co-Ordinating Council is concerned includes not only their entertainment while on leave, but also insulation from those (Egyptians) who might take advantage of them. For example, the *Services Guide* provides information about full and half-day tours organized by the Empire and Empire Service Clubs and the YMCA and independent excursions, listing the cost of hiring a camel or donkey to see the Pyramids. These price lists would help in planning the trip but other information, such as “there is no entrance fee to the Pyramids” and “every party will be escorted by a reliable guide who is attached to these Clubs” and “Car prices quoted are for cars in good condition and with properly qualified drivers,” indicate the extent to which servicemen on leave were easy marks for Cairo’s enterprising poor. One soldier recalls the experience of being trapped in such an interaction.

Cairo had its dangers, however, and it was not wise to frequent some of the sleazier bars and cabarets down the darker alleys of the city for all manner of reasons. The most common source of danger, however, was from the ‘shoe-

shine' wallads [sic] whose persistence and aggressive tactics were a by-word in the Middle East. There you were, walking from the station towards the city centre with your nostrils full of the diverse and pungent smells of the Orient, and your ears almost deafened by the sound of Arabic music blasting out from hundreds of loudspeakers. Suddenly, around a corner, you come face to face with a band of shoe-shine boys. You try to ignore them, but, in a flash, they have you surrounded and one of them is saying 'Wanna shoe shine, George?'. You shake your head but quick as a flash one of the gang has splashed a blob of runny black polish on to your shoe. You are at first disposed to let the mess stay where it is and to walk on, but you change your mind when you see another urchin standing by with a brush dripping with the horrible black substance with the obvious intention of ruining your best, freshly laundered suit of K.D. [khaki drill uniform]. You give in with the very best grace you can manage, and pay up when the job is completed.

(Straw)

The British king's name was rather freely bandied about in Egypt. Servicemen regularly refused to pay their fares on Cairo's tram and were often heard to say 'Charge it to King George' or 'Put it down to Churchill'. Likewise the shoe-shine boys in this anecdote call British servicemen George with mock deference (Straw). The serviceman "walking from the station towards the city center" is visiting Cairo, not stationed there. He is the intended beneficiary of the *Services Guide*, and its contents will lead him towards social and sports clubs where he will find other servicemen, and away from the "diverse and pungent smells of the Orient." Even the fact that the Anglo-Egyptian Union required Egyptians to be sponsored for membership by a British member seems germane to my point about self-selecting groups

and the services being encouraged to stick together while in Cairo. A welfare organization, Leave Accommodation, was instituted by the British Troops in Egypt Headquarters “to ensure that the minimum of delay and the maximum of comfort shall be obtained by men arriving on leave in Cairo and desiring accommodation.” The custodial attitude towards servicemen on leave produces a simulacrum of home and reinforces the importance of maintaining distance from locals and the distinction of Britishness. The admonition, “Remember that you are representing your unit in the capital City of Egypt,” indicates concern about appearances and not interaction, and raises the question of how a serviceman far from home chooses to identify for the purposes of socializing (Co-Ordinating Council 12).

Clubs for subsets of the service are also detailed in the *Services Guide to Cairo*. Finding community among one’s fellows was both desirable and encouraged. The Indian Soldiers’ Club-Cairo catered to “all ranks of the Indian Army,” served “Indian food and cold drinks at basic prices,” offered “Games of Indian origin,” and free tea. The Jewish Welfare Committee for Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen, the Comforts Fund for Jewish Soldiers, the Churches of the Unitarian and Free Christian General Assembly of Great Britain and Ireland, and the Salvation Army all operated service clubs. “The New Zealanders [had] their Club in the heart of Cairo” which featured a “canteen with N.Z. specialties” (16-25). Other specialty clubs catered to junior officers, South African Officers, South African Women’s Services, Springboks, and YWCA members. Some organizations, like the YWCA, operated one club for members and a separate Services Club promising free admission and a warm welcome free to anyone wearing “the recognized uniform of any unit in the Services.” The opportunity to engage the mind and discuss non-military matters in service and sport clubs attracted many and offered a wholesome alternative to Cairo’s brothels. Even the

servicemen's patronage of brothels, however, was overseen by the military. The Royal Army Medical Corps posted orderlies at the door of sanctioned establishments to distribute a free condom and tin of antiseptic ointment to military patrons (Jones 62-3). Nationality, sex, religion or rank could be used as a guide to one's social place in Cairo. Trips to Cairo were also opportunities to communicate with family and to address the problems that arose from and during separation from family. The Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen's Families Association maintained an Enquiry Bureau which facilitated communication between soldiers, sailors and airmen and their families—at home and in occupied territories. It also offered advice about dealing with personal and family problems. The aims of the Families Association indicate the strain under which the Middle East Forces served and the consequences for their private lives. They also show the importance of reaffirming interpersonal connections. In addition, hobbies or avocation might direct one's recreational time, and given a choice, many in the Forces chose to read and write.

In his 1947 study *Adult Education: The Record of the British Army*, Major T. H. Hawkins describes the rise in reading and the use of books in the Services.

During the War many more people developed an interest in reading. This was equally true of civilians as of members of the Forces, but it is probable that more new readers would have been found in the Services than in the civilian world. This was possibly due to the fact that, through the Welfare and Education branches, books were placed where they were easily accessible. When the unit libraries were made available during the release period, for example, . . . there was ample evidence that many men and women borrowed (and read) fictional and non-fictional books of good quality simply because they were readily accessible in rooms which the

soldiers and auxiliaries were already in the habit of visiting. (Hawkins and Brimble 411-412)<sup>1</sup>

Hawkins suggests that in order to continue to expand the reading public books should be made available “in places which they habitually frequented and not in places which, however attractively laid out, still possess unfortunate institutional connections” (412). Hawkins advises a continuation of the military program for civilian life. By making books available outside borough and county libraries, potential civilian readers could become accustomed to the practice of borrowing and reading books before following their interests into libraries.

Cairo’s clubs offered accommodation, amenities and a range of diversions. Possible activities, services and entertainments included gardens, cinema, dances, billiards, darts, tennis, tea rooms, milk bars, restaurants, baths and showers, barbers, watch repair, film developing, postal services, laundry, mending, concerts (live and recorded), wireless, lectures, discussions, debates, religious services, lending libraries (the Victory Club boasted 4000 volumes), and reading and writing rooms. Cairo sport clubs offered badminton, bowling, cricket, croquet, golf, ping-pong, racing, squash, tennis, volleyball and yachting. The Gezira Sporting Club set aside part of the grounds for the British and Imperial Forces in the hope that they would “find the green grass and shady trees a pleasant change” (Co-Ordinating Council 26). Of all the services and amenities on offer, however, only food and drink rival the ubiquity of reading and writing rooms. Reporting on Army Education in the Middle East, Hawkins observed that “the need for places where soldiers could read and write in quiet surroundings was seen from the beginning, and by May 1943 more than a hundred and fifty educational centres had been set up, including several in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania” (Hawkins and Brimble 240) The presence across the region and in so many Cairo’s clubs of rooms dedicated to reading and writing speaks to the paramount importance of these

activities to members of the Forces. Initially feared as a potential distraction from military duties, education and cultural enrichment were found to “be of real service to any army operating in the desert, not only in providing relief from the monotony and boredom of desert life, but also in helping to keep alive interest in home and outside affairs generally” (246). The opportunity to read, write and learn must have met many essential needs.

Through these activities members of the Forces not only communicated with their family and peers, they created their own accounts of historical experiences, and learned about the history and geography of the countries in which they fought. They questioned the conditions leading to and likely to result from the conflict in which they participated, prepared for post-war careers via correspondence courses, and escaped into art, music and imagination. Participants could maintain access to the highest expression of their humanity—to the abstract, the beautiful and to an identity which was not solely defined by war.

### **“Starved for something to read”**

Stan Scislowski, a Canadian soldier who crossed from Halifax to Liverpool on the ocean liner turned troop ship *Andes*, reports that the lust for reading material began during the ten day voyage.

I'd always been a voracious reader, and now with so much idle time on my hands I found myself with nothing to read. How shortsighted I was too have neglected to bring reading material along with me. I found myself prowling the deck like a predatory beast ready to pounce on anything in the way of Pocket Books (now known as paperbacks), magazines or newspapers lying loose and unattended. And I wasn't the only one starved for something to read. It seems like half the passenger list had the same idea in mind. If a guy sprawled out on a blanket sunning himself happened to have a book and had

fallen asleep, you could bet your bottom dollar it'd be long gone before he woke up. I got so desperate for something to read, I even took to reading the labels on cans. Would you believe it? Except for sleep at night and frequent naps, there was no better way to pass the interminable hours than by reading. Much to my regret, however, I didn't have any. ("On the Way Overseas")

The discomfort of being "crammed into every nook, cranny and cubbyhole" of the ship was compounded by the immediate threats of being torpedoed by U-boats or assaulted by bullies aboard ship, and the fear and anticipation of future combat. Idleness exacerbated these concerns; reading offered a temporary release and diversion from them. The desperation for escape made thieves of honest men and reading, even if it meant stealing a book, felt like a vital enterprise. Longing for the diversion of the printed word was not confined to the close quarters of the troop ship. As a luxury liner the *Andes* carried 1800 passengers; when refitted as a troop ship, she held 5000 men. On one level reading could alleviate boredom and remind one of home. On another, literature was a currency of interpersonal connection and a means of sharing individual perceptions about common experiences. Through reading and writing literature servicemen reconnected with community and their own humanity.

Lawrence Durrell, civilian expatriate writer living in Cairo during the war, corroborates the servicemen's desperation for reading material. Durrell observed, "the really striking thing about the psychological atmosphere was the sudden realization that everyone was hungry for reading matter." Durrell describes an unfortunate transaction between the largest bookshop in Cairo and a swindling wholesaler in London that illustrates this point. The London dealer unloaded "a mountain of seventeenth-century theology, memoirs and sermons" on the bookshop in exchange for its blank check and misplaced trust. "I saw with

misgiving this whole wall of dreadful indigestible fare exposed to human view in the Cairo bookshop,” Durrell recalls. “Its owner wrung his hands the while and cursed his rascally London contact. Who on earth would wade through all this stuff?” To the surprise of Durrell and the despairing bookseller, the newly arrived New Zealand Division cleared the shelves. Durrell recalls: “I cannot say if they were all divinity students or curates in the bud, but all I can attest to is the disappearance of all these fat unreadable tomes in a matter of twenty-four hours” (xxiii-xxvii). If the New Zealanders were fresh from a voyage like Stan Scislowski’s, they were likely glad to have anything to read that was not labeling their food tins. Under these circumstances even the driest tome was evidently desirable.

Durrell’s interpretation of the servicemen’s interest in reading reveals his own attitude towards texts. Durrell hypothesizes that the lust for literature stemmed from “the sharpened sense of death in the air [which] gave a new resonance to life. People felt that they might die without having really tangled with any of the great religious and philosophical problems of their time. One suddenly realized that, after all, the British were at bottom poets and poetry lovers, and not just football philistines. It took moments of dearth like this to bring it out of them” (xxiii-xxvii). Durrell implies that literature is means to an end: one’s object is engagement with existential issues and reading allows one to establish an informed position and enter the discussion. His conclusions about the servicemen’s interest in reading reflect his own beliefs about the value and purpose of reading. As a writer and editor, Durrell engages with texts as tools for asking and answering larger questions. Servicemen read with a purpose too, but they also value reading as a pleasurable act, not only to apply knowledge gained from reading to “great religious and philosophical problems.”

Intellectual engagement with a text might seem more worthwhile than reading for pleasure, but the types of pleasure found in reading should not be dismissed and are



particularly enlightening as to the value of reading among those in the Forces. In “Reading in War-time,” his November 1945 address to the English Association, the Most Reverend Cyril F. Garbett, Archbishop of York, describes some of the extra-intellectual uses of reading among civilians and servicemen which created an “unprecedented demand” for books.

[I]n reading many find a temporary refuge from the incessant anxieties and strain of the time. Through books they find a way of escape, [books] are the ‘magic casements’ through which they can gaze on a world more beautiful and orderly than that in which they are now living. Through them they can gain inspiration and guidance from the wisest men of all generations, through them they can travel in distant lands, through them they can gain help in planning for the future. The necessity for recreation, amusement, and instruction turn men to books at a time of exceptional strain. (3-4)

In addition to the escapism and idealism which can make reading so delightful, Garbett touches on the capacity of texts to collapse time and space—to bring the reader together with “the wisest men of all generations” or place the reader “in distant lands.” Garbett recasts the soldier’s struggle with “religious and philosophical problems” as a conversation with wise men rather than an independent exercise in the abstract coincidentally facilitated by texts. Both Garbett and Durrell indicate that reading helps servicemen to maintain connections to the world around them, but Garbett’s observations indicate that reading is not merely a tool for building connections but is itself a form of connection.<sup>2</sup>

Servicemen and women used reading and writing to create community. Durrell recalls an improvised literary exchange that illustrates both the appeal of reading and writing and the role of these activities in cultivating community among servicemen.

Among people cadging for books for the desert I met one weary Education Officer who told me of the boredom and misery of being stuck out there in the sand with only the Egyptian Gazette to read. In despair he had erected a three-ply notice board and pinned up a few rapidly fabricated poems and satires on it, asking for further contributions. Within the same day the whole board was covered with every kind of poetry and prose production, down to brilliant limericks. He had been obliged to increase the size of the board!

(xxiv)

The Education Officer's turn to reading as a remedy to "the boredom and misery" of prolonged stints in the desert confirms its importance to servicemen. Moreover, the amelioration of misery that the Education Officer means to accomplish suggests that reading had a palliative effect in addition to the intellectually stimulating one that Durrell imagines. The outpouring of texts in response to his creation of the notice board reveals the desire among servicemen to share what bits of literature they had written or memorized. The Education Officer may have intended only to offer diversion, but his notice board generated a place of exchange around which a community of readers and writers could form. The popularity of the notice board demonstrates that the desire among servicemen to communicate with one another. The exact nature of their writing is not described, but the collection which Durrell introduces with these anecdotes contains poems on a variety of subjects and in a range of tone and qualities which indicate that communication through written words was the outward sign of a deeper strain of fellow feeling among those who found themselves in the desert. Reading is soothing in part because it is both private and communal.

### Cairo's Literary Community

In addition to the reading and writing rooms, lending libraries, lectures, discussions, and poetry readings on offer in Service Clubs and the many informal literary conversations which took place in their lounges and tea rooms, the literary community grew as the war transplanted military and civilian writers to Cairo. According to Durrell, "When the war sharpened its focus and the armies expanded Cairo became a brilliant intellectual center. It seems at times that every poet and painter from London was in our midst" (xxv). *Oasis* editor Victor Selwyn recalls that both military and civilian intellectuals and writers took advantage of Cairo's geographic and war-imposed isolation to develop an independent literary culture. They were not alone in doing so. Garbett distinguishes between the literary taste of the Northern and London audiences: "The North has a most vigorous and independent intellectual life of its own. It has its own mind on literature as on every other subject. It is not in the least prepared to accept as final the literary judgments of London or even Oxford or Cambridge" (4). According to Selwyn:

The Middle East of the Second World War [was] paradise for eccentrics . . . .  
 Three months by boat from home, out of War Office reach, the Army wrote its own rule-book in an empty desert. This freedom of the desert was matched in the Cairo base. In a near peacetime setting, with the privileges of an occupying power, the Services, allied to civilian writers – Terence Tiller, Bernard Spencer, Lawrence Durrell et al – created the cultural centre of the Second World War outside Britain. The War Office in its wisdom posted writers to the myriad of ME intelligence agencies. They set up literary service clubs, founded magazines . . . . ("Obituaries")

The freedom Selwyn describes fostered the creativity to write and the initiative to publish locally, resulting in numerous literary products from both military and civilian quarters. Roger Bowen's study *Many Histories Deep* traces the Cairo years of one group of poets, founders of the literary magazine *Personal Landscape*. While Lawrence Durrell was working for the British Council in Cairo and Robin Fedden, and Bernard Spencer taught English at Fuad I University, the three men edited *Personal Landscape*, a sixteen page, bi-monthly magazine for three full years beginning in January 1942 (27). Terence Tiller served as advisor. The early numbers printed their own writing, but *Personal Landscape* soon included the work of others, mainly civilians, but also servicemen, notably G.S. Fraser and Keith Douglas. While *Personal Landscape* was a private enterprise, it was only one of a handful of English language war-time journals in publication in Cairo (44-45). Officers at the Headquarters of British Troops in Egypt began to publish *Orientalisms* in 1942, a year before *Oasis* appeared. The British Institute launched *Citadel* in 1942 and *Words*, which published Egyptians writing in English, in 1944. The English department of Cairo's Fuad I University produced *Esjam* as a vehicle for the writing of its students and faculty, many of whom were British and also published elsewhere. The Salamander Society produced *Salamander* from 1942-45. In *Cairo in the War*, Artemis Cooper credits *Oasis's* editors with developing the idea to publish volumes of exclusively servicemen's poetry (I have not been able to corroborate Cooper's claim, and he does not give a source for this information. While publication dates might shed some light on this issue, the origin of the idea cannot be dated with certainty) (153). Many groups within the services published newspapers and volumes of their own writing. These ranged from the small booklets of poems from a single military unit to anthologies like *Poems from the Desert*, a volume comprised of the winning entries in a poetry competition organized by the Eighth Army's Education Officer. Many of the four hundred

three submissions, General Montgomery observes in his Foreword, were written while “the Desert Army was wholly engaged in hitting Rommel and all his forces ‘right out of Africa for six’” (v).

Exchange of information was enabled by coverage of Cairo’s literary life in regional English language newspapers. Cairo’s English writers had their own public forums in the British-owned *Egyptian Gazette* and *Egyptian Mail*.

The Monday issue of the *Gazette* was of special importance to literary exiles for the “Book Page,” where the latest issues of *Personal Landscape* or *Salamander* would receive notice, where the volumes of verse and prose published locally by the Salamander Society, by the Renaissance Bookshop and the Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, could tempt the varied members of Cairo’s exile community. The *Mail* carried book reviews on Thursday.

(Bowen 30-31)

One of the “privileges of an occupying power” to which Selwyn alludes, English language newspapers kept the local community of readers and writers informed about each other’s work. During the war, writers in Cairo were well known to each other. They frequented the same clubs—notably the Anglo-Egyptian Union—and shared a few members. Some, like the *Personal Landscape* group, were exclusive, while others, like the Salamander Society, were not.

Bookshops also catered to the literary community and English language market. Founded in 1929, the Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop supplied Fuad I University and the services’ unit libraries in addition to maintaining a lending library for residents of Cairo. Books reviewed in the *Gazette* and *Mail* were available for purchase in the Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop and its chief competitor the Renaissance. In addition, Victorian and Edwardian titles were available from second-hand booksellers (Bowen 30-31). In a 1944 article in the

*Mail*, John Gawsworth praises Cairo's bookshops, recommending their offerings to "those deprived of Hatchard's, Charing Cross Road, and the stalls of Farringdon Market" (qtd. in Bowen 30-31). Garbett reports that in addition to detective and Wild West stories, "men of all ranks are often found reading books on England" especially "illustrated books on rural life" the country-side, nature, and gardens (5). Moreover, he writes,

I have been told on good authority that officers and men on active service have a special delight in books on England and its country walks and scenes. The farther they were from home the more eager they were to read about it. . . I was struck by the way in which the men who had been long absent wanted to know the simplest facts about England—the weather ("Is it raining?" I was often asked, and they seemed the happier at my affirmative reply!)—the crops—the flowers—and above everything the county or town in which they lived. (5-6)

The flood of English-speakers into Cairo found shops, clubs and acquaintances with whom to share their enthusiasm for reading.

One group among whom they could find a welcome was the Salamander Society, whose original members—John Waller, John Cromer, Keith Bullen and Raoul Parme—conceived of a society dedicated to "the preservation of culture in its widest sense." This mission could hint at an intention to 'protect' culture from unwelcome change, however, for the Salamanders, "culture in the widest sense" meant active engagement with literary ideas and production, and with poetry in particular. "Preservation" required discussion, and the Salamanders' held informal Sunday salons. Bullen hosted these gatherings at his home at the Gezira Preparatory School in Cairo where he was headmaster and Parme was a teacher. To these meetings "[e]verybody was welcome, irrespective of nationality, colour, religious belief

or political creed” for the exchange of ideas. According to Cromer, “The keynote of the meetings was informality and everyone was invited to express an opinion on whatever subject came under discussion” (9). The Salamander Society promoted an open and inclusive attitude toward culture and community by encouraging connections between people and ideas over selectivity and identification by exclusion. The group’s attitude toward fostering and sustaining a literary community meant that not all associates would be great talents but that everyone would be encouraged to do his best work. Cromer distinguishes between the openness of the Salamanders and other groups, which he implies advocated a conservative approach to cultural preservation.

[T]he Salamander Society came into being to provide a meeting place for literary expatriates and a source of encouragement and assistance for amateurs of the arts. It aimed at breaking down through a common interest in poetry some of the more artificial barriers that divide men. Not then or in any subsequent period did it consider itself a formal group, competing with other groups, but rather as a point of contact for independent individuals. It has never been a clique of the pretentious, the petulant and the petty and has excluded nobody; individuals have been left to exclude themselves. (10)

Selectivity is often equated with quality, and a group unwilling to exclude members according to aesthetic standards risks being swiftly dismissed. Picking up an anthology by “a clique of the pretentious” the reader can begin evaluating and contextualizing the text based upon the clique’s claims for itself. When the Salamander Society publishes, it abdicates this responsibility and readers must depend upon their own judgment to evaluate contents. The Salamander’s attitude helps tremendously in preserving texts from the war, and “amateurs of the arts,” both military and civilian, found places in the group.

Cromer recalls the hospitable and egalitarian ethos of a group which considered itself quietly cosmopolitan. The Salamander Society, he writes, “is truly represented by its colophon whose significance is ‘the spirit of fire’. Created in the midst of war, flourishing in the rear of a combat area, remaining steadfast in its belief of art and poetry as a keynote to international understanding, Salamander is indeed a microcosm of world literature” (Cromer 13). In today’s terms, Cromer’s claims for the Salamander Society’s multiculturalism would rate somewhere between generous and exaggerated. The demographics of the society suggest that the criteria for diversity were not exclusively cultural: “All three branches of the British Services were represented, and all ranks within those Services” (10). The “varied and comprehensive appeal” of the Salamanders attracted one Egyptian, one Armenian, one Italian and one Yugoslavian to the British and Imperial majority. The society was open to anyone, yet it did little to cultivate the participation of Egyptian writers. Each issue of *Salamander* contains a poem translated from Arabic, but in the context of many translated poems they do not register as specific engagements with Egyptian or Arab literary culture. Bullen’s interest in French poetry and in translation became characteristic of the group and its publications. Bullen translated French to English and Parme translated English to French. Other contributors translated contemporary verse into Latin. Cromer later wrote, “The eclipse of France was never accepted as a final act and every effort was made to keep alive the great tradition of French verse.” Roger Bowen observed that the Salamander Society drew upon and identified with France while the Personal Landscape group focused on Greece—likely because many of their members, Durrell in particular, were living in Greece prior to its invasion (Cromer 11). In addition, the travel essays in *Salamander* depict a robust orientalism in their descriptions of Arab culture. However inadequate these efforts seem today, the Salamanders took an interest in the region and the cultures amid which they lived.



Moreover, in the context of the early 1940s and a thoroughly segregated city, a stated position of openness would qualify the Society as progressive. So while the content of the publications suggest that for the Salamanders, world literature still largely meant European literature, their interest in other cultures and “belief of art and poetry as a keynote to international understanding” demonstrate a nascent commitment to inclusion. The Salamander’s support and publication of *Oasis* validates this claim.

Despite their contribution to literary life in Cairo, very little existing scholarship mentions the Salamander Society, and none focuses upon it. Those who have studied British poets in Egypt focus on the *Personal Landscape* poets. The expatriate group’s commitment to modernism and their exacting literary standard attract the attention of critics. The contrast between the Salamander Society and the *Personal Landscape* poets comes down to a difference in their relationships with poetry. The Salamanders’ attitude toward poetry is characterized by appreciation and participation, while the *Personal Landscape* poets were practitioners and innovators. The Salamanders were enthusiasts and amateurs who saw themselves taking part in something larger, while the *Personal Landscape* were professional writers who wanted to move art forward. The *Personal Landscape* group felt exiled in Egypt, and expressed contempt for Egyptian culture and often their own countrymen as well. There was an intellectual pursuit, in contrast to the Salamanders’ hobbyist passion. There is no evidence that the *Oasis* poets shared either the literary aspirations of the *Personal Landscape* writers or the hobbyist avidity of the Salamanders. The story of the *Oasis*’s conception reveals a popular, yet largely private turn to poetry by thousands of servicemen in the Middle East theater.

### Creating an Oasis of Poetry

The tension between individual identity and representative experience permeates *Oasis* and shapes the reader's experience of the book. Whereas many anthologies of servicemen's poetry list each contributor's rank, branch of service and nation, region or hometown of origin, *Oasis* provides only names and often initials in lieu of full names. The anthology includes no biographical information and the poems are alphabetized by the poet's name rather than ordered chronologically or thematically, stressing the poets' identity over the editorial hand. In the absence of contextual details that could make each poet more real in the reader's mind, the identities and experiences of the poets are obscured. Perhaps the information was not available or the paper shortage pitched poems against context, but for the most part the poems and poets of *Oasis* exist in a vacuum of details. Readers are left to wonder specifically when and where the poems were written, where a poet was from, what his branch of service and his duties were. This wonder is not necessarily negative. Prompting readers to imagine the particulars of the poets' histories may engage readers more deeply with the texts.

While the criteria for inclusion in the collection are broad—the poets must have served in the Middle East and written their poems during that service—the editors' decision to privilege experience over identity compromises the ability of readers to read *Oasis* as the particular experiences of individual poets. The manner in which the editors ordered the poems and identified the poets in the anthology raises questions about the place of individuality in the *Oasis* anthology. In the absence of details which would help to distinguish the poets in the collection, *Oasis* takes on the quality of a collage, and it is tempting to read the poems as though they represent one collective experience, rather than fifty-one individuals' experiences. Each poem on a particular subject adds to the composite

image of that subject, and as one reads the poems they coalesce into a representation of the feelings and experiences that constitute military service in the desert war.

The anthology received a notice in the *Palestine Post* which reflects the impact of presenting these poems in an anthology. Taken together, the poems depict a commonality of experience.

The poems in “Oasis” were written by men under the stress of war in the desert, in the air and on the sea; under the impact of countries and people strangely new to them; during spells of hard-earned leave in the cities and towns of the Middle East. Many things have been their inspiration: battle, the longing for home, hope for the future, comradeship and sacrifice and death. It is noticeable how many have drawn from the splendour of the Orient sky; from the sunset on the desert, where this was their only beauty. Seas, the voyage out, African ports, Egyptian dancers, beer and the memory of England, all these have made their poetry.

By any standard there are fine poems in this anthology. Some of them, while lacking technical accomplishment, show great promise. Almost all have the stamp and ring of complete sincerity. If there is sometimes a sameness about them, that is because they were written in similar conditions, under trials and experiences often very much alike; it should not be allowed to detract from their individual merit. (K., “Middle East Anthology”)

Despite the common materials of their creation, the poems “almost all have the stamp and ring of complete sincerity.” The reviewer’s sense of the poems’ “sincerity” registers the specificity of individual experience and the way in which the poet calls for the reader’s attention. The poet’s “sincerity” initiates the reader’s ethical response to these poems; it

affects a call to the reader, but what part does poetic quality play in achieving “sincerity”? The reviewer leverages the poets’ military service to attract the attention of readers to poets who are unknown and unlikely otherwise to attract critical notice. Likewise, the tension between the poems’ sameness and their individual merits invites speculation about the viability of these texts apart from their war poem/war poet context. This review affirms the value of the poems both as testimony to the unknown servicemen’s experiences and bolsters the unknown poets by association with respected names, like G. S. Fraser. By publishing the fine poems with the promising ones, the editors have united the poems under the banner of servicemen’s verse while distinguishing the more recognizable contributors.

It should be simple to conclude that *Oasis*’s intended audience was servicemen, for its poems are composed by servicemen and sold in the servicemen’s commissary. There are strong indications, however, that the editors aimed for a broader audience, for civilian readers and literary recognition. One clue to the editors’ aspirations for the book is the preface to the volume by Dr. C. Worth Howard, Acting Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of American University at Cairo and Director of Literary Activities for ‘Music for All.’ For civilians, his work on behalf of servicemen at ‘Music for All,’ his apparent familiarity with their troubles, and his qualifications as a literary critic invest his endorsement of *Oasis* with authority. His knowledge of the war is derived from knowing servicemen, not from being one, but his inclusion in the volume implies that the editors supported his views. Howard proposes that the book is particularly valuable to those who would know the experiences, thoughts and feelings of servicemen of the Middle East theater.

For all who have been in the services and whom we would honour, these poets say, “Here we are—these are our dreams, our cries, our songs. Learn what has been the anguish and the grief, the joy and the faith of us in

uniform.” We may think that we have known these soldiers and airmen, seeing them by the thousand on the streets of the city, riding with them on packed trains or tram cars, sitting with them in the cinemas, chatting with them in service clubs, entertaining them in our homes. Yet by these poems, we may come to know the soldier of the Middle East in a fashion impossible hitherto. (xiii)

Howard argues that each poet represents many voices. “Here we are” he imagines, not “Here I am.” Each poet speaks for more than his own service, more than his own feelings. Moreover, Howard claims the poems teach what cannot be learned from either observation—on the streets, in trains, trams or the cinema—or conversation—in service clubs or even the intimacy of entertaining at home. Taken together, Howard’s claims suggest that military service can only be represented by servicemen, although some servicemen can speak for others, and that civilians must privilege those accounts over their own interactions with and perceptions of servicemen. Howard implies that reading the anthology constitutes a meaningful response to the sacrifice of veterans. By reading the poems civilians acknowledge and honor the sacrifice of the poets and, by extension, their silent and silenced comrades. Through the act of reading readers may receive and respond to the testimony of the soldier-poets. This exchange between poet and reader does not depend upon literary merit or the pleasure of interpretation, but upon the reader’s willingness to respond to the poet’s need to be heard.

By alerting the reader to the difference between being informed about the war and understanding the servicemen in the Middle East, Howard extends his claim for the ways in which *Oasis* might serve the civilian reader by providing special access to the serviceman’s experience.

Details of the campaign and accounts of individual exploits of men of the army and the navy and the airforce have already been given to the world. Newsreels and daily broadcasts have kept the public far better informed of the progress of the forces than has been possible in any previous war. An untold number of photographs have been taken, showing men in action and recording the aftermath of battle. Cartoonists and artists have employed their skill to portray scenes on the battlefield and life away from the front.

(xiii)

The variety of means by which the public has learned about the war—newsreels and radio broadcasts, photographs, cartoons and other visual representations—are both widely available and somehow inadequate representation of the war. Although Howard acknowledges that the public is well informed of events, his contention that despite observing and interacting with servicemen the public has not known them casts suspicion upon the many ways of knowing about the war. If personal interaction with servicemen is not fully informative, what can one hope to learn from films and photographs? Even if the details and secrets of the recently ended conflict become public knowledge, Howard argues, no information would surpass firsthand accounts because the expression in poetry surpasses all other communication. In order for this exchange to take place, however, the poems must be of a certain quality.

The public will continue to receive other reports. Stories of escape which can now be only mentioned will be narrated in detail. Stories of the amazing adventures of the desert patrols and of combined operations will sometime be revealed. Carefully prepared histories of army divisions and air squadrons will be published in weighty tomes to find their places in libraries beside the

musty records of past wars. In time, generals and other high-ranking officers will write their memoirs, quoting from secret documents to solve puzzles of the past.

But perhaps no record relating to the war in the Middle East will be closer to the spirit of the men who have served than this volume of poems. This is true because poetry has the quality of engaging our emotions so directly and so powerfully. By a word rightly chosen or by a phrase richly coined, a poet opens vistas or captures the heart as no other artificer may. (xiii)

As Howard imagines a future of revelation and insight, he makes a rather subversive case for the greater, purer truth of the servicemen's poems. The third type of knowledge—that contained within the poems—will require civilian readers to integrate what they thought they knew with new and emotionally charged information. Because all a civilian reader's knowledge about the war is second-hand, experienced by servicemen then filtered through newspapers and other “artificers,” the poems in *Oasis*, Howard argues, offer a potent combination of first-hand experience and image that makes the soldier's experience feel more immediate for civilian readers. Despite the many ways available to civilians for gathering knowledge about the war, *Oasis*, Howard argues, offers insight and a connection to the serviceman's experience available nowhere else.

Howard's description of the desert's “intense heat in summer when a tent might suddenly burst into flames” and “bitter cold in winter when rains might come to add discomfort and pain,” and “the swarms of flies and other insects” is not meant for the soldiers who were there. By listing particular physical experiences of serving in desert conditions, Howard invites civilian readers to speculate about what other unimagined specificity of experience might lie beyond their ken. Howard describes the soldiers' return

from the desert “sometimes bitter, sometimes desperate to catch life in some more colourful aspect—but so often they have returned eager simply for a bath, clean sheets, a good meal. To some it may have appeared that these men back on leave to the city, in their need for change cared only for the sordid and the ugly. On the contrary, thousands of men have searched for beauty in a variety of forms.” Howard defends the soldiers’ humanity by describing their search for beauty. They have sought out music, both sacred and secular, and “the privilege of good books.” “Let no man say,” Howard cautions, “that all those in uniform have become simply cogs in a machine—that military discipline has made of them mere automatons. Their eager search for the good and the beautiful has been splendid proof of the cultural vitality of our democratic processes.” Howard’s political conclusion is perplexing, but perhaps, in view of the ongoing war it can be read as an indication that the Allies (need to) believe that their military forces retain their individuality and their spirits, even as Allied nations begin to imagine that enemy soldiers are “cogs in a machine” and “mere automatons” (xiii). Perhaps the individuality and identity of soldiers is at stake and, by extension the nation, already under attack, risks losing more of its threatened character. The reading experience Howard describes depends upon the poet’s skill, but what does a poem need to be or do in order to accomplish the communication Howard claims the *Oasis* texts offer? What abilities does the reader need in order to take up the text and access all it offers? Howard does not describe what permits the poetry to communicate all he attributes to it, nor does he articulate any aesthetic requirements. He does, however press his point urgently, creating the desire to read the texts even in the absence of the tools necessary for full appreciation.

The anthology serves different purposes to different audiences, assisting civilians in understanding the past, and offering veterans an aid to memory and a buoy for the spirit.



To the greater portion who have found no creative release for their adventures, this anthology should come as a welcome aid. That someone has captured a present experience in a mesh of words, that another has given shape to dreams of lovely desert nights, or that some other had unleashed questioning of society's conventions and restraints should be cause of gratitude. Here is a record for men of the service to refresh memories, give meaning to experiences, reveal values previously unsuspected or only glimpsed. (xiii)

Howard believes that for veterans the poems can be cathartic, but do veterans require the same poetic quality necessary to convey the poet's feelings to a civilian reader or is their experience an advantage in connecting with the text? Do they need poetry at all? Why should they be grateful that someone has written poems about experiences which they shared? Readers may gather images and ideas from different poets and be grateful that someone who was there has been able to describe what the reader was not able to articulate. This is another way in which the *Oasis* poets come to speak for others, by representing shared experiences in an accessible way.

Of all the ways in which Howard imagines readers engaging with the text, one transcends either single audience. For both civilian and military readers the anthology can serve as a memorial.

[T]he collection is a memorial to those who have fought, died, or endured in battles of this Near Orient. Likewise, it is a message and an interpretation for those others in homes all over the world who have hoped for these men, loved them, and yearned for their return.

We are told not to expect great art in the midst of great conflict. No matter what the verdict of time is upon the rank of these poems, there is certainly assurance that the creative springs have not been choked by this awful sport of Mars. (xiii)

Howard's sense of the anthology's utility is separate from any judgment about its quality, but the assumption of quality underpin his claims. The ability of some to access creativity in the destructive atmosphere of war is sufficient for Howard, "no matter what the verdict of time is upon the rank of these poems." The myriad uses of the poems which Howard describes and the strength of spirit which their very existence represents require that their obscurity comes to an end, in order that they may finally be read and understood both in terms of their testimony and as poems, yet the effectiveness of the memorial depends upon its ability to communicate its message, and the strength of the memorial requires texts which will be viewed positively in the "verdict of time."

On 25 October 1943, in an article titled "Oasis in the Middle East: Soldiers Turn to Poetry" the *Palestine Post* reported that an "interest in poetry, unexpected even by those closest to the troops in the Middle east, is revealed by the fact that the "Oasis" anthology is to be reprinted" in a run of 3000 copies "as soon as paper becomes available." The report notes Army Educational Corps' Instructor Sergeant Victor Selwyn's surprise at the unanticipated popularity of the collection: "We knew, of course, that there was enthusiasm for poetry, but we never believed it was so widespread. We used 51 poems out of the 3000 submitted, dealing with the work of 800 poets – but knowing this, we still did not anticipate such a demand for the anthology in bookshops." The demand in bookshops suggests that civilians without access to N.A.A.F.I., where *Oasis* was first sold, contributed to the demand for a second printing. (The unnamed reporter is most interested in the appeal of poetry for

servicemen. Slightly more than a third of the brief article offers Selwyn's explanation for servicemen's interest in poetry and *Oasis* in particular.) Selwyn's surprise in civilian interest in the anthology shows that the original audience for the book was conceived as strictly military.

Selwyn and the other editors shared intimate knowledge of the value of poetry and the various needs met by reading and writing it. "Selwyn attributes the popularity of poetry among the troops to the fact that it remains one of the few emotional outlets left for men on active service," and attributes the "popularity of this anthology . . . to the fact that it marks a return to the simple, traditional styles of the sonnet and lyric, as distinct from the intensely personal work of the modern school. 'Men do not have to read the poems five or six times before beginning to understand what they are about'" ("Oasis' in the Middle East").

Selwyn's interpretation of the accessibility of traditional forms invites further examination of the differences between personal and private expression. Is Selwyn suggesting that the poems are part of a public discourse on the war? When poets write in a traditional form or 'after' or 'with apologies' to a famous poet, are they merely adapting an existing form or making their verse doubly public—once in its content and once in its familiar form?

Selwyn does not specify whether the "emotional outlet" occurs in the writing or reading of poems, but from his explanation about the power of traditional styles to present the poet's thoughts and feelings I infer that the desire to be understood and to solicit or evoke a response from and in readers constitutes the foundation of the poets' effort, in contrast to "work of the modern school" which one has to read "five or six times before beginning to understand what they are about." If the poems in *Oasis* seem simple, then their simplicity may indicate a desire to connect with readers rather than a deficiency of style or skill. This conclusion raises the question of how traditional verse forms assist in this

communication. For those in the service, the exchange between writer and reader may constitute a tether to humanity and identity: a connection as potentially restorative as any oasis.

*Oasis's* epigraph, a quotation from the Chambers's Dictionary, defines an oasis as "A fertile spot in a sandy desert. Any place of rest or pleasure in the midst of toil" (i). *Oasis* bears out these two definitions: the fertile spot of creative writing in a sandy desert rife with warfare and destruction, and the rest or pleasure of reading in the midst of the toil of soldiering. The editors created the fertile spot by gathering the poems into the volume then offered it to readers in need of rest and pleasure. General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East Force, observed the resonance of the title in his September 1943 Foreword to the volume.

This Second World War has not as yet been so prolific in the production of Poetry as was the War of 1914-1918, perhaps because the tempo is faster and the lands more foreign and barren than those experienced by the majority of fighting men in the last War. I consider OASIS very aptly named, because of the pleasure that it will give to many who have found War an aesthetic desert; and because most of us in the Middle East will always remember the feeling of excitement and anticipation on approaching those patches of greenness and water in the Western Desert; not knowing whether they would turn out to be real or mirage—I feel in the case of OASIS it will prove to be the former. I therefore wish it the greatest success and hope that it may be the source of pleasure to many. (iii)

By comparing the "feeling of excitement and anticipation on approaching those patches of greenness and water in the Western Desert" to the excitement and anticipation of preparing

to read the poems of *Oasis*, Wilson raises the question of what it means to open the book of poems “not knowing whether they would turn out to be real or mirage.” I do not believe that this is a question of realism or even of strict authenticity. Wilson implies that the oasis offers a quality of escape, renewal or relief. I propose that in order to deliver the experience of an oasis, the poems must offer a reader from the Forces more than distraction. It must offer the possibility of connection through language to another person, a reprieve from isolation and anonymity, or an experience common to both reader and writer. Later readers would make different discoveries in the texts.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The omitted section refers the reader to page 330 for more information about the development of unit and command libraries. This text is a tremendous resource and suggests a promising avenue for further research and integration with the present study. The general scheme of education, the range of instruction available to the Forces, the role of education officers, unit librarians and others in cultivating a subculture of self-improvement and intellectual enrichment represent a promising offshoot for future research.

<sup>2</sup> More can be written about Garbett’s account of reading. Of particular interest is his description of which texts were popular—at least in the North—during the war.

First and most remarkable there has been almost everywhere a great demand for the English Classics. There is little doubt that Anthony Trollope heads the list . . . . [Next] come the novels of Jane Austen, and after her the Brontës. Some way below come Thackeray and Charles Dickens, and still lower Conrad, Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

What is the reason of the popularity of these authors, especially Trollope and Jane Austen? I think it is because they give a picture of a secure and

solid England: of an England in which there are no great change; in which life goes on placidly, disturbed only by occasional political and ecclesiastical disputes. The vicarage lawns, the great houses and parks, the large gardens, the cathedral cities, the village sports, the hunts, the spacious hospitality, all give the impression of an unchanging national life. And most of the chief characters are solid and placid; whatever internal emotions they suffer are usually well concealed. Jane Austen noticeably gives us a picture of country life in England, as seen from a vicarage and a cottage in Hampshire, quite undisturbed by the wars with Napoleon. (4-5)

## Chapter Two

### Poetry in Wartime: Culture and Responsibility in Conflict

The conditions in war-time London shaped the attitudes of its writers, publishers, and readers, and they, in turn, established the literary context with which the *Oasis* poems would contend, during the war and after. The war dramatically altered reading practices on the home-front and influenced the critical perspectives of those who kept the cultural home-fires burning. The greatest factors shaping the public and critical reception of Second World War poetry—then and now—are the themes, styles and standards of First World War poets. The work of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and others defined war poetry for their successors. The public's expectations for war poetry were wedded to themes and emotions of their poetry. Readers did not realize the extent to which the content and themes were specific to the First World War, and Second World War poets suffered under their unadjusted expectations. These differences shaped a different kind of war poetry that, because it did not meet the public expectation, has been undervalued by both readers and critics.

The Second World War provoked a debate among critics and writers about the role of the artist in wartime, specifically his responsibility to continue to produce works of high cultural merit and his responsibility to respond to the war and, perhaps, contribute to the war effort. The tension between culture and war played out in Cyril Connolly's monthly columns in *Horizon*, and the Cairo-based expatriate magazine, *Personal Landscape*, whose civilian editors largely succeeded in ignoring the war until early in 1943. These sources reveal the positions of critics and civilians on the role of the poet in wartime and examination of them uncovers the basis for rejection of most Second World War poetry. Recovery of Second World War poetry depends upon reading them as witness literature—as the soldier-

poet's fulfillment of his obligation to bear witness to the war and his own experience. A brief survey of post-war criticism of Second World War poetry reveals the consequences of the debate outlined above for the interpretation of this war's poetry in the subsequent four decades and shows that more recently literary scholars have worked to broaden the definition of war poetry to accommodate poets of the Second World War. The chapter concludes with analysis of the ways in which the criticism and literary history outlined above shaped the editors' presentation of the postwar anthologies of Salamander Oasis poems and the effect of their presentation on the public reception of and interest in the poems.

### **Reading and Writing in Wartime**

“The paper shortage which will rid us of the books not worth publishing and the news not worth printing, may bring publisher and reader back to poetry, which is now the only kind of writing so concentrated as to be economically justified.” Cyril Connolly, *Horizon*, June 1940

The conditions under which books were written, published and read in Britain changed dramatically during the war. Blitz conditions and Home Guard service fueled the demand for books, magazines and newspapers just as the supplies necessary for making paper, the machinery needed to print and bind books, as well as the workers to do both, were increasingly scarce. The pressures of production and consumption squeezed writers from both sides and prompted many debates about what type of content was particularly appropriate and desirable in wartime writing. In her biobibliographic study *English Poetry of the Second World War*, Catherine W. Reilly writes that the disruption of “normal social and family life” created opportunities for reading.

There were long spells of enforced inactivity when people had time to spare, sitting in barracks, in ships at sea, in air raid shelters waiting for the ‘all clear’,



and in remote places where nothing momentous was likely to occur. The public libraries were never so busy, and special libraries for servicemen were established by military authorities. People read anything and everything, and it is more than likely that poetry was read by those who had never read it before and would never read it again. (x)

Appreciating the popularity of reading and poetry in British wartime culture helps us to understand how the issue of war poetry became so heated. Therefore, I want to depict the state of reading, writing and publishing before examining the wartime debates over what war poetry should be and do.

Robert Hewison describes the circumstances writers and publishers faced in *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-1945*. Beginning with the declaration of war in 1939, preparations were made for rationing materials, including paper, which would be increasingly difficult to supply. An initial measure of paper rationing limited publishers to 60% of their paper usage for the twelve months prior to the war. By December 1941, publishers were limited to 37.5%. The restrictions on paper usage in combination with the Excess Profits Tax and increased production expenses meant that despite increased demand for reading material, publishers produced fewer texts and earned no additional profit (22). German occupations in Denmark and Norway cut Britain's supply of wood pulp from Sweden by 80%; newsprint was suddenly dear, and its shortage resulted in smaller newspapers and magazines (24). The quality and supply of paper continued to suffer. Without new materials, paper was repeatedly recycled and made from straw; the results were yellow, thin, rough and sometimes brittle. The degrading of paper quality and supply can be seen in a cursory comparison of *Horizon's* 1940 and 1944 numbers. Early volumes were printed on heavy, smooth, white paper between sturdy color covers. The magazine consistently used

every available inch: printing on both sides of its cover, not only small advertisements (four-to-a-page), but content as well, most often letters to the editor. By 1944, the numbers are substantially thinner with fewer pages and lighter-weight heavily yellowed paper; longer articles are printed in smaller type. Cyril Connolly lamented the consequences of the paper shortage for his fledgling journal. Writing in December 1940, Connolly describes the setbacks he faced in *Horizon's* first year.

The first of these [technical disadvantages] was the paper shortage, which preceded the fall of France. This is now partially overcome, but it prevented any expansion of circulation just at the time when it was beginning to be possible. A greater difficulty has been the air raids, which keep many booksellers closed for brief periods, and disorganize the mail. The offices of *Horizon* would seem to be a military objective second in importance only to our printers. Two thousand copies have been destroyed by enemy action . . . . (282)

In contrast to the hardships suffered by Londoners who lost their homes and lives, rather than copies of their journal, Connolly's statements may seem petty complaints. Viewed more generously, however, frustrations in production at a time when readers were at their most voracious, must have struck publishers as a painful irony, even if the pain was more or less restricted to their pocketbooks. Writers may have felt the stress most keenly as it became more difficult to find outlets for their work. Publishers who participated in the January 1942 Book Production War Economy Agreement maintained their 37.5% ration, while those who did not participate found their ration further reduced to 25%. By participating, publishers agreed to reduced production standards, which ultimately enabled

them to produce more books with less paper, as much as 60% of their pre-war volume out of their 37.5% ration (Hewison 78).

With less paper available, short stories, anthologies and poetry became more popular with publishers. Although the number of fiction titles dropped over the course of the war from one third of all books published to one fifth, poetry publication declined more slowly between 1940 and 1942, only 20% over the period (Hewison 76). In 1943 poetry volumes were published at 106% their 1940 level and 105% in 1944. The popularity of reading was fueled by the conditions of war: black-outs and closed theaters which kept people at home, long hours in bomb shelters and lulls in Home Guard duties which reading could ameliorate, and a desire for escape. Nevertheless, boredom and limited radio programming should not receive all the credit for the demand for books. When the Ministry of Supply initiated a salvage drive to improve paper quality by re-pulping pre-war books, Britons donated fifty-six million. Five million of these books were apportioned to the armed forces and one million to depleted libraries (Hewison 79). In addition to showing the commitment of British citizens to the war effort, the outpouring of texts indicates the vast number of books kept at home of which these millions were surplus. It shows the willingness to sacrifice old books for the hope of something new to read, and the importance of maintaining reading material for servicemen and libraries in order for everyone to have access to a book. The book salvage drive reveals the conflicting impulses to face the realities of the war and to continue living as normally as possible. By turning in old books, people acknowledged the shortage of paper which resulted from the war, and, at the same time, they invested in future books and better paper with which to continue enjoying their lives. The tension between these impulses played out in literature and literary criticism as well.

Some critics cried for war poets while others argued that the preservation and advancement of culture required ignoring the war as much as possible. The identity and philosophies of war poets became a particular interest as well. Should war poems be patriotic or pacifist, written by civilians or soldiers, concern major events or personal experience? Must they meet a literary standard or might some other criteria be applied? These debates mainly occurred among people who were not engaged in writing war poetry themselves, and the lack of consensus did not hinder those who did write about the war. Still, the questions raised about war poetry indicate the influence of the public and critical expectations for a genre established in the last world war and expected to continue, in some form, in the next one.

### **“Where are the War Poets?”**

Despite the differences between the public feelings about the two wars, publishers, politicians, readers and critics based their expectations for what war poetry should be and do upon the poetry of First World War. Therefore, soon after war was declared, readers of all stripes began to look for the next Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Graves, Blunden, Sorley, Thomas, Gurney, Grenfell, Seeger or Brooke, according to personal taste and politics. A cursory study of First World War poetry reveals the futility of this search.

The foundational studies of First World War poetry interpret the poems as marking a shift from pre-war illusion, demonstrated by Rupert Brooke’s patriotism, to war-weary disillusion reflected in Siegfried Sassoon’s protest and satire. Paul Fussell describes the Great War as “more ironic than any before or since. . . . It reversed the Idea of Progress” (8). The illusion or innocence which characterized period before entrenchment fostered fantasies of victory by Christmas and inspired poems about glory and honor. Fussell writes “In nothing, however, is the initial British innocence so conspicuous as the universal

commitment to the sporting spirit.” The “conception of war as strenuous but entertaining” persisted only a short while, and, as the mechanization of war and the determination and resources of the enemy were revealed, the apparent denial maintained by leading officers lead to the unexpected slaughter of British troops (25). As early battles “all but wiped out the original British army,” and the Germans introduced gas in October 1914, it became increasingly clear that this was not the sporting war which the British were led to expect (9-10). The high hopes of the early days contrast so sharply with realities of mechanized and trench warfare that the suffering of soldiers expressed by later works appears particularly cruel. The disillusionment apparent in Sassoon’s poems in particular expresses, in addition to bitterness and outrage, the sense of betrayal. Sassoon’s direct and fictionalized autobiographies explains the development of war poems: “The significance of my too nobly worded lines was that they expressed the typical self-glorifying feelings of a young man about to go to the Front for the first time. The poem [“Absolution”] subsequently found favor with middle-aged reviewers, but the more I saw of war the less noble-minded I felt about it” (qtd. in Bergonzi 92). As his “self-glorifying” feelings gave way to the realities of war, Sassoon began to take responsibility for translating the trench experience into verse: “This gradual process began, in the first months of 1916, with a few genuine trench poems, dictated by my resolve to record my surroundings, and usually based on the notes I was making whenever I could do so with detachment. These poems aimed at impersonal description of front-line conditions, and could at least claim to be the first things of their kind” (qtd. in Bergonzi 92). Second World War poets could skip the self-glorifying feelings because everyone eventually played a part in the war effort. Furthermore, the generation who would fight the second war inherited the lessons of that which fought the first, and was not entering blindly into the horror of mechanized warfare. Consequently, Second World

War poetry did not repeat much of the ardent and innocent patriotism, pity, compassion, satire and betrayal which characterized poetry of the First World War. Sassoon's ultimate focus, "impersonal descriptions of front-line conditions" became a starting point for Second World War poets.

The effect of poetry on the public during the wars differed also. When *The Old Huntsman* was published in May 1917, Virginia Woolf's review in *The Times Literary Supplement* praised its evocative power. Sassoon recorded her words, along with other encouraging reviews, in his diary.

What Mr. Sassoon has felt to be the most sordid and horrible experiences in the world he makes us feel to be so in a measure which no other poet of the war has achieved. As these jaunty matter-of-fact statements succeed each other, such loathing, such hatred accumulates behind them that we say to ourselves 'Yes, this is going on; and we are sitting here watching it', with a new shock of surprise, with an uneasy desire to leave our place in the audience, which is a tribute to Mr Sassoon's power as a realist. *It is realism of the right, of the poetic kind.* (168)

Woolf connects Sassoon's representation of "the most sordid and horrible experiences in the world" to the feelings of his readers, suggesting that through realism, the poetry succeeds in shocking its readers out of their seats and their complacency. The "uneasy desire to leave our place in the audience" suggests a struggle of conscience between looking and looking away. Sassoon gives readers what they want, a realistic portrayal of the war, but he does not give it freely. Sassoon requires that readers hear his demands, feel implicated by his anger and acknowledge responsibility for perpetuating the circumstances he describes. The desire to "leave our place in the audience" is the desire to shirk responsibility, but Sassoon keeps

his readers in their seats. His “realism of the right, of the poetic kind” creates a feeling of authenticity. Bernard Bergonzi records

By 1918 the public mood was ready for what [Sassoon] had to say, and his attacks on the Nation at home were accepted with a possibly masochistic fervour. [*Counter-Attack and Other Poems*] found admirers in unexpectedly high places; Winston Churchill, at that time Minister of Munitions, was one: he learnt by heart some of the poems in *Counter-Attack*, and approved of them because, he claimed, they would finally bring home to the civilian population what the troops at the Front had to endure. (103-104)

Poets of the Second World War did not need to “bring home to the civilian population” the experiences of troops at the Front. Between the Blitz and the threat of invasion, curiosity about real combat was a relic of the last war, and “masochistic fervour” if found, could be channeled into war work, rationing, salvage drives and pursuits of the “Make do and Mend” variety. Neither did Second World War poets need to confront complacency. Unlike the First World War, which, in its questionable purpose and shocking brutality, kindled pacifism in all but the most bellicose soldiers and civilians, the Second World War fueled anti-Hitler, anti-fascist fury in all but the most pacifist.

Many soldier-poets in the Second World War had read those poems studiously and knew what to expect from modern warfare. For the most part, therefore, readers who based their expectations for Second World War poetry on the verse of the First World War were disappointed, and the readership and prominence of Second World War poetry has suffered as a result. Thus, the soldier-poet in the Second World War did not duplicate the dramatic trajectory of his forbearers. In a 1990 article in *The Times*, Denis Healey, who served in

North Africa and Italy, where he acted as a beachmaster at Anzio, describes the different attitude of Second World War soldiers to their predecessors and its effect on their poetry.

By the time my generation had to face the Second World War we believed that we had no alternative but to fight the uncontestable evil of Nazism; but we had no illusions about the fate which awaited us. Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon had told us what to expect, though the nature of our ordeal turned out rather different.

Except for [Cassino,] the Anzio beach-head, and the last winter on the Gothic Line in Italy, there was little trench warfare. Millions served in the Middle and Far East and north west Europe. The air force was far larger. There were many more women in uniform. And the home front was subjected to air raids.

So poetry of the Second World War was far more diverse than that of the first. More important, most of its poets came from ordinary homes. Most wrote their poems with no thought of publication. Some of the best were from the Dominions, such as the South African Uys Krige, J.E. Brookes, with the Australian infantry, and the New Zealander Les Cleveland. A few of the Scots preferred to write in Gaelic, making them even less acceptable to a literary establishment based in London.

For all these reasons the poetry of the Second World War made less impact on the peacetime public than that of the First. It offered no equivalent to the intense concentration on the horrors of trench warfare. It had no clear message, of hope or despair. As Dennis McHarrie wrote:



“He died who love to live,” they’ll say,

“Unselfishly so we might have today!”

Like hell! He fought because he had to fight;

He died that’s all. It was his unlucky night.” (“Voices”)

By claiming on behalf of his generation that First World War poetry had disabused them of illusions and idealism, Healey shows that the texts of Owen, Sassoon and others were seen as primary and authoritative sources on modern warfare. For Healey’s generation the poets of the First World War retain a place of honor among sources and a point of reference for understanding war. Keith Douglas wrote to Rosenberg, and Alun Lewis to Edward Thomas. Soldiers of the Second World War had more knowledge of the brutality of modern warfare than the First World War generation, due in no small part to Owen and his peers. Servicemen in the Second World War did not experience the initial naïveté and subsequent shock in response to mechanized warfare that their predecessors had. They did not struggle to reconcile a sense of duty with a perception of the futility of the war. Instead they faced the unhappy task of fighting a ‘good’ war. They confronted not the appalling attrition of trench warfare but an astonishing escalation of violence: heavier weapons, carpet bombing, slave labor in Japanese prisoner of war camps, Nazi death camps, and atomic bombs. Moreover the variety of people who served, and range of their experiences broadened the scope of poetry from the forces. The poets’ diversity of nationality, class and education and their experiences which varied from branch and type of service to theater of war, make the poetry of the Second World War difficult to generalize. The breadth of experience and the number of individual perspectives require readers to relate to poems and poets one at a time. Furthermore, unlike the literary figures of First World War, who each produced a corpus of work, many Second World War poets are known by only a few poems. Healey suggests that

even the better recognized poets are not as popular as First World War poets, because they do not meet readers' expectations of shock and a "clear message."

The characteristics of Second World War poetry described above and the unwillingness of poets to write optimistic and patriotic verse despite a more worthy cause, prompted many cries, particularly in the popular press, of "Where are our war poets?" Alexander Comfort, editor of *Lyræ*, poet and pacifist who refused military service, challenged the assumption that poets were obliged to write about the war.

We have had three separate campaigns waged against the poets—the 'younger' poets in particular—for their failure to do what is expected of them [with respect to the war]. The Rostrevor Hamilton campaign in the *Listener* (demanding more pep poetry) can be dismissed, because the Conservative Party can always hire sandwich men if it wants them without impressing writers; so can Robert Lynd's articles in *John o' London's*, on the ground that he has not read enough of the poetry which has been written since 1939 to talk about it. But one cannot ignore Spender's essay in *Horizon* to the same extent. . . . [W]hen he says that "no poet has created in imaginative terms (1) any major event in the war; (2) any statement of the nature of the struggle in which we are involved, either as suffering or as ideas; (3) any positive faith in the democracy for which we are fighting; (4) any effective statement against war," there is enough truth in that to require an explanation from the writers themselves. (*Horizon* 5:29 358)

Despite his suggestion that the poets should explain themselves, Comfort offers an example of "interpretation of a major event" which was "small and personal in scope" (359). Rook's "Dunkirk," he continues "was written within the circle of the war which the individual

fighting man sees, a circle in which there are no general principles and no objective except the next point to be occupied or abandoned” (359). Considering Comfort’s strident pacifism, his suggestion that war poetry is written from within a unprincipled circle of the poet’s own experience is surprising, but it is also, perhaps, an acknowledgment of the tendency of principles to overshadow individuals and of war to threaten individuality with impersonal violence. In these circumstances, writing from one’s own perspective may constitute another front, one in which servicemen write poems to reclaim their identities from the forces conspiring to eliminate them.

Oscar Williams, editor of the 1945 Anglo-American collection, *The War Poets: An Anthology of the War Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, answers the question on a more practical level. Williams attempts to clarify misconceptions about the existence of war poetry and where it may be found, addressing his introduction to “those for whom this may be the first large collection of good contemporary verse brought to their attention.”

There are many who, because they are unfamiliar with the publications in which good modern verse is likely to appear, believe that World War II has not produced fine war poems. Often in the popular press, the cry is raised “Where are the war poets?” The war poets of this war have been writing since 1929; the trouble is that the popular press is not “where” real poetry is to be found. The general run of periodical editors fear to print anything but sentimental versifying on the premise that good poetry is over the heads of their readers. . . . Resistance to good poetry in general is intensified when it has war or the problems of war as its subject matter. (4)

The difficulty in the popular press of finding sentimental versifiers to write about the war, may indicate that poets learned a lesson from the early voices of the First World War. For

many, the painful irony of Brooke's "swimmers into cleanness leaping" forestalled both the formation of queues of eager volunteers waiting to enlist and the poems to encourage them. Moreover, the reticence of editors to print good poetry was matched in the hesitance of poets to repeat the work of the last war's poets.

In a contribution to Williams's anthology, Gavin Ewart describes the difficulty a soldier-poet of the Second World War faces in trying to write about the war.

Personally, I feel very strongly that the best poems about war (modern war) have already been written—most of them by Wilfred Owen before he died in 1918. In a good many cases, all we can do today is to write the poems of the earlier war. For this reason I find myself very shy of the war as a subject, although, there is always room for good war reporting. I feel, however, that this is better done in prose. . . . The subject is too large and looms too near; it crushes the writer. All we can do is to provide footnotes, the small, detailed cameos of our own experience. (28-29)

With the bar for war poetry set so high—or the definition drawn so narrowly—the new generation of soldier-poets worked in the shadow of Owen and his peers. Their efforts at originality evidently disappointed the popular press, which continued to clamor for war poetry after poems by soldiers were in print. The turn away from "the war as a subject" and towards "small, detailed cameos" of personal experience describes the response of many poets. This tendency, combined with the number of poets who, as Healey claimed, wrote "with no thought of publication" produced a vast number of specific, subjective and detailed accounts of their experiences in the war.

Their anthologies form an astonishing treasury, invaluable to historians no less than to all who love poetry. Commenting on some "sad-coloured

volumes” of history she had been given for review, Virginia Woolf wrote “the machine they describe...but the heart of it they leave untouched. At any rate, we are left out, and history, in our opinion, lacks an eye.”

The Oasis collection gives history a thousand eyes, all with the sharp immediacy of a war photographer, but with a range and depth of insight which only poetry can provide. (“Voices”)

The “thousand eyes” Healey describes are both the greatest strength and thorniest problem of the Salamander Oasis poems. The desire Woolf expresses for “an eye” to history which would enable writing to touch the heart is not met by a thousand eyes. Though Healey suggests that the deficiency she observed is resolved many times over by the thousand eyes to history the Salamander Oasis collection supplies, many readers, after hundreds of different poets’ accounts of the war, may repeat her wish for a different reason. One eye, one perspective on the whole of the war, would be inadequate but a thousand can be disorienting. The poems hold tremendous potential for historians, literary scholars and poetry lovers, yet the very multiplicity of voices and experiences which make the collection so vivid and powerful also make it difficult to approach and even more challenging to concatenate.

For other poets, the last war was not the Great War, but the Spanish Civil War, and it left many disillusioned. Leftist writers’ anti-Fascist activity on behalf of Spain could not be sustained through another war, particularly one in which Communists would not (at least initially) be fighting Fascists. In *Under Siege*, Robert Hewison writes that the August 1939 declaration of the Russian-German Non-Aggression Pact “was a profound shock” to the Leftist literary and military veterans of the Spanish Civil War. From their point of view, Hewison explains, “The Pact was the complete reversal of the grand battle between

Communism and Fascism which Spain had been supposed to be about” (6). While some Communists defended Stalin’s decision, others, including Stephen Spender, began to “think again about the political purges in Russia, and the activities of the commissars in Spain” (7). In a pamphlet published in May 1939 titled “The New Realism, a discussion,” Spender “accepted that he was a bourgeois, and that he could only operate by accepting the cultural implications of that fact. Culture became a more important commitment than politics” (8). Spender while “still left-wing and committed” retreated from the staunch political position that would ally him with Stalin against his own country. Prompted by a reexamination of Communism in practice, or by concerns for their own safety once Communists were numbered among the enemy, writers began to step down from their political platforms and focus on preserving and defending culture during the coming war. It was then, Hewison writes, that they felt the absence of their leaders. W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood had departed for America in January 1939, but the effect of their departure were not realized until the eve of war, when it “resulted in the further demoralization of the movement which they had helped to form. Both men, through their obvious talent and their less definable moral authority, had become leaders of their generation. Their abdication increased the sense of disorientation and defeat among their followers” (8). In the absence of these two “leaders of their generation,” those remaining in London transformed into cultural isolationists. Hewison turns to Samuel Hynes’s *The Auden Generation* to explain how “English literary life fell into a state of shock from which it found little cause to recover during the war years” (182). According to Hynes:

For the writers *as writers*, the appropriate response to the end of the ’thirties was silence, or a retrospective brooding over what had happened. Some of them would fight in the war, or support it in various other ways, but they

would not write much about it; it was not really their war, and when it overtook their lives it came not as a cause, but as a consequence of a cause that had already been lost. (182)

Whether they were licking their wounds or simply uninterested, many writers, editors and publishers, shied away, both from literature about the war and the inferior literature demanded by those enduring it. Hewison's title, *Under Siege*, describes not only the wartime condition of Londoners enduring the Blitz, but the attitude towards the public of writers, editors and publishers who saw themselves as the protectors of culture and literature. Pointedly ignoring the war and deploring the low-brow entertainments that the public demanded, some in the literary establishment pulled up the ladder to the ivory tower to wait out the war. The war would not be easy to ignore, however, and writers had only a few options: (1) to write about it; (2) to write about their refusal to write about it; (3) to critique other people's writing about it.

### **The Ivory Tower on the Front Line**

The writer's desire to participate in and contribute to his cultural moment and his responsibility to represent and engage with the crisis in the world around him came into conflict during the Second World War. For many, the conflict between culture and responsibility manifested itself in uncertainty about the degree to which the war should constitute the subject of their work. Beginning in January 1940, Cyril Connolly wrote with studied dispassion about the war and the arts in his monthly column "Comment," adopting by turns all three positions outlined above. A cynic might argue that his strongly-stated yet changeable positions were intentionally provocative and calculated to increase sales, but it is probable that Connolly was sincere in his attempts to negotiate his philosophical position on the war. Tracing Connolly's position on the war and the responses to his Comments that he

received and published reveals a set of attitudes and critical practices which help to account for the reception of the *Oasis* poems.

In May 1940, Connolly writes that although the war “has so far taken up little space in the contents of *Horizon*,” the false war, declared but not fought, may at any moment turn into a true war, therefore, “it seems time to put down a few reflections on the war and on the attitude of artists and writers to it.” Of the one thousand poems submitted to date, Connolly explains, “nine hundred have no bearing whatever on the war, while the remaining hundred are either Communist, Pacifist, or Defeatist” (309). He continues:

No contributor has yet expressed a wish to beat the Germans; nor been provoked into writing about the black-out, the blockade, the *Graf Spee* or Scapa Flow. The bomber which played a large part in pre-war poetry, is no longer mentioned. What belligerence there is exists only in contributors of over military age: it is clear that there is a cleavage between the opinions (old-fashioned anti-fascist), of the over-thirty-fives, and the truculent sheep-to-the-slaughter recalcitrance of the young contributors. . . . These generalizations apply only to our contributors, and have no bearing on the feeling of the country as a whole, which would seem to be extremely bellicose, with a real desire for large-scale bombings, a win-the-war cabinet, ferocious handling of neutrals, and an invasion of Russia. (309)

The observation that no contributor has “been provoked” into writing about the war despite both ongoing experiences—black-out and blockade—which affected daily life, and early and dramatic conflicts with Germany—the *Graf Spee* and Scapa Flow—indicates that Connolly expects to receive poems about the events of the war rather than about attitudes towards or beliefs about the war.<sup>1</sup> What could such poems accomplish that other forms of literature or



reporting could not? Connolly assumes that poems about the experiences and events of the war would be necessarily belligerent, as evidenced by his dissatisfaction with “[w]hat belligerence there is” in the work of his current contributors. In the paragraphs that follow, he dismantles the Communist, Pacifist and Defeatist positions to which intellectuals have fled and argues that the war is necessary and especially so for intellectuals. In contrast to the “old-fashioned anti-fascist” “over-thirty-fives,” and the “truculent sheep-to-the-slaughter recalcitrance of the young,” Connolly appeals for a pragmatic intellectual response to the war: for intellectuals to take the war personally. He writes, “intellectuals recoil from the war as if it were a best-seller. They are enough ahead of their time to despise it, and yet they must realize that they nevertheless represent the culture that is being defended. Abyssinian intellectuals, Albanian intellectuals, Chinese intellectuals, Basque intellectuals, they are hunted like the sea-otter, they are despoiled like the egret. Our own are the last to survive” (313). Connolly argues that intellectuals (of a kind which have not been submitting their work to his journal) should feel themselves a rare breed, threatened by the enemy and consequently wrong to treat the war with contempt. He seems close to implying that facing the war and writing about it would be a more appropriate, possibly a more grateful response, from intellectuals protected from eradication by servicemen willing to fight. In a startling turn, Connolly argues instead:

The war is the enemy of creative activity, and writer and painters are wise and right to ignore it and to concentrate their talent on other subjects. Since they are politically impotent, they can use this time to develop at deeper emotional levels, or to improve their weapons by technical experiment, for they have so long been mobilized in various causes that they are losing the intellectually greatest virtues, the desire to pursue the truth wherever it may lead, and the

belief in the human mind as the supreme organ through which life can be apprehended, improved and intensified. (314)

Connolly does not see a middle path between ideological engagement with the war, which compromises the writer's "greatest virtues," and ignoring the war. Connolly's advice is predicated on several faulty assumptions: (1) no one has submitted poems about the war which are not ideological therefore such poems cannot be written, (2) as long as the war threatens culture, those concerned with culture should closet themselves from the war, (3) while in that closet, intellectuals may "develop at deeper emotional levels or improve their weapons by technical experiment," thereby preserving "the desire to pursue the truth wherever it may lead" (provided it does not lead outside the closet which protects it). Connolly's idea that intellectuals and artists are endangered by the war is valid, but his conclusion that they can only do their work in isolation from it denies both the nature of that work and the likely, if latent, desire among them to participate in or contribute to the struggle for their freedom. Connolly seems to believe that artists and intellectuals who pay attention to the war risk contamination by futile ideology, or compromise by the stress of the conflict. In either case, he fears, their work suffers and culture suffers. He concludes that "intellectuals are lucky to be alive. They must celebrate by creating more culture as fast as they can," and offers Eliot, whose *East Coker* which had just appeared, as the role-model (314). Connolly warns that if writers "take a vow of silence till the war is over; or produce as little as do some of our lords of language, they will disappear" (314). If writers want to remain valuable, Connolly implies, they must keep producing culture worth defending, and be seen doing so.

Two months later, the July 1940 "Comment" was pre-empted by Goronwy Rees's reply, "Letter from a Soldier," which challenges Connolly's assumptions and proposes a

relationship between artist and soldier based upon representation and responsibility. Rees challenges Connolly's purported position on the war. Quoting Connolly's claim, "War is the enemy of creative activity and writers and painters are right and wise to ignore it," Rees blasts the editor for his inability to follow his own advice. He writes, "your constant preoccupation with the forbidden subject can only be described as an obsessive activity—you return to it with the regularity of a dipsomaniac returning to the bottle or a neurotic to a guilty conscience" (467). Rees claims that "the war will not be ignored" and Connolly's inability to take his own advice is both understandable and good evidence against his position. Not only, Rees claims, should writers not ignore the war, they are beholden to the soldier and have a responsibility to make a study of the soldier's experience in order to make it intelligible and keep the soldier's humanity in view.

I am the last to ask, or wish, that the writer should lay down his pen and take up arms; and I believe the people of this country are too wise to make any such demand. It implies as great a misconception of the artist's function, and equal contempt, as to ask, or believe it possible, that he should ignore the war. Yet the soldier has the right, in return for his blood and his life and his despair, for the crimes he must take on himself, to ask that those most qualified, by their sensibility, by their more lucid perception of values, by their release from belligerence, should comprehend, analyse, illuminate, commemorate, his sacrifice and his suffering and the horror to which he is condemned, to understand and reveal that even in war his is a human being and not a brute too ignoble for the artist's notice. (468)

Connolly's objection about writers' clumsiness in doing this job without adopting an ideological frame may be one reason he feels that they should resist it. For Rees, however,

writers must acknowledge the sacrifice made on their behalf and accept responsibility for it.

“I believe,” he writes, “that the soldier has the right to ask that responsibility should be acknowledged . . . . And even if, in the end, the artist could only reject, oppose, condemn the war, in the light of his understanding, his responsibility would be discharged” (469).

Rees argues for an ethical relation between servicemen and the artist based upon the right of the soldier to remain, and to be seen as remaining, a human being “and not a brute too ignoble” for notice. So long as military service eclipses his identity and war threatens his life, the soldier obliges the artist to respond to him. Rees mediates his difference of opinion with Connolly by suggesting that “while imposing no restraint on forms of expression or even the most ambiguous machinery of mythology, or fantasy or imagery, the content of the artist’s imagination should be the reality of his time, so that if an artist followed your direction to explore ‘the deeper levels of emotion’, it would be precisely that reality he would explore” (469). Rees allows that the artist may respond in a manner of his own choosing, but he must attend to what is taking place. He must bear witness to the soldier’s experience and to current events. It is his war work and his ethical obligation.

Rees’s claims about the needs of soldiers are founded upon the belief that war cannot be described by those who are in it. He assumes that the soldier cannot speak for himself—although Rees has—and there is evidence for his claim. It was widely accepted both within the service and by civilians that military service and the stress of the war had a stultifying effect on the spirits and creativity of servicemen. The problem is not, however, as simple as Rees’s statement of it suggests. Rees argues, “No voice will break the terrible silence of the soldier, while he cannot break it himself; he has no voice, he has only a rifle” (470). The appearance of Rees’s letter in *Horizon* is evidence that not all soldiers’ voices have been replaced with rifles. However, *Horizon*’s selection of servicemen’s writing is slight,

because Connolly's commitment to preserving and providing culture prevents him from publishing submissions which do not measure up. Under the strict standards maintained by Connolly and others, all but the most exceptional soldier-poets may well require the surrogate writers Rees imagines. Civilian writers are at a disadvantage of experience however, and soldier-poets lack the civilian's opportunity for quiet reflection: neither is in a particularly good position to write the Rees-Connolly war poem. So long as editors, readers and critics were unwilling to make allowances for the conditions under which the texts were written and to meet the poets and their texts where they are, few soldiers' poems would see print. This conclusion prompts the questions at the heart of the Salamander Oasis project: who would represent the war, and how and to whom would they represent it? Some critics, notably M. J. Tambimuttu, Stephen Spender and Oscar Williams explored other ways of valuing poems which did not depend upon compliance with a peace-time standard of writing. The literary record confirms that thousands of servicemen found the time and motivation to write about their own experiences. Perhaps their dissatisfaction with others' attempts to portray their experience prompted their response. They may have thought of themselves as making a record for later use by artists who would take up Rees's challenge.

In his reply to Rees's letter, Connolly concedes that *Horizon* has enjoyed a "fool's paradise, lulled by the general false security, and considered the war as a burden, necessary but not intolerable, like income tax, which, after demanding an equal share from us all, would suddenly explode into victory" (532). It is difficult to imagine what, in Connolly's mind, might constitute an "equal share" for a non-combatant—certainly not the burden of reading sub-par poetry submissions. He avows "a belief that [the] art of writing was one of the highest expressions of the genius of England, France and America, and that to encourage and publish it was in itself a war activity," before admitting that it has become "clear that the

labour of imagination necessary for creative writing, the freedom to print it, the backing to publish it, the leisure and curiosity to read it, depend in the last analysis on the British fleet, and now that that extraordinary fact has been brought home to us we cannot afford the airy detachment of earlier numbers” (532). Abandoning the “airy detachment of earlier numbers” will not, it seems, require taking the contributions of servicemen more seriously. For Connolly and, it seems, for Rees as well, the first criteria remains literary standard, and first-hand experience falls further down the list. Despite his adjusted perceptions, Connolly will not concede this point: “And the fact remains that war *is* the enemy of creative activity, because the military virtues are in conflict with the creative, and because it is impossible in wartime for most people to concentrate on the values of literature and art. The point which *Horizon* has made is that though this war is being fought for culture, the fighting of it will not create that culture” (533-4). Someone must create culture during the war, he maintains, if only to keep the values and rewards of peace-time in view. His prediction that “the fighting of it will not create that culture” indicates that Connolly is not aware of nor has he foreseen the effect that the war will have on the men and women fighting it and the energy that they will expend attempting to express their experiences in verse. In the context of other Comments, in which he has complained about the poetry submissions *Horizon* receives, it becomes apparent that the fighting will not be permitted to create culture. Connolly maintains a peace-time standard for war poems, and in so doing, effects a tension between poetic standards and contemporary relevance.

Despite his concessions to Rees, Connolly would not compromise his standards, and consequently found less war-related material to print than perhaps he or his readers hoped. In his June 1940 “Comment,” Connolly describes the flood of poetry submissions to *Horizon* in conflicting terms.

[We] are inundated with poems, not only by professional poets, or even amateur ones, but in many cases by people who have never written a poem before, and yet find it come to them as naturally as blowing out a paper bag. Poems arrive on regimental notepaper, or on the shoddy white foolscap (used only in communicating with their equals!) of our suave bureaucracy. We have had poems sent from schools and prisons, and even from large country houses. (389)

Connolly's description of the volume and type of poetry submitted to *Horizon* subtly boasts of the broad success of his journal after only five months in print: the inundation *Horizon* faces speaks to the breadth of its readership and to its desirability as a publication in which to place one's work. Yet Connolly is ungracious, despite his success; he mocks his readers and would-be contributors. Connolly sneers at the amateur poet's blown out paper bag of a poem and the poet's naïveté in imagining it worthy of notice and takes offence at the low-quality paper on which the soldiers' and civil servants' poems are submitted. Given the number of his own complaints about the availability of paper, his scorn for the "shoddy white foolscap" is surprising, until he clarifies that the slight lies in the bureaucrat imagining that the editor of *Horizon* is his equal. The extremity of his description of the submissions invites the hope that he is exaggerating for comic effect in the glib tone seen elsewhere in his writing. The message, however, is not in question, poetry submissions are, in his opinion, substandard. Following his derogatory statements about amateur poets, Connolly seems to redeem them by observing that amateur poets can still teach readers something about the place of poetry in English culture.

From these amateur poets we can learn one important fact. Poetry is still the natural national form of self-expression, the one to which we take most

readily. It is neither artificial nor decadent, and as the volume of poetry written would appear to have increased since the war, so the likelihood of great poetry being written in this country—which possesses the language and the emotional reserves necessary for it—must increase, particularly when it is taken into account that the poetry of to-day is classless and is no longer the preserve of the educated and leisured. (389)

Finding that poetry still holds the central place in self-expression reassures. The apparent contradiction between being gratified to find that the nation expresses itself through poetry and judging most of that poetry as bad can be partially resolved by examining Connolly's use of the word 'natural.' The amateur poet, it seems, confuses the 'natural' turn to poetry with other 'natural' acts. Connolly faults the amateur for imagining that breathing and writing poetry are equally unstudied human capacities. In this light, the poor quality poetry demonstrates the incommensurability of the need or desire to express oneself and the ease with which such expression may be accomplished. Self-expression is both harder than one expects and made harder by the number of people trying. The self-expression which comes easily is superficial and trite—all the more so when everyone tries their hand at it, and these efforts results in the banal submissions which find their way to the *Horizon* editor. In a cruel heavy-handed way, Connolly argues that true self-expression requires articulation of the particularity of the individual, while insisting that the originality necessary to achieve the requisite level of specificity has not been rationed in equal measure among those enduring the war. The amateur poets who understand that poetry is a crafted expression with technical components nevertheless lack the proficiency to produce work that meets Connolly's standard. Connolly distinguishes between the unformed self-expression that characterizes amateurs' work and the contest among professional poets between experiment



and tradition. He writes, “From the professional poets another fact can be learned; that a fascinating struggle is going on between the technicians (the ‘poets’ poets’, the ‘avant garde’) and the traditionalists. It is a struggle rather between technique and imagination, and *Horizon* has tried to give expression to both” (389). On first reading this passage, one might think that the practitioners and their skills pair up (technicians with technique and traditionalists with imagination), or that each group applies one skill to another (technicians apply their imagination to technique, and traditionalist apply their techniques to imagination). I suggest a third possibility: for both technicians and traditionalists, the interplay of technique and imagination is plastic, and the poets’ awareness of and engagement in the struggle earns their work a place in *Horizon*. It is worth noting despite poetry’s prominence as “the natural national form of self-expression” the self-expressive aspect of poetry does not enter into Connolly’s description of the professional poet’s concerns.

In his November 1941 column, Connolly closes in on the trouble with poetry, particularly failed poetry in which he sees spoiled potential.

In this number of *Horizon* there are no poems. This is not accidental, it is rather an act of editorial passive resistance, a negative criticism of the poetry which has been submitted. . . . *Horizon* receives a hundred poems a week. Why are they all so bad? Because most poets have no idea what poetry is about or what a poem ought to be. Of a hundred poems seventy should never have been written. They represent the bottom level of trash which has never varied, except in bulk, throughout the centuries, for all bad poetry is much the same. It is the other thirty poems which demand attention. They too are bad but in a different way. One cannot help feeling that their badness is curable, that they exhibit errors peculiar to the present time, a

disease (like nightblindness) which we can attribute to a particular cause.

(389)

Connolly traces the deficiencies of these bad but curable poets to a strain of puritanism, which he defines as “poverty of imagination, poverty of diction, poverty of experience,” and confusion about the poet’s purpose. The puritan poet’s work “clearly depicts the dilemma of the intellectual in the period of *entre deux guerres*,” it can be recognized by the “academic asceticism and rhyming journalism” of the twenties and thirties (299). Connolly describes these poets as lost; they took poetry “down a cul de sac to get away from the Georgians” and the “academic socialism of the thirties” was not enough to lead them out of it. With the advent of war, Connolly suggests, “events have caught up with his prognostic and he is no longer out of step with the rest of the population, his work will deepen and simplify itself” (301). A “deep cause of puritanism—the poetic sense of responsibility” can be remedied with a new romanticism, and by reminding them, “All we ask of the poets is to sing” (301).

The “poetic sense of responsibility” is a legacy of the First World War. It produced the “concentration on the horrors of trench warfare” and gave the poems of that war the “clear message” that amplified their impact on the reading public. These traits, which Denis Healey ascribes to the First World War, are replaced in the Second World War by the small, personal, lyric poems that soldiers in the war wrote. The shift from poetic responsibility to “all we ask of the poets is to sing” effectively transfers responsibility for bearing witness to the war as a whole from poets to readers, who must puzzle together hundreds of vignettes in a collage of experiences rather than reading the work of a handful of poets and thereby receiving a concentrated digest of the war. Unfortunately, this process did not go smoothly, and, it seems, many of the people involved—most importantly readers—seemed unaware that it was taking place. Editors, including Connolly, and critics, including Spender, critique the

lyrics that soldiers write in terms of the reader's lingering desire for the "clear message." The discontinuity between expectations for war poetry's form and its content make it difficult for many Second World War poets to find readers.

### **Defending Culture: *Personal Landscape* and the Neo-Classics' War**

As Connolly wrestled with the place of the war in poetry and poetry in the war, a group of men in Cairo were following his original advice to ignore the war and continue making culture. Bernard Spencer, Lawrence Durrell and Robin Fedden were civilians living as expatriates in Cairo when they decided to form a poetry magazine January 1942. These men had very different experiences of the war and different attitudes towards poetry than the group which produced *Oasis*.

In "An Anatomy of Exile," Robin Fedden's introduction to the 1945 volume *Personal Landscape: An Anthology of Exile*, he describes the prominent place of *Personal Landscape* on the Egyptian literary scene.

The immediate success of our first number showed that there were many people in the Middle East who wished to read live verse, and the contributions which subsequently came in proved that there were also more people writing it than we imagined. Further, the absence of any other serious verse publication, and the lamentable level of various Middle East anthologies of "war poetry", directed the best of this interest and this practice towards *Personal Landscape*. Such a development inevitably changed its nature and what had been a rather private affair became a matter for the bookshops. Our scope, and the sort of thing we have since been publishing, the present anthology is intended precisely to show. (14)

Fedden's surprise over the popularity of their publication and the number of contributions received echoes the *Oasis* editors' speculation about the place of verse among their fellow servicemen. Fedden's reaction, however, suggests that his surprise springs from the prevalence of serious poetry, as though he and his fellow editors briefly believed they alone were capable of producing and appreciating it. The editors of *Personal Landscape* printed no work more often than their own, but the eight numbers they produced between 1942 and 1945 also included many contributors. G. S. Fraser, Georges Gorse, Diana Gould, Charles Hepburn, Olivia Manning, Amy Nimr, John Pudney, and Ibrahim Shukrallah each contributed to one number of the magazine; Dorian Cooke, George Seferis, and Gwyn Williams to two numbers. Keith Douglas, Elie Papadimitriou, Hugh Gordon Porteus, and Ruth Spiers (translating Rilke) were printed in three numbers and Robert Liddell in four. Terence Tiller and editors Bernard Spencer and Lawrence Durrell appear in every number; Robin Fedden appears in two-thirds. Fedden's description of the magazine as "a rather private affair" certainly refers to the editors' tendency to regularly print their own work. The magazine became "a matter for the bookshops" at roughly the time it began to include other contributors.

Fedden's lament for the level of so-called war poetry not only leverages his claim for the superiority of his publication but also indicates that the war was not high among the priorities of contributors not in uniform. Manning's poem "Written in the third year of the War" describes the Greeks' failed attempt to repel German invasion. The poem would have appealed to Durrell, who, along with Manning, escaped to Egypt when Greece fell. The sentiments of the exile are also a theme of the poem, and a feeling of exile characterized the group. I conclude therefore, that the poem was printed because of what it meant to the editors as lovers of Greece, things classical and as exiles, rather than out of a specific desire

to respond or encourage responses to the war. Keith Douglas's poems appeared late in *Personal Landscape's* run, and Fedden explains his inclusion in terms of Douglas's superiority relative to other war poetry. "We think," he writes, "that Keith Douglas's war poems are near the top of the small body of presentable English poetry that the war has thrown off . . ." (14). Fedden seems intent on shaming the majority of poetry "thrown off" in the war, with a back-handed compliment to Douglas's poems. Bernard Spencer's obituary note on Douglas appeared in *Personal Landscape's* final issue and describes the poet's work in more positive terms.

It was in North Africa that he wrote the poems we were fortunate enough to be able to publish, and which are among the small amount of successful verse written by soldiers from the battlefield in the present war. His most remarkable qualities as a poet are his economical use of language for statement (metrical and sound effects are rare), the surprise and force of his images (c.f. *Cairo Jag*, and *Vergissmeinnicht*) and the maturity of the 'pity' (as for instance in *Enfidaville*). He regarded himself as being in the tradition of Wilfred Owen. (20)

As Spencer intends a compliment when he names Douglas one of the small number of successful soldier-poets, the measures of Douglas's success reveal the criteria by which Spencer judges war poetry. Douglas's "economical use of language for statement" rather than special effects of meter and sound reflects a standard to which the *Personal Landscape* editors held themselves. Spencer's praise for the "maturity of the 'pity'" coupled with Douglas's own sense of following in the footsteps of Owen and Isaac Rosenberg connect the success of Douglas's poetry to its similarity to poetry of the First World War. The influence of First World War poets on Douglas simultaneously creates similarity and

difference between his work and theirs and makes Douglas's poetry his own. Some poets in the First World War mentored each other and drew from their own knowledge of poetry and reading of other poets' work, but none of them knew how the war would end or what its consequences would be. Douglas learned from their experience more completely than they could and by relating their work to his own experience of war, he produced poetry which presented his experiences in a manner that met the expectations for war poetry held over from the First World War in the minds of readers. Douglas's expectation of his death in France and his preparation of his manuscripts for publication prior to participating in the D-Day invasion parallels Owen's behavior. The similarities exist, and are not, in and of themselves, problematic; however, when readers' and critics' desire Second World War poets to meet expectations based on their predecessors in the First World War, to write similar poetry, even to die similar deaths, we cheat the poets and ourselves of the opportunity to read the texts on their own terms: informed but not circumscribed by the poetry of the First World War.

Douglas's poetry and a few other poets writing about the war begin to appear in *Personal Landscape* in 1943 and war poetry—mainly written by civilians—became increasingly significant in the final three issues which appeared in 1944 and 1945. The editors explain their decision to end publication of the periodical in the final issue, affirming their decision to focus on interests beyond the scope of the war.

When we were relatively cut off from England, and the term of our stay in the Middle East seemed likely to be indefinite, there was an evident place for a local verse periodical. *Personal Landscape* was accordingly started in January 1942. For three years it has provided a vehicle, the only one available in English, for serious poets and critics in the Middle East. It has also, at a time

when propaganda colours all perspectives, emphasized those “personal landscapes”, which lie obstinately outside national and political frontiers. (2)

The claim that theirs was the only vehicle for “serious poets and critics” and the implication that a serious periodical operates “outside national and political frontiers” buttress the belief that important poetry was not written about the war, but in spite of it, and, by extension, that the war was not a subject for serious poets and critics but a distraction to them. These beliefs have shaped literary criticism about poetry of the Second World War to a significant degree for a surprisingly long time. Together with the popular belief that ‘war poetry’ either refers specifically to First World War poetry or should replicate that poetry’s themes of satire and pity, the claim that culturally important work keeps a distance from the war has marginalized the vast majority of soldier-poets’ writing. The place of soldiers’ Second World War poetry is further complicated by the tendency of critics to pit one group against the other. Both the civilians and the servicemen have substantial weaknesses which can be easily leveraged to condemn their work depending upon the critic’s preference. Furthermore, members of each group are not always their own best allies.

For example, Robin Fedden describes the discomfort of his exile in Cairo in terms of unvarying weather, the monotony of a “flaccid” landscape, the psychological isolation of being a Christian in an Islamic country, the bad taste of the Egyptian upper class and the ennui which resulted from passing the war years in a neutral country. The highlight of the war for Fedden was, therefore, Rommel’s advance on Alamein, at which point “the war suddenly [became] a tonic and [affected] just that stepping-up of emotional tempo which lends events immediate significance and obscures the day-to-day dreariness of a state of semi-hostility. War in a neutral country like Egypt is war at its most sterile; expatriates of all nations have felt here the length and inconvenience rather than the inspiration of the

struggle” (12). It is difficult to imagine, let alone accept, that Fedden’s high opinion of his literary sensibility qualifies him to pass judgment on the work of the men and women who felt “the inspiration of the struggle” while he languished in an air-conditioned tea room, far removed from the London publications where he would like to place his work that he must create his own publication. Fedden’s off-putting hubris and attempts to valorize the journal should not be allowed to color the entire group. They were firmly on the sidelines of the war and unconcerned with aspects of it which did not impact them personally and professionally. Because they were expatriates before the war began and more or less committed to waiting out the war in neutral Egypt, they continued to focus to the greatest extent possible on culture rather than current events. While few writers in London could take Cyril Connolly’s early advice to “ignore [the war] and to concentrate their talent on other subjects,” the *Personal Landscape* poets with few exceptions did. One can argue, that in so doing they show the commitment of the artist to his craft.

Cleric, the reviewer at *The Palestine Post*, did not, however, take that view. He critiques the *Personal Landscape* poets for their “whining protest” and self-centeredness, attributing to them to a “classic demonstration of the guilt complex” in a 21 September 1945 review of the post-war anthology *Personal Landscape: An Anthology of Exile*. He dismisses the introductory essay, writing “the value of Mr. Fedden’s judgment can be gauged from the two dull and turgid poems which he also contributes and the reader soon realizes that this unfortunate preface must be discounted.” Durrell and Tiller, in his opinion “fit equally well into the spoilt-boy category” and are also dismissed: Durrell for his “high-flown, sometimes rhythmical expression of a psychological state for which Freud had a name” and Tiller for “ornate imagery which pleases the ear and eye for a few lines, [but] turns out to be as sterile as any hot-house plant, and to give these designedly personal poems a dry and remote



character.” The critic attributes the fault to “the mental state of the poets, reinforced by the ‘personal orientation’ theory, which is the privilege of the comfortably off.” I am not particularly interested in the poets’ mental states—at least not in the Freudian terms of the reviewer. The men’s detachment from what takes place around them is evident in their writing and of greater interest. The reviewer does praise Bernard Spencer and Keith Douglas, writing that Spencer “is a complete enough personality to realize that external events have their own importance and are not to be judged merely by their effect upon the precious Personality of the poet. In Mr. Spencer’s work precision of thought is matched by efficiency and tautness of expression, and the temptations of licence and lyricism are rejected.” Keith Douglas, he writes, “is the remaining writer of any note. His muscular expression of passionate feeling is more likely to prove the poetry of the age than the cloudy verbosity of Terence Tiller or the gawky immaturity—not without charm sometimes—of Lawrence Durrell” (7). It is difficult to separate the reviewer’s negative opinion of the poets’ perceived psychological maladies from his assessment of their writing—all the more so for the lack of textual evidence in the review. The dressing down derives its sting, however, from the reviewer’s indignation over the poets’ detachment more than from deficiencies in the work. The reviewer suggests that the poems are too personal, but it is not clear whether the remedy is that they should be less egoistic or more socially conscious. Perhaps the reviewer means to imply that the sterile and high-flown styles of Tiller and Durrell fail because they do not connect the poets to the world in which they and their readers live.

G. S. Fraser, who contributed to both *Personal Landscape* and *Oasis*, described the differences between London and Cairo poets in response to the 1942 anthology *Poetry in Wartime*, edited by M.J. Tambimuttu, for the editor’s magazine *Poetry (London)*. Fraser describes London poets as neo-romantics; the language of their “crisis poetry” shows “the

virtues of romanticism, urgency, energy, appeal” because the “romantic writer must, perhaps, always write hastily and spasmodically, in fits of enthusiasm, and an uneven texture is always to be expected in his work.” He argues that London poets respond to radically different circumstances than those which exist in Cairo and that the poetry from the two cities varies in consequence of the poets’ different experiences, particularly their experiences of the war. Therefore, Fraser writes, reading *Poetry in Wartime* has prompted him to see “that English society at its most sensitive is going through a critical spiritual experience, and is on the verge of accepting, with all its grave practical implications, the view that our world can only be saved from utter destruction by the acceptance of love and suffering as duties.” He suggests that the Marxist view of history has been replaced by the idea of humanity as a single organism and “that we are all, even when fighting, killing, and hating one another, members of one another still. That social guilt is something shared by the rich and poor, by the oppressed and by the oppressor: to act, indeed, is to be guilty” (215). As the crisis of the war precipitates “the acceptance of love and suffering as duties” among the isolated and besieged British and evokes frenzies of neo-romantic poetry writing, in Cairo “nothing of this sort, it must be said, is happening” (215-6). In the absence of “any profound historical or religious experience” Cairo’s poets take a long view of history, and “reflect, a little more sadly than usual,” what he terms a neo-classical view. With few exceptions, the best poetry out of Cairo, Fraser claims, is written by “English public servants: the members of the British Council, the university lecturers, the minor officials at the Embassy.” Moreover, these poets are distanced from the English romantic poet by the years spent abroad in the Mediterranean during which they “acquired some of the qualities of that civilization: which is serene, taciturn, unchanging and sad . . . .” Fraser is describing the employment, the expatriate lifestyle and the stoical attitude of the *Personal Landscape* poets for whom the war

has had a material rather than a “spiritual impact” (216). By Fraser’s account, Cairo provides the conditions under which artists can turn their back to the war and concentrate on art and culture as Cyril Connolly suggested to 1940 *Horizon* readers. By their own account, in *Personal Landscape* itself, and by Fraser’s description of the poets in this article, the editors are as deliberately unconcerned with the war as possible. For neo-classic poet, in contrast to the neo-romantic, the problem “is not his content (scenes, faces, incidents throng one in that cosmopolitan city) but his form: it is elimination. ‘I don’t want experience,’ said Terence Tiller, fretfully, to me in a Cairo tramcar, ‘experience is a distraction . . . .’” Therefore, Fraser explains, readers should have different expectations for poetry written in Cairo and London.

We can expect, then, that the verse written in Cairo (under the sense, more or less conscious, that civilisation is something static, which suffers occasional brutal intrusions from outside) will be quite different from the verse written in London (under the sense that history is a process of painful development which has reached a crisis, and that this crisis makes universal moral claims). Cairo’s best poetry will be placid and patient, rather than urgent in its tone, sad rather than tragic, persuasive rather than minatory, moral rather than prophetic. (217)

The neo-classic attitude which Fraser ascribes to Cairo’s best poets is a civilian’s luxury, and he acknowledges as much. Despite his own position in the Royal Army Service Corps, he admires rather than resents the comfort and the placidity of his civilian peers. Fraser’s description of the differences between Cairo and London poets reframes the *Personal Landscape* editors’ lack of interest in the war as a kind of cultural service, preserving the practice of art for its own sake where it is possible to do so. In this sense, the apparent egoism and snobbery of the group may be viewed as working toward a long-term, which is

not to say a higher, purpose. “It would be ridiculous, having thus invented two schools, to set them quarrelling,” Fraser writes. “London and Cairo are both responding appropriately to their own experiences” (218). While the youth and urgency of London writers tends towards uneven output and eventual irrelevance, the reserved and mature Cairo writers risk stagnation and obsolescence.

The vast majority of the *Oasis* poems are, ironically, of the London variety, despite having been written in the Middle East. This fact is certainly due to the immediacy of the war in the lives of the servicemen and women who wrote the poems. Fraser writes that neo-romantic poetry can be somewhat inconsistent in its quality, but he is even more severe upon the soldier-poets. “Except, perhaps, for a few sincere and fluid pieces written by John Waller, one or two fine Highland rants by Hamish Henderson, perhaps a couple of my own ‘tight-lipped poems for my Flemish town,’ poetry published by soldiers in Cairo—and there is a great deal of it—is only accidentally good: it ranges from at its best, the anonymously moving . . . to at its worst, a translation into bad blank verse of the current *clichés* of English individualism, and never with its finger on the spot.” Fraser traces the latter strain of bad poetry to “the *Picture Post* leader-writer” arguing that as “thoroughly necessary and useful as *Picture Post* culture in its own way no doubt is, it makes a poor substitute, in the composition of poetry, for experience, for reading, and, one might add, thought” (216).

London’s neo-romantic poetry, Fraser writes, displays a number of revealing characteristics. His observations are mildly critical of the rough and quotidian quality of the poetry, but they also illustrate the qualities which give the more emotional poems their allure. Of five randomly selected quotations of poetry by young writers in England, Fraser claims, the following descriptions would likely apply. There would be “at least one invocation,” “one colour adjective,” “one attempt to evoke a typical contemporary scene, a pub, a rifle

range, an air raid,” “one obscure, packed line, concentrating a great deal of confused thought or of painful experience.” “There would be some use of language that would strike us as tasteless, odd, or inflated,” and “some streak of brilliance, that we miss here. There would be more intensity, but less style: more life but less composure . . .” (218). The patterns Fraser describes may make the experience of reading this poetry repetitive, but they also indicate the many ways in which these poets are trying to connect with readers and bear witness to their experiences. The invocations—to absent loved ones, to the reader, to past poets, to God—may be interpreted differently in the context of the disruption of war than they would be under normal circumstances. The typical contemporary scene and the description of color may indicate an effort to bear witness to the new and strange daily experiences—to capture the sense of displacement in a familiar environment, or to communicate emotion with color. Each of these patterns can slip into triteness, and my intention in imaging their potential purposes is not to make excuses for unimaginative verse, but to detect signs within the poems that make the poet and the poet’s experience as available and real to readers as possible. In the strange uses of language and the awkward expressions of intense experience, poets make their experience available as best they can, and readers have a responsibility to read these poems on their own terms, to try to connect and be present to the text in a way that allows the reader to respond as fully as possible to the poet’s words. The reader’s tendency to view the “streak of brilliance” as the best or perhaps the only moment of poetic communication in these poems has contributed to the devaluing of Second World War poetry; much of the intensity—wrapped in unpolished language and shaky forms—much of the ‘life’ that is missing from the *Personal Landscape* work, remains unknown. The ‘brilliant’ and the ‘accidentally good’ soldier-poets have received some

attention, but even their champions are not exempt from resentment about the long shadows of First World War poets and suspicion about the work of lesser poets.

### **Patterns in Second World War Poetry Criticism**

In *Personal Landscapes: British Poets in Egypt During the Second World War*, Jonathan Bolton provides a wealth of information and detailed readings of the *Personal Landscape* poets, adding to the picture of their work together and the literary climate in Cairo during the war. His depiction of G.S. Fraser's circulation in different literary circles as a lack of allegiance to *Personal Landscape* perpetuates the sense of competition between the groups. "Despite his admiration for the *Personal Landscape* poets, Fraser spent much of his leisure time in the company of the poets affiliated with the verse periodical *Salamander*—an inferior magazine centered around such lesser talents as Keith Bullen, John Waller, and Erik de Mauny. Although Fraser published very little in *PL* . . . his poetry benefited from his contact with the *PL* group" (12). Bolton's description of *Salamander* as "an inferior magazine" of "lesser talents" invites readers to question what would attract Fraser, who met the superior standards of the *Personal Landscape* magazine, to pass his leisure time in the company of men who were not in a position to help him improve as a poet. Bolton's study of the *Personal Landscape* poets betrays his inheritance of the attitude which Fraser attributed to the Cairo poets in his *Poetry (London)* article: isolation from negative influences and distractions and focus on style, intellectual rigor are more valuable than experience.

Roger Bowen's description of Cairo's literary products is more descriptive than appraising, and he observes the inter-group strife without perpetuating it. In the following description of Cairo's literary life, he characterizes both the breadth of publishing opportunities for English writers in Egypt as well as the allegiances represented by particular publishing choices.

English writers in Egypt might place pieces where they could: Durrell, Spencer, Tiller, Douglas, [George] Seferis, and [Olivia] Manning all contributed to *Citadel*; Spencer and Tiller to *Esfam*; Douglas, [Ian] Fletcher, [Hamish] Henderson and even Durrell (under an assumed name) to *Orientalism*. But there were still basic loyalties to intellectual and literary style. Tiller also appeared in the March 1943 issue of *Salamander*, then in correspondence with [John] Lehmann the following year asked in an aside, “Have you seen *Salamander*, a Cairene organ designed to publish the guff which *Personal Landscape* refuses? Gosh.” Perhaps in the interim he had heard of Keith Bullen’s no doubt sincere praise of his work, congratulating him for writing “the best sonnets since Lord Alfred Douglas.” (55)

The number and variety of publications in Egypt both fostered and divided the community of writers. The associations of individuals to the publishers of Egypt’s journals account for some of the submissions Bowen describes. *Citadel* was published by the British Council and the contributors Bowen lists were affiliated with that group. *Esfam* was produced by the English department of Fuad I University where Spencer and Tiller taught. *Orientalism* came out of the Middle East Forces, and drew both civilian and servicemen’s contributions. Terence Tiller’s belittling description of *Salamander* indicates that while individuals might publish broadly, the “basic loyalties to intellectual and literary style” at times developed into cliquish affiliations and the basis for petty rivalry. The Tiller story reveals that transgressing one’s “basic loyalties” by publishing where one ought not to could end in shame and regret. The passage conveys a sense of competition among the writers. The persistence of this behavior in the broader context of the war which brought them all to Egypt, and in which they were all on the same side indicates the degree to which they were entrenched in their

“intellectual and literary styles.” Bowen presents the conflict without perpetuating it by describing the *Personal Landscape* writers’ attitude without defending it and by acknowledging the cracks in their appearance of indifference.

The *Personal Landscape* writers tended to be private, or cautiously reserved, about themselves in print. They accepted what readers came their way, recognizing that the modernist and intellectual qualities of their poetry would not attract a wide audience. Only in the very last issue of their magazine, in an editorial address entitled “A Change of Landscape,” did they suggest that in its three years *Personal Landscape* had “provided a vehicle, the only one available in English, for serious poets and critics in the Middle East.” (55)

Bowen claims humility for the *Personal Landscape* writers, offering as evidence that “they accepted what readers came their way” and acknowledged “their poetry would not attract a wide audience.” He leaves it to readers to conclude that in light of the editor’s final declaration about the value of their magazine, their quiet patience and dedication to “the modernist and intellectual qualities of their poetry” are recast as aloof and elitist.

Linda Shires’s 1985 study, *British Poetry of the Second World War*, focuses on poems written in London and a few poets on the First World War model—poets who joined the war rather than soldiers who took up poetry. Shires dismisses more inclusive attempts to represent the war in verse. Describing two “extremely important” literary magazines produced during the war, *Poetry Quarterly* and *Poetry (London)*, that “never reached the reputation of *Horizon*” Shires at first seems to argue for broader criteria for publication but ultimately upholds the exclusion of novices’ poetry.

These journals, edited respectively by Wrey Gardiner and Tambimuttu, were forums for new poets. Unlike *Horizon*, which in one issue printed no poetry



at all because of Connolly's belief that there was none worth printing, these magazines encouraged the young. . . . The editorial policy of Tambimuttu, the more colourful of the two editors, was liberal in the extreme. Often mocked in the period, his indiscriminate generosity accounts for the low quality of many of the *Poetry (London)* issues. 'No man is small enough to be neglected as a poet', he wrote in *Poetry London's* first issue.' (17-8)

Shires suggests that Cyril Connolly performed his editorial duty by rejecting inferior verse. While the passage shows that Shires holds no particular prejudice against young poets, her assessment of Tambimuttu's editorship in contrast to Connolly's implies that his "indiscriminate generosity" spoiled young writers and failed to uphold proper literary standards. Shires rejects Tambimuttu's stated purpose of the magazine—and by extension of poetry—to "represent humanity as a whole." From this perspective, Connolly's decision not to print any poetry that does not measure up seems snobbish and overly defensive, as though 'good' poetry, or poetry's good name, might be contaminated by substandard verse. Moreover Shires presents "Connolly's belief that there was none worth printing" as an indication that the editor's reputation is at stake and can only be upheld by strict exclusion of marginal material. Consequently, it is better not to print poetry at all than to encourage the untested talents of would-be poets. Shires's comparison of Connolly and Tambimuttu's opinions reveals two important attitudes: their radically different perspectives on poetry during the time the *Oasis* poems were written and collected, and the resistance to novices' poetry among literary scholars and critics. Shires recalls Tambimuttu to the fold on the basis of his association with better poets.

Tambimuttu may sound vague and histrionic in his 'First Letter'—he was certainly not a 'common sense' editor. He can be criticized for lacking sound

principles of literary selection, but there was also a positive side to his immense tolerance. Poets who found a forum in *Poetry (London)* included Lawrence Durrell, D.S. Savage, Dylan Thomas and Nicholas Moore. Nor should it be forgotten that for all the slush he admitted, Tambimuttu also printed some of Keith Douglas' poems and edited the first volume of Douglas' poems. (18)

Rather than acknowledging the legitimacy of Tambimuttu's purpose for his poetry magazine, Shires chides his bad judgment and "immense tolerance" for "slush." For Shires, Tambimuttu's legacy is preserved by virtue of the 'real' poets whose work he included. Although Tambimuttu was acquainted with the Salamander group and consulted on the first post-war anthology, *Return to Oasis*, no reference to the Salamander poems, or Tambimuttu's association with them appear in Shires's discussion of his editorial work or Second World War poetry. Shires's reading of the different editorial styles of Tambimuttu and Connolly shows the connection between reputation and value that determines what poems we read and how we read them. If we follow Tambimuttu's philosophy, we can read many more poems and judge them according to our own preferences, while Connolly, and, it seems, Shires require poems to meet particular requirements to be worthy of printing.<sup>2</sup>

The conditions under which the *Oasis* poems were written extend beyond the battlefield, to a conflict over the place of culture in wartime. The divisions that arose from attempts to answer questions about the value of poetry and its purposes in the crisis of truly global war shaped the publication and the readership of Second World War at the time, and critics throughout much of the twentieth century took sides in a struggle to establish the rightful place of texts and writers in the literary landscape of the 1940s. First World War poetry was the benefactor of this division. By the time the *Oasis* editors decided to republish

their anthology in 1976 many of the beliefs about their poetry which had irritated them during the war had become established interpretations of Second World War poetry. As a result, they made decisions about how to republish and what to publish in new anthologies which have played into the myths they hoped to refute. In the next chapter, I analyze the editor's decisions through their own writing about the *Oasis* poems and the post-war anthologies they produced. In addition, the chapter addresses the question of the imagined audiences for the *Oasis* anthologies and the assumptions about the needs and interests of the audience that shape the presentation of the *Oasis* poems to twenty-first century readers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Admiral Graf Spee, a heavy cruiser or Panzerschiff, sank nine merchant ships in the Southern Atlantic and Indian Ocean between September and December 1939. Hunted down and damaged by the British Navy in December 1939, the Admiral Graf Spee entered a port for repairs in neutral Montevideo, Uruguay. Upon leaving the port the Graf Spee was ambushed in international waters by British cruisers. In October 1939, U-boats attacked HMS Royal Oak in the waters of Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands off Scotland's north-eastern coast. HMS Royal Oak capsized as a result of the torpedo attack and 833 of the ship's 1400 man crew died.

<sup>2</sup> In his 1995 literary history and anthology, War Poetry: An Introductory Reader, Simon Featherstone challenges the division between First and Second World War poetry. He proposes a reading that takes into account the common "intellectual and historical contexts rather than as two isolated movements" (2). His criticism and anthology give the poetry of each war equal weight, while acknowledging that as a body of work, the poetry of the Second World War "has been overshadowed by the more celebrated poetry of the First

war”(3). Featherstone observes that although studies of war poetry continue to focus on the First World War and its pacifist themes of futility and compassion, in “other forms of popular culture . . . the focal point is the Second World War, and a far more positive view of its purpose and conduct is presented” (7). Featherstone claims that the wars and their literatures influenced adolescents, framing their concept of nationalism, courage and masculinity through popular films and fiction and school textbooks of the 1950s (9-10). In addition to balancing First and Second World War poetry, his study explores the reasons for the greater prominence and popularity of First World War poets. He posits that Owen and Sassoon’s poems found traction in the liberal environment of the 1960s and 70s, and in addition, their regular forms and vivid images and emotions made them good teaching tools for the close reading of poems (11). His attempt to balance the scales does not depend upon undercutting the poetry of the First World War or making excuses for the poetry of the Second. He does not, however, tackle the work of novices directly, but continues to use the established figures in Second World War poetry for primary source material.

### Chapter Three

#### From Battlefield to Book: The Archive and Anthologies

In their introduction to *Oasis*, the editors describe the project's inception as a hypothesis.

There must be a lot of poets in the Middle East. Men who have been encouraged by some inward feeling, induced by the war and by battle, to express in verse the many ideas flowing through their minds. It seems a pity for the gems which undoubtedly will have been produced to remain locked secretly in the poets' bosoms. Why not collect their works together and publish a Middle East anthology of servicemen's poetry? (ix)

The phrases "encouraged by some inward feeling" and "induced by the war and by battle" suggest that servicemen who would not otherwise write felt called upon to bear witness to their experience of the war. The speculative tone in the editors' statement, "There must be a lot of poets in the Middle East," implies that they suspected rather than knew this was the case. In truth, there were at least half a dozen English language literary publications in print in Egypt to which the poets they imagined could have submitted texts for publication.

Between the literary publications produced in Cairo and those imported from London, the *Oasis* editors' perception that poems might, without their intervention, "remain locked secretly in the poets' bosoms" indicates a specific concern about the poems of servicemen, in particular of novices. More specifically, they seem to want to collect precisely those poems which would otherwise go unpublished, unread and unremembered. Coupled with their belief that the servicemen's poems were the literary consequence of war-time experiences, their project takes on the quality of a recovery effort. If Selwyn, Burk and

Saunders failed to collect and publish the poems the servicemen's testimony to their war-time experiences would be lost.

The metaphor of poems as gems suggests that though varied in type and quality the poems are precious. The metaphor also implies that while the poems may not be gems of an equal grade, they are all products the same forces which create gems: pressure, heat and time. The preface and the gem metaphor reveal the premium that the editors placed upon the individual voice speaking from first hand experience. The conditions which elicited the poems invest each poem with importance. The chief criteria for consideration bears out this conclusion. The first standard is not literary quality, nor rank, nor sex, nor branch of service, but first hand experience and the immediacy of composition. These measures indicate an effort to preserve the testimony of servicemen. How are the characteristics of testimony and poetry compatible and where do they diverge? The choice to write poetry suggests either an independent affinity for the form or a sense that verse can accommodate some quality of testimony that cannot otherwise be achieved. The *Oasis* editors' tasks—gathering poems and agreeing upon a literary standard for publication—are in conflict: the source of the creation and the product require different measures of value.

Selection for publication depended not only upon the testimony of the soldier's poem, but also the quality of the poem. In the compilation of post-war anthologies, editors also took into account the needs and interests of a civilian readership. Pursuing three goals—literary quality, first-hand testimony, and suitability for the audience—complicates the recovery aims of the project. The editors' concern about lost gems is moderated by their decision to include only those poems they judge to be the finest. This decision undercuts the implication that every soldier's voice is valuable, yet in order for the poems to work as testimony, they must also work as poems. Finally, the intended audience shapes the editors'

choices about what to print. As logical as it may be to address the final selections to a particular set of readers, these choices are not about the efficacy of the poem or the power of the testimony it conveys. The consideration of audience is a calculus of what editors believe readers will want to read and what readers should read. Consequently the testimony-gathering aspect of the project and the ability of the poems to bear witness to servicemen's experiences are in tension with the editors' concerns about audience. For practical reasons the editors cannot print every poem. Their specific grounds for excluding particular submissions are lost to history, but the first post-war anthology, *Return to Oasis*, reveals one consideration: what constituted testimony for *Oasis* readers.

This chapter describes the post-war anthologies produced by the Salamander Oasis Trust and examines the editors' decisions about what poems to include and how to organize the anthologies. By studying the anthologies I hope to uncover the audience the editors imagined and what they wanted that audience to know about the poems, the men and women who wrote them, and the war that inspired them. What did the editors believe about the critical perception of Second World War poetry? How did they present the work of unknown poets? What content did they feel would be most meaningful for post-war readers? Why was collecting and preserving the texts so important to them? The answers to these questions have directed the creation of the anthologies, the archive, and poetry collection process.

The editors' desire for recognition and their conviction in the value of first-hand experience fueled their passion for all the poetry of the Second World War. In the preface to *Return to Oasis* Selwyn and 'J Ch.' write "A myth has evolved, repeated so often that people believe it, that in contrast to World War One, the Second World War produced only three poets of note" (xviii-xix). The editors' hackles are raised in response to a 1978 "B.B.C.

Radio 4 probe into ‘Where are the war poets?’” and a subsequent article “by a Sunday newspaper critic who prefaced his remarks about there being only three poets, with the words: ‘as we all know.’” The editors refute “the three poet summary of World War Two” with this claim: “A visit to any library, or the Imperial War Museum would kill the myth even before publication of *Return to Oasis*.” If there is already abundant evidence of Second World War poetry, what are they worried about? People visit libraries and the Imperial War Museum. How much damage could two bits of misinformation do against widely available evidence? Why publish another anthology if the ‘three poets of note’ myth is being effectively dispelled by existing volumes of Second World War poetry? Moreover, if, as the editors’ writing and behavior suggest, the myth is sustained despite abundant evidence to the contrary, what good can one more anthology do? It seems that, for the editors, securing the proper place in literary and cultural history for Second World War poetry is a pursuit of justice.

The Trust produced five post-war anthologies, indicating that something more is at stake than the reputation of a few poets. The effort to draw attention to the work of novices shows that for the Trust and the editors, experience and the effort to describe it in verse has meaning which transcends traditional literary standards. Clues to their attitude can be found in the preface to *Return to Oasis*.

There is a tendency now to denigrate much of what Britain and its soldiers achieved between 1939-45, and maybe that extends to the poetry they wrote. Certainly, after the War, our late colleague G.S. Fraser felt that a gap appeared in our poetry, for many who came back did not continue writing and were lost to view. And when we mention Second World War poetry, especially that of the Middle East where it mostly happened, we receive blank



stares even from academics who teach tomorrow's generation. The names of Owen, Brooke, Sassoon, Edwards, Graves, and Grenfell from the First World War remain bright. Yet, a silence shrouds their Second World War successors except for a few reprints—so much so, that we are in danger of losing part of our cultural heritage. (xix)

Ceding to Fraser's concern about "a gap" in Second World War poetry, the editors suggest that soldier-poets could have secured their literary reputations by continuing to write after the war, like Sassoon and Graves had. But the isolation which fostered writing in the Middle East also kept writers out of the public eye. The greatest difference between Owen, Brooke, Sassoon, Edwards, Graves and Grenfell and the Second World War poets is that they were already published or aspiring poets when they went to war. In contrast, most of the poems in the Salamander Oasis collection were written by servicemen under extreme pressure and looking for a way to exorcise it, not by poets in the bud. Consequently after they returned home from the war they pursued non-literary careers. Finally, if the Second World War poets did not receive attention for their war writing—presumably drawn from the most dramatic and intense experiences of their lives—their post-war writing would be hard-pressed to attract notice. Nevertheless, the remarkably widespread phenomenon of servicemen and women writing verse in wartime merits attention regardless of the quality of their poems.

The editors felt that Second World War poets required different kinds of promotion than those of the First World War. "*Return to Oasis* reproduces the neglected Middle East poetry from the widest possible spectrum; from the professional poet, to the sailor, soldier or airman, whose inspiration flared for a dramatic moment then died. In such dramatic moments of inspiration men added a few personal brush strokes to the picture of war" (xix). The editors explain the relative anonymity of many Second World War poets when they

describe the poets in *Return to Oasis* as adding “a few personal brush strokes to the picture of war.” In their most “dramatic moments of inspiration” the poets do not paint their own pictures of war; they make a small contribution to a larger project, of which they may not even be aware, before their inspiration gutters out. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the names of these poets are not well-known. In order to give Second World War poetry the attention it deserves, we need a way to read these poems that is not harnessed to interpretations based on individuals or individual talent, one that utilizes the multiple perspectives on the war experience gleaned “from the widest possible spectrum.” *Return to Oasis* and the other anthologies present pictures of the war to readers, pictures framed by the editors’ understanding and personal experiences of the war. Even as the editors lament the anonymity of each poet, they seem to understand that rather than the individual talents of the First World War poets, the Second World War poets are best understood as collaborating in the creation of a “picture of the war,” inviting speculation about what a composite shows that a single account cannot.

The Second World War is represented by anthology. The contributions of each poet to the anthology must be valued differently than single-author accounts. As long as critical attention depends upon individual talent, most poetry of the Second World War will not be acknowledged. Given the difficulty of gaining recognition for poets who wrote only a handful of poems, the editors are understandably frustrated, however the solution is not to try to make a name for every poet, but to change the way in which war poems are read and understood. The post-war anthologies are a response to this need. In them, the poems are organized with the intention of giving the greatest possible context and meaning to work which would otherwise be difficult to interpret. What pictures of the war do the anthologies offer? What do we make of the individual voices within them? And what of the poets of

note? What kind of pictures of the war are the editors making? In order to serve two readerships—the war generation and its successors—the editors present the texts as both gateways to memory and as literary memorials that acknowledge the writing of servicemen and women in the Second World War. Reading others’ recollections may revive the veteran’s memories, trigger nostalgia or restore a sense of camaraderie by corroborating experiences, thereby easing the sense of having endured the war experience alone. For non-veteran readers the editors frame the texts with claims of literary merit bolstered by authenticity and gritty lived history. To attract literary notice, they attached better-known writers to the project. To appeal to a general audience, they made the history of the desert war more accessible, appending to the text a chronology, maps, explanatory notes on the poems and brief biographies of the poets. They suggest the metaphor of composition in which each poem contributes “a few personal brush strokes to the picture of the war” (xix). They do not, however take the crucial step of modeling the reading to which they feel the poems are entitled. In the gap left by this omission, readers have, for the most part, stalled, unsure how to use or interpret the texts and lapsed into patterns of reading, evaluation and criticism which apply to poetry from the First World War. The organization and contents of the anthologies signal what is important to the poets and editors. Another indication is the desire to create a public record of verse written during the war. By creating an archive of the poems they collected, the editors have ensured that future generations will have an opportunity to appreciate these texts.

### **Recovery and Reading: The Archive and the Classroom**

When the editors gathered in 1976 to form the Salamander Oasis Trust, they not only decided to reprint *Oasis* but to begin collecting poems for possible publication and ultimately for preservation in the Imperial War Museum archives. In doing so the Trustees

created not only a record of the war but also of personal expression of war experience—the events and the ways in which they were understood by individuals who were there.

Archiving the poems is a stated goal of the project from the first solicitation of new work. It seems that only inappropriate submissions were returned, and all others were collected in the Salamander Oasis Trust Archive.

The archive presents a challenge to readers of First World War poetry because it does not favor individual talents. Reports about the archive show the difficulty of relating to unknown writers and unfamiliar texts. Rowan Dore of the Press Association presents the archive as the vulnerable work of novices to which better known names lend interest and credibility. When the poems were turned over to be archived in 1995, he described them as being “rescued for the nation” and credited the Trust with “rescuing the writings of a generation.” Dore explains the need for rescue by the anonymity of the majority of poets: “Contributors have included film star Dirk Bogarde and politician Enoch Powell, as well as hundreds of servicemen and women whose work would otherwise have never been published.” He also identifies the public figures, “former deputy Labour leader Lord Healey, former soldier and professor General Sir John Hackett and author Dr John Rae,” who are “all keen supporters of the trust’s work.” Another report describes the archive as a rich store of cultural heritage. John Young of *The Times* communicates the value of the poems in terms of their scope—“some 17,000 collected poems written by British, Irish and Commonwealth serving men and women during the Second World War”—and their desirability to scholars. Young reports that the Salamander Oasis Trust has “received several offers from institutions in the United States to purchase them,” but according to General Sir John Hackett “the trust had turned down all offers, believing that such an important collection should not be allowed to leave the country.” Young also contextualizes the

collection for readers. Paraphrasing Healey, Young explains that “with one or two exceptions” the First World War poets were “officers and public schoolboys” while in the Second World War “poets were drawn from all ranks of people all over the world who were moved to write by the intensity of their own experiences.” Unlike poets who survived the First World War and “pursued literary careers,” most Second World War poetry came from individuals who “wrote only during the war because they were bearing witness to an experience that was absolutely unique in their lives.” In contrast to Dore’s association of anonymous poets with public figures, Young’s depiction emphasizes the archive’s populism and direct connection to history.

Jon Stallworthy’s appreciation which appears on The Imperial War Museum Documents Archive website links the relationship between individualism and populism in the archive.

When, in a poem of the First World War, Charles Hamilton spoke of “millions of the mouthless dead” (whose “pale battalions” he was soon to join), he spoke prophetically. We have the published testimony of a few poets, like Owen, Sassoon and Sorley - most of them officers - but virtually none from the mouthless millions who lived and died on the Western Front. Thanks to the Salamander Oasis Trust, no such silence seals the wake of the Second World War. Long before its end, Victor Selwyn and the *Oasis* editors had appealed for poems from their fellow servicemen and women to produce the *Oasis* anthology, Cairo, 1942-3. Post-war, setting up a Trust, they collected poems from desks and drawers, archives and libraries, throughout the UK and Commonwealth, assembling more than 17,000 poems written on active service from every phase and theatre of that war.

No such record exists for any war before or since. The Trust donated the unique archive to London's Imperial War Museum; and its anthologies . . . do, indeed, give voice to men and women of every rank in the UK and Commonwealth, who served in that war.

The Salamander Oasis Trust has ensured that "*We will remember them*".

Stallworthy's distinction between the writers of First and Second World War poetry clarifies the disconcerting aspect of Dore's report. By identifying individual contributors, Dore undercuts the strength of Second World War poetry even as he tries to generate interest in it. Because Bogarde and Powell are known as actor and politician rather than poets they are not good examples of Second World War poets. Very few contributors to the archive could compete with the fame of the First World War poets, and the comparison dismisses the very qualities that make this collection of Second World War poetry special.

Despite the publicity about the archive, it has had few visitors since the last contribution of texts in 1995. According to a document archivist, in the last five years they have had about one visitor a year interested in the Salamander Oasis poems. Two of those years, I was the visitor. Researchers face a few obstacles to access the archive. The Trust charges a fee to view the collection. While other Imperial War Museum documents have been digitized and are available online, the Salamander Oasis poems are only searchable in a paper catalog of about 500 pages in which the contributors—who are often not the poets—are listed alphabetically. At some point the archive was indexed, but that database is no longer available, even to archive staff. The collection was recently moved from London to the Duxford branch of the museum. Is the archive in its current state because of a lack of scholarly interest in the poems or is the lack of scholarly interest in the poems a consequence

of the difficulty of accessing texts which have not been selected for publication and of finding copies of the published anthologies?

The Trustees certainly worked to publicize the collection, holding public readings and making recordings of poets reading from the collection. In response to the publication of the fifth anthology, *The Voice of War*, former Chancellor Lord Healey and former Home Secretary Lord Merlyn Rees launched a campaign to add the poems to England's National Curriculum. According to a 1996 Press Association article, "War Poetry 'Should Be In National Curriculum'" Lords Healey and Rees believed that "the standard of the latest batch of poetry published this week is so good it ought to be studied in schools." The reporter describes *The Voice of War* as "a collection of the best poems from the Second World War [which] counters the myth that it was only the First World War that produced any poetry of note." The Lords Healey and Rees would see poems added to the "Second World War studies already feature[d] in school and university syllabuses." Lord Rees's plea focuses upon the fact that the poems are "rich in history," while Lord Healey's argues the poems' capacity to represent the war to a new generation: "This is the authentic voice of war. This was a grass roots war and the poems are a poignant reflection of what happened. It would be marvellous if today's students were given the chance of studying them." Healey made a similar claim six years prior. In "Voices recalled from a cataclysm," an article for *The Times*, he wrote

Very few people who served in the last war will read these books without pleasure and emotion. For those who did not, they offer a unique understanding of what the last great cataclysm meant for men and women like themselves. They demonstrate the power of poetry to calm the spirit

and to illuminate history. For those reasons no library and no school should be without them.

These comments show that war poetry is read as a means of learning history and relating to those who lived it. Healey's suggestion that the texts should be studied for what they can teach about "the power of poetry" has not been taken, despite the remarkable opportunity that the collection presents to study what poetry means to novices, how they use poetry, and what they understand poetry's power to be.

### **The Post-war Anthologies**

#### ***Return to Oasis* (1980)**

The *Oasis* poems are available to readers today because they were republished in 1980 in an expanded edition titled *Return to Oasis: War Poems and Recollections from the Middle East 1940-1946*. In July 1976, thirty-three years after the publication of *Oasis*, Victor Selwyn placed an appeal in the London *Daily Mail* for the two other editors and the volume's 51 contributors to contact him in London. Interest among academics and history buffs was deemed sufficient for a reprinting of *Oasis* and Selwyn, along with Erik de Mauny and G.S. Fraser, two *Oasis* poets, undertook to reestablish contact amongst the editors and contributors. On 1 November 1976, the *Oasis* poets and editors met in London, elected an editorial board and trustees and formed the Salamander Oasis Trust. The editorial board subsequently placed notices soliciting additional poems from members of the Middle East Forces. Appeals like these two were made for each anthology.

1.) From *The Guardian*: "Appeal for war poetry"

"Unknown poems by servicemen and women of the Second World War, written on whatever scraps of paper, are needed for a new anthology. . . . All manuscripts, will be eventually handed over to the Imperial War Museum."



2.) From the Press Association: “Poetry Plea”

“Field Marshal Lord Carver and General Sir John Hackett are supporting an appeal for war poems to be published . . . by the Salamander Oasis Trust.

The poems must have been written during the 1939-45 war by members of UK and Commonwealth forces.”

*Return to Oasis's* pale yellow dust jacket reproduces, in a field of muted orange, the two green palm trees edged with red of the original cover, below the shadowed letters of the title, OASIS. “Return to” appears in small capital letters above OASIS, and the subtitle “War Poems & Recollections From The Middle East 1940-1946” appears in the box which originally held the words “The Middle East Anthology Of Poetry From the Forces.” At the bottom of the cover, where the 1943 edition acknowledged its benefactor with the words “a salamander production,” the 1980 *Return* states “Introduction by Lawrence Durrell.” The back cover of the dust jacket reproduces, in color, a sketch of a crowded city street, to the left of which appears the credit: “Cairo Street Scene: Keith Douglas from ‘Alamein to Zem Zem’ Editions Poetry London.” The *Return to Oasis* dust jacket simultaneously advertises the anthology to different audiences. By reproducing the *Oasis* cover and Douglas’s detail-rich sketch, *Return to Oasis* evokes veterans’ memories and invites them to revisit their experiences. The *Return* of the title implies that enabling veterans’ reconnection with their personal history is the editors’ primary purpose. The editors have framed the texts in such a way as to suggest that they also seek a wider audience, capitalizing upon the literary credentials of Durrell and Douglas to attract readers who might otherwise overlook a book of poems from unfamiliar sources. The volume is published by Shephard-Walwyn in association with Editions Poetry London, a familiar name to readers of M.J. Tambimuttu’s

journal *Poetry* (*London*) and another connection to the literary establishment, or an outer circle thereof.

*Return to Oasis* includes the original *Oasis* poems, a reproduction of the *Oasis* cover and Foreword by General H. Maitland Wilson, the editors' account of project's genesis titled "In The Beginning," a preface by Worth Howard of 'Music For All' and the American University at Cairo, and a brief essay by John Cromer titled "Poetry Today." The text of *Return to Oasis* is divided into four sections. "The Original *Oasis*" reprints the 1943 edition. "Previously Published Middle East Verse" includes the work of ten *Oasis* poets and twenty-four others. "Previously Unpublished Poems Soldiers' Poems and Ballads" includes poems by six *Oasis* poets, forty-two new poets and one poet who also appears in the Previously Published section. When selecting poems for the first anthology since the 1943 publication of *Oasis*, the Trustees faced considerations of audience which altered their presentation of the texts at their disposal. While *Oasis* was intended for a readership of military men, the Trustees knew that later publications would represent the war to readers who did not fight in it. Furthermore, part of their mission, bringing the poems the recognition they deserved, required expanding the audience for the poems. In his obituary for John Waller, Selwyn describes the growth of the post-war project.

In 1976 Waller joined us in setting up the Salamander Oasis Trust – all Middle East poets. Originally our intent was just to reprint *Oasis*. It cried out for a reprint. But then John asked a pertinent question. Where were the hundreds – thousands – of manuscripts we did not use in the Middle East, because of space? Paper was rationed. Could we see them – select and publish? Many at the time had been returned by army post – efficient and free. Others, I regretted, had been in a box lost between Alexandria and

Taranto. So we began our appeals for poetry through the BBC and the press that drew thousands of manuscripts over the years, from all theatres of war, leading to four anthologies and soon five.

In the case of *Oasis*, the editors intended the collection for a readership of soldiers, and consequently chose not to include poems which represented battle in detail. In the preface to the 1986 collection *Return to Oasis*, Selwyn and an unnamed editor, initials J.Ch, explain the selection of the additional poems included in the expanded volume.

At the time of compiling *Oasis* we felt less need to describe a war. We were in it. Poems could be more reflective; an *Oasis* in fact! However, a generation later, when choosing poems to supplement *Oasis*, we realized that we were presenting a picture of yesterday to today. So we have chosen more poems that tell of the war, more poems of action. Many have a rougher edge, as they should, for war is not a neat affair. (xix-xx)

Based upon their exclusion from *Oasis*, the poems of action added to *Return to Oasis* were deemed by the editors either not to be as valuable or important to soldiers at the time.

During the war, they understood the purpose of the collection to be relief from the pressures of daily life and excluded many war-themed poems. Forty years later, poems describing the war are valuable to the book's younger audience. For the soldier readers of *Oasis*, war was the shared experience and "reflective" poems stand out as representations of individual experience. The editors evidently believed that for *Return to Oasis* readers, poems about the war would be more meaningful.

By titling the first collection *Oasis*, the editors proposed a metaphor for literature as a means of reflecting on and providing relief from the pressures of war. *Return to Oasis* and the subsequent anthologies operate differently. Readers are invited to imagine the war and its

participants and to place themselves inside that group, on the night patrols, in the tanks, wadis, brothels, sandstorms, and wind-buffeted tents. If *Return to Oasis* replicated the original *Oasis* only, it would show a new generation of readers what was important to soldiers in the war. With the additional contextual material and supplementary poems, however, *Return to Oasis* attempts to re-imagine the soldiers' experience of war for an outside reader—one who needs to be shown the war in order to understand the need for an *Oasis*. The new anthology then is an invitation to outside readers to imagine the circumstances of the war and the soldiers who fought it. A multi-generational, civilian readership, however, must be provided with points of entry into the poems and through them the war and frames of reference for interpreting their content. Therefore, in addition to more “poems of action,” *Return to Oasis* includes explanatory notes, maps, illustrations and, where available, biographies of the poets. While these additions may jog the memories of veterans, they are more specifically aimed at depicting a time and place for the benefit of those who were not there. The final section of the book bridges the gap between the war and post-war generations. “Vignettes, Biographies, Notes, Chronology and Maps” begins with two remembrances, “Last Lunch with Keith Douglas” by M.J. Tambimuttu, and “A tribute to Keith Bullen” by John Braun (Cromer), followed by vignettes by Almendro, David Burke, Louis Challoner, Molly Corbally, Erik de Mauny, Norman Hudis, G.C. Norman, John Rimington, Victor Selwyn, and Darrell Wilkinson. Some of these accounts feel closer to events than others. Challoner's contribution “With the Guns” is made up of extracts from his war diary. Molly Corbally recalls “Nursing in a Sandstorm” with great detail and a minimum of sentiment. Many of the others relate memories from the service and describe the experience of remembering.

In his brief essay “War Anthologies” Ian Fletcher—an *Oasis* poet, Salamander Oasis Trustee, and Reading University professor—describes anthologies as “a window into the past or the present: they have both aesthetic and documentary value” (xxix). Fletcher outlines two aspects of the anthology *Return to Oasis*, explaining that the aesthetic project casts a wide net and that the documentary value of the anthology depends to some extent upon the broad spectrum of poems it includes. Although the “poetry of the Middle East theatre may seem to divide itself into those with battle experience and those rotting gently on the lines of communication” for Fletcher “the variousness of the experience is the variousness of the sensibilities, talents and education of the contributors” are more important. Fletcher identifies three types of contributors: “There were the ‘art’ poets for whom the war and the army were merely a phase in a larger career; then the educated voices of those who were moved under the pressures of exile and acute, unfamiliar experience, to a poetry of occasion, and finally, the record of the almost inarticulate, the artless, the oral; those blunt, often poignant songs of complaint or of an innocent patriotism.” Fletcher suggests that the anthology best serves the second two categories. The first could presumably find an audience elsewhere, and the breadth of the project “not only presents that microcosm of a nation and a society at war, in exile; but is of further documentary value in gathering such fugitives; records of immediate and authentic experience, where the words have no time to go dishonest, emerging after forty years in tattered typescript, in painful capitals.” The anthology is analogous to a scrapbook of amateur photographs; each entry captures a moment of the contributor’s daily life in a small candid snapshot. Professional and amateur perspectives are both valuable, but the amateur is more likely to include the accidental detail or expression which communicates “immediate and authentic experience.” Fletcher’s claim that the “fugitives . . . have no time to go dishonest” implies speedy composition and limited

revision. Fletcher's image of fugitive words and poems evokes an impression of moment of writing in which emotion was expelled onto paper which was then secreted away. The fugitives captured the feelings and impressions of their writers, enabling the writers to distance themselves from their pain and shock, at least temporarily. The fugitives were not intended for publication, but Fletcher reports, Victor Selwyn and others found that "enclosed in letters from elderly veterans, recalling comrades either dead in battle or more recently lost" they are "perhaps the most moving documents, more moving than the art poetry, even when written by such richly talented poets as Keith Douglas, or than the occasional poetry of the educated" (xxix-xxx).

The range of contributions to the archive raise questions about what form representation of the war will take and who will represent it. The flood of submissions reveals the remarkably widespread practice of poetry writing during the war. By limiting the selection to the poems of servicemen and women, the editors stress the surprising popularity of poetry writing in the forces. As "records of immediate and authentic experience" the poems, though written in the past, are put forth by the editors as the best representation of the war. Why do they credit poetry with greater immediacy and authenticity than prose? The most likely fugitives and perhaps the most numerous are the "blunt, often poignant songs of complaint or of an innocent patriotism" by "the almost inarticulate, the artless," and "the oral." Poetry's oral tradition, and the familiarity of ballads as songs and hymns may make it more accessible. Poetry is also practical; it can be composed without paper or light, memorized, and written down later. Other common forms of writing, letters and diaries, are could be censored or lost in the mail. Diaries are private, but sometimes forbidden. There is no shortage of prose from the war, however, leading one to ask what the novice poets believed about poetry that lead to them choosing to write in verse.

***From Oasis Into Italy* (1983)**

*From Oasis Into Italy: War Poems & Diaries from Africa & Italy 1940-1946* differs from *Return to Oasis* in that prose–diary entries, excerpts from memoirs, and letters–appear among the poems in the body of the book. The earlier anthologies married identity and experience. Their contents were alphabetized by poet, emphasizing authorship and requiring readers to puzzle together the poets’ contributions to create a picture of war. Historical moments structure *From Oasis Into Italy* in which texts are organized by both place and time, then alphabetically by the writer’s name. This organization allows readers to choose what to read by subject rather than by poet, and, unlike *Oasis* and *Return to Oasis*, the organization of the poems mimics the progress of the war, allowing readers to follow the front west across North Africa and north into Europe. Consequently, the specificity of poet’s identities and individual experiences are secondary to the larger context of the war. The section titles supply valuable information about the context for the poems they contain.

- I. Middle East Forces (Under command of G.H.Q., Cairo, including 8<sup>th</sup> Army)
- II. North Africa (Algeria, Tunisia; 1<sup>st</sup> Army and later 8<sup>th</sup> Army)
- III. Italy (Central Mediterranean Forces, including 8<sup>th</sup> Army)
- IV. Yugoslavia and Greece (Central Mediterranean Forces and Special Forces)

By organizing the anthology according to location and chronology and naming the forces connected to each place, the editors help readers to create meaningful context for the texts and potentially to understand the events of the war better. *From Oasis Into Italy* also includes supplementary material: “An Appreciation” from Field Marshal Lord Carver,

acknowledgments, a description of the Salamander Oasis Trust, a Foreword by General Sir John Hackett, a memorial listing, and an introduction before the primary sources.

The additional layers of representation offered by prose and especially by the art in the book underscore the editors' emphasis on the manifold expressions of first-hand experience. Historical background, maps, biographies and a few pictures follow the poems. The front and back covers of the book feature color drawings. There are four color plates in the text itself, one by George Meddenmen and three by Ronald Cox. The text reproduces additional drawings in grayscale, including Sam Morse-Brown's penciled portraits of Generals Montgomery and Alexander, and Major General Francis de Guingand, Montgomery's Chief-of-Staff. From portraits and cartoons to a reproduction of a hand-drawn birthday greeting on an airgraph, the anthology manifests creativity and self-expression in the forces and the many forms that expression took.

In the introduction to *From Oasis Into Italy*, the editors outline the extra-canonical thinking that guided their compilation of an anthology which privileges representation of events through the eyes of many over more traditional aesthetic considerations. They hoped that by choosing texts that "were written at or near the time of the events with which they deal" their anthology would have "an added quality of immediacy and authenticity." In their effort to put "on record the facts and feeling of war," the editors collected texts "exhibit[ing] a range of literary skills" as one "would expect . . . from a sector of a war." All texts bear "a direct relation to experience" which the editors, "having shared the background of the contributors . . . were in a position to judge" for themselves. The editors chose texts that are "sincerely written, true to themselves and to their background" and "rejected material that strained to achieve an effect." Having "gathered the writings and art of a generation" the editors "present in this series a range of experience, feeling and accomplishment. But," they



maintain, “the accomplishment has had to reach a standard and make its point” (xix-xx).

Despite the presentation of their guidelines, subjective judgment remains a critical and little understood part of the process. Why do the editors prize sincerity over other traits? How is the editors’ preference for sincere texts, “true to themselves and their background,” evident in the anthology? What does it mean to have “strained to achieve an effect:” that the effect to be achieved exceeds the skills of the poet or that the poet is seen to be shaping the poem to impact the reader in a particular way? How does straining to achieve an effect impinge upon “a direct relation to experience?” It appears that the editors believed that recording the “facts and feeling of war” with “immediacy and authenticity” necessitated inclusion of “a range of literary skills.” The gathering “the writings and art of a generation” in order to present “a range of experience, feeling and accomplishment,” however, suggests intentional inclusiveness.

In his appreciation of the anthology, Field Marshall Lord Carver indicates the kinds of experience that the anthology’s contributors faced in the service. Carver describes the impact of a peopled landscape on servicemen habituated to desert warfare: “In Tunisia, Sicily and Italy one was fighting where people were living. One was reminded of the rhythm of normal human life, with all its hopes and fears, and at the same time of the misery which war brings to those who happen to live on the battlefield. One was not living a life apart as if in some military monastery, as one had been in the desert.” The servicemen “lived and fought” in conditions “nearer to those experienced by their fathers in the First World War than in any other campaign of the Second.” Under these conditions, Carver suggests, writing poetry helped them through “a time which tested them, and in which they felt the need to express their personal feelings: to commune with themselves.” He recommends the anthology as a memorial which enables “us to remember them and to see through their eyes what war

meant to those who fought for freedom” ensuring that their “achievements should not be forgotten” (*From Oasis* v). Carver’s interest in the poems is historical and cathartic rather than literary. The lessons readers learn about “what war meant to those who fought for freedom” are expressed in verse, but are not about poetry, experimentation or language for its own sake.

The fact that so much war-time self-expression took form as verse invites speculation about the writers’ beliefs about poetry. As both a low and high art, poetry is a medium open to all and flexible enough to express the familiar and the strange, to communicate directly and to represent confusion. Poetry requires a different attention than prose; bringing this attention to writing and reading makes special the poem. While Carver focuses on the poems as memorials, General Sir John Hackett explores the impact of the war on inner life, the difficulty of communicating one’s experience to others, and the ways in which that difficulty is manifested in texts. Hackett writes, “Every war is a private war” in which “Every man, woman or child in any way involved . . . lives in a unique and private world among experiences inaccessible to others. Wartime pressures, physical, moral, spiritual, can be very high, often so high that the vessel upon which they are brought to bear collapses under them. Even when they can be borne,” Hackett writes, wartime pressures “leave no-one unmarked.” As mounting pressures approach “the limit of human tolerance [they] generate an intensity of feeling that cries out for relief of self-expression,” yet even this release is incomplete as some experience cannot be shared. “It is private, personal, unique and in its essence uncommunicable,” but, Hackett suggests, “it is still possible to lighten the load by saying something about it, to seek out the places where truth, pain, beauty, anguish, wonder lay and try to indicate them to others. It brings a measure of relief not only to those who do it but also to those before whom it is done, for it shows them that

other too were under the hammer and have cried out in language they can understand” (*From Oasis* xvii). In Hackett’s account the “fugitive” poems gathered for the archive, taken together may produce a map of “truth, pain, beauty, anguish [and] wonder.” The map of this poetry is fractured, tenuous and incomplete. Like the human vessel collapsing under pressure, the vessel of poetry is subject to strain. While accomplished poets might ‘cry out’ without losing control over their writing, novices’ poems often break down under the weight of demands they cannot meet. Sometimes the feeling exceeds the form, other times the effort to control the text evacuates the emotions which inspired it. Whether their aim is low or high art, poems which succeed in communicating feeling—or in indicating the places where those feelings lie—are anthologized. Hackett acknowledges, the selections in *From Oasis Into Italy* vary “greatly in kind and quality. There is prose and verse, carefully worked on and complete, side by side with rough and uncouth fragments. There is poetry on a respectable—and even a high—lyrical level and plain doggerel. The sad, the seamy, the savage, even the simply funny reflections of individual experience in active theatres of war . . . .”

Hackett cites two reasons for publishing such a broad range of work: “It was important to rescue and preserve what still remained of this wartime self-expression, even if not all of it was of the highest literary quality” and to “fill out the human backdrop against which great events were played, by sketching in something of the characters of those playing in them.”

For Hackett the loss of these poems would compromise the history of the war:

Without this [anthology] events will soon be no more than dates and battles in history books. But wars are made and fought in by people. It is people who suffer in them, who struggle, endure, behave basely or well and sometimes even find in wars enjoyment as well as tedium and horror, and it is what people have to say about their thoughts and feelings at these times

that endow the record with reality. I think of this collection in all its variety, at all its levels of quality, as a glimpse at part of the structure within which the 'history' was made, a sort of environmental archive without which all the factual chronicles of events and all the hardware on display have little meaning. (*From Oasis* xvii)

The "levels of quality" preserved in the collection ensure that the peopled history of the war contains all the faces, deeds and voices of those who really fought it, not only the most handsome, most heroic and most literate. A more selective collection would produce an incomplete "environmental archive;" history would be altered by their exclusion. The editors' commitment to inclusion explains their decision to broaden the scope of the anthology in *From Oasis Into Italy*. Future anthologies, however, focus almost completely on verse.

### ***Poems of the Second World War (1985)***

*Poems of the Second World War: The Oasis Selection* broadens the scope of the Salamander Oasis anthologies to include all theaters of the war. Like *From Oasis Into Italy*, the poems in *Poems of the Second World War*, are grouped by the location or theater of war in and about which they were written. A selection of pre-war poems titled "1939-1940," make up the first section, followed by "The Middle East," "The Home Front," "The Mediterranean," "North Africa, Italy and the Balkans," "Air," "Sea," "Normandy to Berlin," "South-East Asia and the Pacific." *Poems of the Second World War* is a smaller scale book than its predecessors. Published by Dent for the Everyman's Library series, the book is printed on paper of a mass-market quality, which has yellowed significantly in the past twenty-four years, in contrast to the unspoiled pages of the earlier two volumes. The editors frame the entire collection with two poems "Luck" by Dennis McHarrie, "which expresses the philosophy of

the man and woman in war,” and “August 10, 1945 – The Day After” by Edward Lowbury “on the dropping of the atomic bomb” (xxvii). In addition to the poems, *Poems of the Second World War* contains a note on the history of the Salamander Oasis Trust, a memorial listing of poets, a Foreword by General Hackett, an historical overview of the war by Field Marshall Lord Carver, an introduction and a note on the arrangement of poems by Victor Selwyn, a brief account of “Writing Poetry in War” by Selwyn and Norman Morris, Spike Milligan’s remembrance “How I Wrote My First Poem,” and a detailed list of poets’ names and poem titles appearing in each section.

In his introduction, Selwyn situates the third anthology in relation to other collections of the Second World War poetry with a renewed claim to the supremacy of personal experience as a standard for inclusion: “We can only say, at the end of reading 140 books published both during the war and since – many in private editions – and having worked carefully through the anthologies we are expected to supersede, including the finest of them all, *The Terrible Rain*, edited by Brian Gardner, that *Ours smells of war. We were there and wrote then, and this is how it was*” (xv). Selwyn’s conviction about the indispensability of first-hand experience and the immediacy of writing directs the selection and presentation of the poems. Explaining the vital difference between the Salamander Oasis anthologies and others, Selwyn writes,

Whereas, for example, Ian Hamilton in the introduction to his anthology of World War Two poetry, says that he looked for what the poets wrote when they went to war, our concern has been the converse, to seek the writings of those who *became* poets as a result of going to war. Naturally, we select from the established poets, too. But to get the feel of war we have deliberately sought unpublished manuscripts, the verses written by unknowns from the

airfields of Britain to the POW camps of South-East Asia – many of which have lain hidden in desks and drawers for forty years, or were left to widows and children along with the medals. (xvi)

Through his comparison of manuscripts to medals, Selwyn indicates the extent to which military service is considered personal rather than national history. If the anthology and archive projects can bring personal histories into the public consciousness, we are less likely to forget that “wars are made and fought in by people.” Reading these poems and acknowledging the experiences of the individuals who wrote them can prevent the depersonalization Hackett warns against. They keep us from imagining war as distant and mechanical—as much out of our control as the weather—rather than an action consciously taken by people like ourselves, on our behalf.

Novice war poetry in particular can demonstrate the effect of war on ordinary people. In his preliminary note to the volume, General Sir John Hackett suggests that war acts upon people to produce specialized poetry of heightened and clarified experience and emotion. The collected poems are products

of the pressures and tensions, the pangs and passions, the fears and frenzy, the loneliness, excitement, boredom and despair, the disgust, the compassion and the weariness, and all the other stimuli to self-expression which, though they are not uniquely found in wartime, react then upon the human condition with special force. Poetry that could as easily have been written in peace tells us little about the explosive creative urge which develops so strongly in men and women under wartime stress. It is the cry from the heart which is wrung from quite ordinary people by what happens to them in

war that we look for, a cry that probably would never have been heard at all in peace. (viii)

Poems that show how the pressures of wartime react upon the human condition allow readers who have not experienced war to imagine themselves into that place, and by including poems from the broadest range of contributors, the editors offer the greatest variety of access points to date. In “Writing Poetry in War” Selwyn describes the development of novice writers from letter-writers with “new experiences and places to write home about . . . to the writing of diaries, short stories and poetry” (xxvii). Through the practice of writing letters home, Selwyn suggests, servicemen and women “found they had something to say and the facility to do so . . . Letters home became more descriptive, had the odd illustration—especially airgraphs—and often contained poems. People wrote poetry, too, for the unit’s entertainment and to go on notice boards, the latter especially in POW Camps” (xxvii). On leave the new writer could buy a notebook to begin collecting his writing, meet in service clubs with other budding writers and share work. The military obstructed some creativity, censoring poems being mailed home, and discouraging private writing for reasons of security and morale. The British Expeditionary Force “felt that poems with a cynical touch falling into enemy hands might be used for adverse propaganda” (xxvii). The Navy and Fighter Command of the Royal Air Force were particularly “security-conscious” with the result that poetry from these branches is limited (xxvii). Fewer poems come from infantry—where a would-be poet carried a heavy kit and was constantly on the move—than units which operated from vehicles or bases (e.g., medical services, artillery and tank units) or were “on the line of communication” (xxviii). In compiling the anthologies, the editors faced many poems on some subjects and fewer on others. “For example in poems on the Western Desert,” Selwyn writes, “only a limited number could deal with sand

and flies and Tobruk. So, sadly, some good poems had to be dropped” (xxv). Selecting for the anthology necessitates exclusion; even a process which favors unknown poets cannot print them all. Perhaps for this reason *Poems of the Second World War* includes within its thirteen pages of acknowledgements a listing of wartime and post-war anthologies as well as a listing of works by individuals, compiled with the advice of the Imperial War Museum’s Dr. Gwyn Bayliss and Catherine Reilly, author of *English Poetry of the Second World War: A Bibliography* and editor of *Chaos in the Night*, a collection of women’s poetry from the Second World War. The descriptions of editorial process and listings of other collections reaffirm the tremendous number of poems which were written during the war.

***More Poems of the Second World War (1989)***

“The Seven Faces of War” by which the poems are organized in *More Poems of the Second World War* are “Enlisting/Training,” “Support,” “Action on Land,” “Action: Sea/Air,” “Leave,” “Behind the Wire,” and “Reflection/Aftermath.” These categories predict the content of the poems more precisely than the geographic headings of the prior two anthologies. While the headings in this volume suggest common experience, the manifold accounts within each section challenge that assumption. The more the common thread between the poems seems, the clearer the differences between poems appear, and the more distinct the identities of the poets. For example, “Behind the Wire” contains poems by British and Commonwealth prisoners of war and some accounts of liberating concentration camps. This section contains poems written in Singapore, Poland, Bergen-Belsen and Sumatra, about rice, bedbugs, guards, V-J day, camp liberation, and the Burma railway. When a seemingly narrow category produces such a broad range of experiences, readers begin to the sense breadth of unreported experiences. Particularly in prison camps, where writing was extremely difficult and potentially dangerous, each extant poem claims



territory in the reader's imagination for the unrecorded poems of hundreds of other prisoners of war.

In "Editorial Reflections on Oasis and the Poetry of World War Two" Selwyn offers a "critical appraisal of the anthologies of the Salamander Oasis Trust, together with the Oasis Anthology in war-time Middle East" in order "to clear up misconceptions of the origins of *Oasis* and its role in the poetry of World War Two" and "to show the modus operandi and attitudes of the editorial team" (329). Selwyn writes against the "misconceptions" presented elsewhere (e.g., Bergonzi's "indifferently researched" *Poetry of the Desert War*) (333). While other may imagine culture "a rare blessing bestowed from a self-appointed élite on high," for Selwyn it grew from "the grass-roots, . . . the well read, thoughtful and literate generation of World War Two" (329-330). The consequences of this view of culture play out in the editorial process and the anthologies themselves. The editorial board sought to "balance an anthology between established poets and unknowns – usually preference for the latter, as the former have appeared in print, balance between themes and, above all, between content and literary level" (331). This process required evaluating thousands of manuscripts "all of which must be carefully read – for often an apparently unpromising collection conceals a poem of inspiration lower down" (331). Selwyn identifies four questions which guided the editors. The answer to the first question—"What is *war* poetry? Not just poetry, but *war* poetry?"—is seemingly straightforward: "poetry that could not be written in peace-time . . . that is written under the pressures and inspiration of war. It can take many forms," Selwyn writes "and whether it is neo-classical, modernist, neo-georgian, or whatever, may be of outstanding interest to academics but less so to us" (332). In order to limit their scope to these texts, the editors only included "poems written by those service and written during World War Two – with few exceptions listed in our

Introductions” because this “poetry enjoys an immediacy later writing cannot always re-create,” and “a boundary line gives the poetry unity” (332). The second question—“By which criteria do we judge?”—is answered as follows:

We judge on three counts. Has the poet something to say? Can he/she say it – the mode of expression and literary level? Above all has it that magical spark of inspiration, which any work of art must have? Invention.

Creativity. A new twist to an old theme. Content and literary level may conflict and hence we are so indebted to our late colleague Professor Ian Fletcher, not only an authority on twentieth century poetry but also a Middle East war poet, for his reminders of what poetry must be, not just prose chopped into odd lengths. Ian would walk round the room, declaiming the poem – for the poetry must have a sound – its final test. (332-333)

Unfortunately, Selwyn does not give examples of the conflicts between content and literary level which are resolved by listening to a poem’s sound. His description of Fletcher’s role as an academic and the team’s literary authority encourages re-examination of Selwyn’s claim about the relationship between form and content. In offering Fletcher’s credentials and recalling his instruction that poetry is “not just prose chopped into odd lengths” Selwyn invites speculation about the stability of the balance between content and literary level. The third question—“What should we include in an anthology?”—refers specifically to structure and breadth. The prior anthologies were ordered by “Theaters of War” and the present by “Faces of War.” Within each anthology, Selwyn writes, they strove to create a *mélange* of subjects, styles “and even lengths.” In response to the fourth question—“From where do we draw our material?”—Selwyn reaffirms that the texts are drawn from both published writers and those “moved to write by going to war” who submitted original manuscripts or were

privately published (333). Selwyn rejects the term amateur to describe the class of writers “moved to write” by war as “it can be derogatory.” First-hand experience lends these writers an authority which no amount of literary training can replace.

The editors used their own judgment to determine authenticity. Selwyn reports with pride their early detection of an imposter which slipped past the editors of *Poems from the Desert*, the Eighth Army’s poetry anthology. Selwyn recalls, “We sensed no soldier would write that way well before we found the Sunday paper story of a professional, Gerald Kersh,” whose “‘religious’ poem purported to have been written by a soldier and placed in a slit trench at El Agehila” yet had in fact been “written from comfort far away” (333). By referring to the imposter’s status as a “professional,” Selwyn emphasizes the primacy of experience in the criteria for selection. Field Marshall Lord Carver echoes this position in his prefatory piece “An Historical Record.” Carver writes, “because all the poems in these volumes were written at the time of their authors’ experience, they remain a true record of the feelings of a wide and varied cross-section of those who have served in all ranks of all three services” (vii). Carver acknowledges that the poems “are not necessarily a true reflection of the experience of all who served. Those who are inclined to write them tend to be the more sensitive and thoughtful, and their output to be the product of especial emotions” (vii). Nevertheless, Carver declares, the “Salamander Oasis Trust has added a major contribution to the social history both of the twentieth century and of war in all centuries” (vii). The social history and understanding of war which the poems relate benefit from the editors’ efforts to reconcile content and quality in their selection process. The conservation of the submissions by the Imperial War Museum rather than an academic institution or a general studies library speaks to the texts’ inextricable dependence on their history. Still, the archive is one of poems, and as such the collection and its anthologized

texts have information to share about how people in a particular historical moment related to verse and engaged in its production.

Introducing this anthology, Victor Selwyn writes, “well over 3,000” poems “poured in for this fourth collection, countering the fear that after three anthologies we would be scraping the barrel. There are so many good poems we just cannot use. We have the problem not only of space but of balancing the themes to gain the widest range of experience” (xii). It is not surprising, therefore that the editors chose to produce another book.

### ***The Voice of War (1995)***

The final anthology, published by Penguin, carries forward the strengths of its immediate predecessors. *The Voice of War: Poems of the Second World War* reproduces the eight categories of *Poems of the Second World War* (i.e., “1939-1940,” “The Middle East,” “The Home Front,” “The Mediterranean, North Africa, Italy and the Balkans,” “Air,” “Sea,” “Normandy to Berlin,” “South-East Asia and the Pacific”) and adds a final section, “The War Ends.” Its organization is augmented by page headers indicating the section from which one is reading, and, best of all, each poem is followed by the biographical information previously relegated to the back of the book. This information can include military rank and service, specific duties or experiences described in the poem, year of death, details about the poet’s post-war career or role within the Salamander Oasis Trust. For example the poem “Destroyers in the Arctic” is followed by this entry:

ALAN ROSS

*Royal Navy, Arctic and North Seas. Intelligence Officer with destroyer flotillas. Naval Staff, western Germany, 1945-6. Editor, London Magazine. (206-7)*

From this entry, we learn a bit about Ross's relation to the Navy—his service did not end with the war—and his literary credentials. The distinction of scholarship is made throughout the book, editors, professors and writers tend to list publications. Such entries signal a claim to recognition within the literary establishment. Those who pursued politics or public service include titles and honors. In contrast, biographies which detail war experience underscore the anthology's claim to the authority of the eye-witness. The entries which tell of poets killed in battle are particularly affecting. Some entries claim both literary credibility and the expertise of first-hand experience. For example, in the poem "When He Is Flying" the speaker feels that Death "stands beside" her, and when she hears or sees aircraft "He takes another step more near / And lays his cold unhurried hand on [her] heart . . ." (202).

This entry appears immediately after:

OLIVIA FITZROY

*Worked in library of London store at beginning of war. First book, Orders to Peach published by Collins 1942. WRNS fighter direction officer Yeovilton, later Ceylon, 1944. Her pilot boyfriend killed near Singapore early 1945: a WRNS girlfriend killed in a car smash. These two events affected her deeply.*

As the poet's name and biography appear after the poem(s), one may easily experience the difference between reading without biographical information and reading with it. While the proximity of biography to text emphasizes the individuality of the poet, the placement of biographic details after the poems means that readers encounter the text before they know even the name of the poet. In this way the lived experience of the poet is more explicitly connected to the poet's name, but the poet's identity is not only subordinate to the category within which the poem appears, but also to the poem itself.

The Voice of War includes fewer poems than any collection since *Oasis*, very little prose and no art, apart from the cover. The poems, many of which appear in earlier

anthologies range from anonymous popular songs like “Ballad of the D-Day Dodgers” to the work of the war’s best recognized poets, among them Douglas, Ewart, Lewis, Krige and Keyes. It better represents the service of women than previous anthologies, and spends fewer pages on arguments about the shortcomings of literary critics with respect to Second World War poetry. More than any other, this book seems designed for use in the classroom. Bawdiness is downplayed. It is more accessible than the others; it aims to present Second World War poetry in the best light—without resorting to the elitism of other anthologies—and to connect the poems to familiar history.

*The Voice of War* is urgently instructional. A new appendix “The Cost of War,” by Victor Selwyn, condenses the core Salamander Oasis Trust beliefs before listing casualty totals for Soviet Union, Germany, Japan, China, Britain, USA, France, Italy, Australia, India, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, Merchant Navy, Yugoslavia, and Poland; it serves as an object lesson in the importance of reading the poems carefully, learning one’s history and not glorifying self-sacrifice.

The flags stayed furled in ’39. Men – and women – went to war; no fuss, no bands. Hitler had to be stopped.

It took nearly six years for the flags to fly. VE Day 8 May 1945. Hitler was now dead, the Nazi army beaten. But for us the flags waved not in triumph but relief. The killing has stopped. The destruction of cities ended. The lights turned on. But most of Europe was refugees and rubble. Our poems do not speak of glory, they tell of compassion and pity for the dead.

John Warry says it in ‘War Graves’

Quiet neighbours dwell in the disputed clay

And none of them now cares who won or lost.

Young men who killed each other in the sky  
 Share narrow Churchyards under English yews.  
 Cheering can be left to Hollywood.

After the years of war we present its balance sheet. It adds up to millions – millions of people, many taking no part at all except to get killed. No one asked them. (286-287)

“The Cost of War” argues for the importance of reading the poems carefully, learning one’s history and not glorifying self-sacrifice. The matter-of-fact response to the threat of Hitler, the return to normalcy, and the refusal of acclaim for the accomplishments of servicemen and women all suggest that the Salamander Oasis poems have a cautionary and memorial purpose; however, the passage bristles with resistance and a sense of there being no adequate response, no compensation for the necessary and involuntary service of the men and women who fought the war. The war graves, casualty list and the rejection of Hollywood cheers speak to the irreparable loss and compulsory sacrifice for which veterans and civilian survivors both require and reject recompense, on behalf of the dead and themselves.

### **Critics and Questions**

The following sample of reviews represents critic’s responses to the anthologies and the questions that post-war readers bring to the anthologies. In Richard Adams’s 1985 review of *Poems of the Second World War* for the *Financial Times*, “All the Grief and the Anger of War,” he briefly contrasts the First and Second World Wars and their poetry before describing the peculiarities of the anthology. Adams writes that the anthology “is, as one would expect (through no fault of the editors) widely discursive in nature.” It includes poems “from the known and honourable dead, such as Sidney Keyes, Alun Lewis and Keith Douglas” and “such respected poets as Gavin Ewart, Vernon Scannell, Roy Campbell,

Lawrence Durrell, G.S. Fraser, Roy Fuller, F.T. Prince and Kingsley Amis.” “The widest possible net has been thrown” resulting in a majority of novice verse. From the composition of the collection—295 poems by 203 contributors—Adams concludes (and predicts his readers will agree) that “there cannot be so many poets of quality. Much of the contents is poor, its only merit authenticity.” Adams picks up on the editors’ struggle to produce an anthology which give space to unknown individuals weighing experience against literary level. His conclusion that authenticity is the anthology’s “only merit” suggests that the primary value or purpose of an anthology is to demonstrate poetic achievement. Answering the question “could the anthology have been better,” Adams recalls C. E. M. Joad: “it depends on what you mean by ‘better.’” Adams’s definition would result in “a book of this length (329 pages) [containing] work by no more than about 20 or 30 poets of some merit; in which case we should, of course, have got more of each.” From a veteran or historian’s perspective, however, 20 or 30 of the better poets would barely scratch the surface and would certainly fail to represent the scope of events and experiences. As General Hackett put it, in order to convey ‘the cry from the heart that is wrung from quite ordinary people by what happens to them in war,’ the anthology must contain a sense of the multitude affected by war. According to Adams, the critic’s question remains: “Are the poems themselves any good?”

Some of them are very good indeed -- a few, perhaps, destined to last -- for the editors have taken care to include the acknowledged best, such as Keith Douglas’s “Vergissmeinicht” and F. T. Prince’s “Soldiers Bathing.” And there are others, from relatively unknown hands, which movingly and effectively succeed in fulfilling that function without which, as Philip Larkin



has said, a poem can hardly be said to exist in a practical sense at all; namely, of re-creating vicariously in the reader what the poet originally felt.

Adams names five poems he is “glad to have found for the first time” and refers to “four or five more” which fall into the category of quality poems recovered by the Trust. Adams sees a gulf between the “acknowledged best” capable of sparking sympathy in the reader, and the “dross” which are included by editors who “self-admittedly . . . have set out to be too kind to too many people.”

This is certainly one way of serving Phoebus Apollo, but it is not his own way. He is—and ought to be—a hard, discriminating master. Also it seems wrong to include, in the same book with F. T. Prince, Keith Douglas and Vernon Scannell, stuff on the lines of “There was me and ‘ole Bert in the Naafi, “Avin’ a couple of beers,” etc. (There’s a lot of this sub-Kipling. Bert by all means: but should he not have his own, separate book?)

The editors’ kindness results in an integrated presentation of the poems—Bert and the “Soldiers Bathing” side by side. The fraternizing between low verse and high offends the critic’s sensibilities, yet is intended to represent the composition of the forces with greater authenticity than separate volumes could. Adams’s partiality for the poems of literary rather than popular cultural or historical value is confirmed by his assessment of the book’s organization: “The arrangement by sections, subtitled “1939-40,” “The Middle East,” “The Home Front,” “Air,” “Sea,” etc., doesn’t really contribute anything to the understanding or enjoyment of readers more than 40 years on. A poem should stand in its own right, self-sufficient and self-communicating.” The “transcendent light of the poem” standing on its own, unmoored from history, is vastly more important to literary critics and scholars than to the reading public in general, and Adams appears to foresee the potential for differing

opinions: “This is an interesting book, a book worth having, a book consisting of about 20 per cent good poems. It certainly has one excellent and unusual merit: since so many of the poets are unknown, readers will be compelled to make up their own minds.” In addition to the amusing implication that readers’ minds are already made up about known poets—or that critics are making readers’ minds up for them—Adams’s acknowledgement gestures to the book’s scope and potential for varied receptions among diverse audiences.

In Peter Reading’s 1989 brief review of *More Poems about the Second World War* for *The Times (London)*, he describes the volume as continuing “the worthy anthologising project of the Salamander Oasis Trust, charting the conflict through the pens of those who were in the thick of it non-literary service-persons as well as established writers.” The assortment of subjects and quality is, for Reading a source of interest rather than inconsistency:

The anthology is sensibly arranged into seven categories dealing with enlistment, action, leave, etc. In addition to the famous names . . . there are contributions from unknowns even from those devoid of talent. The results are fascinating, compulsive reading. Though the art may sometimes be feeble, the sentiments are usually moving. . . . This book is a good read; it is also a fine memorial to those whose burden proved to be insupportable.

Reading’s interpretation of what is elsewhere called uneven talent as “fascinating compulsive reading” speaks to the energy generated by the intermingling of different individuals’ contributions. Reading seems to approach the text with curiosity rather than a particular agenda and consequently the work of unknowns and “those devoid of talent” add to his experience as a reader rather than constitute a failure or shortcoming within the text.

Neither Adams nor Reading name the poems which they would exclude, yet their reviews

plant this question—which poems do not belong—in their readers’ minds before they open an anthology.

On 20 February 1991, eight days prior to the cease fire which ended the Gulf War, George Hill’s feature article “Can war still create war poets?” appeared in *The Times*. Hill raises the question by juxtaposing the wars, placing troops and tanks in the desert and describing the origins of the Oasis anthology without identifying the time period.

In the suspense before the launch of the decisive ground offensive of the desert war, three young servicemen sent out an appeal to all the troops fighting in the Middle Eastern theatre. . . . [T]heir initiative led eventually to . . . a unique and moving record of the experience of war. . . . Victor Selwyn and his two fellow-compilers of those Oasis anthologies in 1942 tapped a torrent of verse, mainly from individuals who published no other poetry before or after. But if the stresses faced by today’s forces in the Gulf produce a similar flood, there is no comparable channel ready to collect it.

The expectation that war produces poetry has been dampened by a pattern of brief conflicts, professional rather than conscripted military forces and an apparent preference among wartime writers for prose. Therefore, Hill reports, while “The Imperial War Museum’s archives contain thousands of poems . . . from the two world wars, and the museum regularly mounts lectures about the literature of war, [it] is making no special plans to solicit war poetry inspired by the Gulf conflict, though it has put out a low-key general appeal for memorabilia related to the conflict.” General Hackett would warn that memorabilia without the human backdrop grows cold with time, but as Hill points out, “It is not the custom to send an official poet to the front line. It would be incongruous, almost impertinent, to do so. Poetry is not like that. In this century, the record has been kept most resonantly by the

combatants themselves, who bear the danger, and the moral stress.” Despite the burdens that combatants continue to bear at the end of the twentieth century, Hill leans toward a negative response to his question. He examines the factors that contributed to the outpouring of verse in the First and Second World Wars poetry in search of an explanation for the diminished likelihood of an similar flood of Gulf War poetry.

The first published poem of the Gulf War appeared “in *The Times Literary Supplement* two weeks before the fighting began in the Gulf.” In “A Dream of Peace” Andrew Motion “draws a parallel between the tanks that are about to go clanking into action in the desert and the tanks in which [his] father fought against the Germans in Normandy, to create an image of war as a repetitive process.” Motion’s poem is about war, but written “by someone who has never experienced it.” Despite having war for its subject, Hill implies and Motion confirms, this is not war poetry in the sense we have come to expect: “‘I have never put on khaki myself,’ Mr Motion says. ‘That is not to say that I don’t have to bear witness in my own way. But war poetry written by non-combatants doesn’t close with its subject in the same way as poetry written by those who were there.’” Motion’s distinction between combatants and non-combatants’ experiences illustrates the extent to which poetry from the world wars have conditioned readers to expect war poetry to be written by servicemen. “In spite of the pervasiveness of war as a theme of this century’s poetry,” Hill observes, the “mention of ‘war poetry’ still suggests predominantly the work written in one war, and in one theatre[:] the trenches of 1914-18. This perception is unaffected by the mass of material collected in the Oasis anthologies, and by the work (familiar and excellent as some of it is) of soldier poets of the Second World War.” Consequently, while there is a consensus that war poetry is, in the main, the purview of those in the services, First World War poetry set a

precedent so formidable that subsequent verse contends with rather than continues the tradition of the soldier-poets.

Second World War poets—novice or otherwise—face comparison with their predecessors despite an array of differences significant enough to justify a re-examination of expectations for war poetry. Hill cites a poet “who served in the infantry from 1940 to 1945,” Vernon Scannell: “Our war was a very different war from 1914 . . . . They went into it in an extraordinary spirit of euphoria . . . . My generation had no illusions of that kind to start with. It was a browned-off war from the start.” In contrast to The Great War, the forces fighting The Good War saw its necessity and as a result their verse lacks the sense of disillusion characteristic of Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg and the rest. A necessary war, begun only twenty-one years after one which dispelled illusions of glory, could not honestly reproduce the stark and pitiful shock of the poems from the trenches. The next war’s poets, despite equally valid emotions and experiences, are viewed, as Hill puts it, as having “nothing to do but find new ways of saying what Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg said from the trenches.” Therefore, while the honesty and raw emotion which characterized First World War poetry is also present in Second World War poetry, the subjects and feelings are different and poets too often dismissed for not reproducing feelings which were not their own. Observing these trends, Hill offers the following two examples.

A poem by Keith Douglas, one of the best writers of the Second World War, declares: “Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying.” The phrase expresses what had changed since 1918: the sense of shock had gone. . . .

Henry Reed, whose “Naming of Parts” may be the best known soldier’s poem of the Second World War, spoke . . . as a civilian in uniform, but with quizzical resignation rather than damning incredulity . . . .

In his study of the conditions which inspired past war poetry and might prompt those serving in the Gulf War to write, Hill touches on the issues of concern to Salamander Oasis editors seeking an audience for their collections. In addition to the expectations for war poetry laid down by the First World War poets, Salamander Oasis poems are part of a controversy around the value of novice verse.

Hill consults Alan Ross, Denis Healey and Paul Fussell for information related to the Gulf War poetry question, and the information they provide gets at the heart of why the Salamander Oasis poems are such an overlooked treasure. Hill writes, “As in earlier centuries,” the Gulf War “has been carried out by professionals who have enlisted, and are trained to expect horror and control their imaginations.” According to Hill, Fussell agrees that “little of literary value is likely to come out of the Gulf” because “the troops are regulars, unlikely to have the habit or the skills for expressing themselves in verse.” Victor Selwyn might argue that regular troops could develop an interest in self-expression through writing, yet soldiers who can call—or as those serving in 2008 are able, email—home may not take the first step of becoming letter writers. They might, however seek other avenues for self expression. Fussell predicted that a “short war is unlikely to produce much poetry,” however “when things go wrong . . . the conditions are right” for poetry writing.<sup>1</sup> “When people are suffering trauma, disillusion, disappointment, as well as a sense that they are living through the most important days of their lives,” they are more likely, Fussell claims, to write poetry. The reception their work receives depends on the public’s expectations. Alan Ross, an Oasis contributor and “editor of the London Magazine, who saw action in the arctic convoys, and wrote ‘Radar’, a poem about the strangeness of combat with an unseen enemy,” expresses a view in the tradition of critics who favor First World War poetry: “In both the world wars, the poets were not professional soldiers. . . . The question whether any

poetry will come out of the Gulf really depends simply on whether there are any born poets there. The idea that amateurs can knock off worthwhile verse is nonsense.” Ross is right; war does not make lyrical savants out of ordinary men. His definition of ‘worthwhile’ verse may nevertheless be too narrowly drawn to admit other types of value. The work ‘amateurs can knock off’ portrays historical experiences, reveals what poetry means to ordinary people, and demonstrates the impulse to self-expression in unbearable circumstances. Hill acknowledges both positions. Regarding the Salamander Oasis anthologies he writes, “Much of the verse collected . . . is indeed of a kind that confirms Galsworthy’s wry observation that at moments of crisis people’s natural mode of expression is cliché,” yet “Denis Healey, a polished sonneteer before he put on khaki in 1940, believes that literary quality is not the point about the collection. ‘Its value is as a record of what these people felt and saw, going through an experience that impelled them to write, often for the only time in their lives. Even some of the recognised poets never wrote anything comparable afterwards.’” Hill concludes his article with the sentiment that the given the degree of strain necessary to produce war poetry “we must hope for wars as little afflicted by poetry as possible.” Far from answering the question about what counts as war poetry, Hill’s article features the constellation of opinions and beliefs surrounding war poetry in general and the Salamander Oasis collection in particular.

In his review of *Voice of War* for *The Independent* Jeremy Treglown writes, “Faced with some of the experiences described in these very different anthologies, it’s hard to argue with the idea that beyond a certain point, literary skill can’t significantly add to what life and death themselves put on the page.” The purpose of this study is not to decide the question or to defend the Salamander Oasis poems, but to show what is at stake for the Salamander Oasis writers and editors and what is lost when their work is ignored or dismissed. If the

qualifications for poets and poetry are so rigid that texts such as these are overlooked and excluded from serious study, we preserve our standards to our detriment. In the next chapter, I look at the poems themselves. What can the Salamander Oasis poems tell us about what poetry meant to those who wrote it? What events inspired them? What questions do they ask, and which can they answer?

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>The conditions have been right for writing war poetry in our current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for several years. In a future expansion of the current study, I will include an epilogue detailing some of the creative projects which have come out of those conflicts and the connections between our current conflicts and the Salamander Oasis poems.



## Chapter Four

### A Picture of War

We in our haste can only see the small components of the scene

We cannot tell what incidents will focus on the final screen.

A barrage of disruptive sound, a petal on a sleeping face,

Both must be noted, both must have their place;

It may be that our later selves or else our unborn sons

Will search for meaning in the dust of long deserted guns,

We only watch, and indicate and make our scribbled pencil notes.

We do not wish to moralize, only to ease our dusty throats.

–Donald Bain “War Poet” (*Poems* 25)

The back cover of *The Voice of War* advertises “a far wider range of attitudes than one finds in more ‘official’ collections: compassion and cynicism, pity and humour.” The remarkable heterogeneity of the collection offers a richer representation of the mind and imagination of wartime poets and a tremendous resource for answering larger questions raised by the war and shared by participants around the globe. Some themes span the broader temporal and geographic categories by which the anthologies are organized. The poems suggest widespread questioning about the ways war reshapes the individual and the meaning of individuality in wartime contexts: the Forces, the hospital, the foreign lands and the eyes of the enemy. How do people communicate their personal, inner experiences, particularly in times of crisis? Why do people so often use poetry to express the shocking, the incompletely understood, and the reason-defying? What can the creation of poetry at such times teach us about what it means to be human in the uniquely human and

paradoxically inhuman state of war? The poems demonstrate that under the pressures of war, many people experienced a sudden revelation of or radical shift in identity. Changing roles at home, new military service, travel and warfare in foreign lands, and increased exposure to both technology and the natural world occasioned by military duties prompted many to write poetry. Many poets articulate the individual and cultural transformation that the war precipitated in personal terms. The Salamander Oasis poems contribute to a broader understanding of the war experience, while their numbers and variety of forms offer post-war readers insight into the poets' beliefs about the uses and value of poetry in wartime.

This chapter explores the transition from civilian to soldier, the unnaturalness of war fought in the natural world, the pervasive fear of death and loss, the problem of bodies and burials, the divergence of popular slogans and personal experience, and the evidence that the war provoked new attitudes and new kinds of thinking. The poems discussed in the chapter are only a slight portion of the collected texts and are examples only, constituting neither definitive nor exhaustive groupings. Many are by well-known poets and appear in multiple Salamander Oasis anthologies; a handful are unpublished. The archive and anthologies offer such an array of poems that these and many other questions could be addressed without use of the same texts.

The parenthetical references in this chapter refer to *The Voice of War* unless otherwise indicated.

### **Becoming a Soldier: Identity in Play**

The transition from civilian to military life inspired many poems which illustrate the adjustment to new duties, identities and lifestyles. Many express the isolation and interpersonal distance which accompany this transition. Many poets depict a boundary between their civilian and service lives. For some, the transformation from civilian to

serviceman raises questions about the pre-war identity.<sup>1</sup> In “Squadding” Jack Lindsay imagines “Shedding its shell, a crab must feel like this, / lost between two worlds, not so much scared as wary” (*Poems* 36). Rather than a new shell for the same old self, however, Lindsay finds that in response to training, marching, and moving in “unison,” “they feel again / that pull of difference splitting each life into two” (37). Compelled to adopt a new shell, he finds himself questioning the beliefs which constituted his old one. What structures and beliefs do military service and the squad replace? Resistant to the new shell of uniform, kit and “uplifted rifle” the serviceman wrestles with his new identity: “It isn’t true, each insists. It isn’t happening, / This is not me. But it is. And you grin to find / the will re-welded, richer” (37). What aspect of military service affects this bond? Is the solder that re-welds his will military discipline? camaraderie? commitment to a greater cause? How is the enlistee or conscript enriched? Other poems, which we will look at shortly, suggest that military indoctrination instills a vital set of skills necessary to minimize the conflict between the brutality of war and the civilian’s sensibilities. In “Enlisting” R.H. Ellis echoes Lindsay’s description of transformation.

How do you go to the wars? It’s easy . . .

.....

Never were human bonds so cheaply, so easily purchased,

Never was human soul so quickly, so easily bartered.

.....

. . . you are not who you were, you are somebody else now[.]

---

<sup>1</sup> I use ‘serviceman’ throughout the chapter as a generic term for a member of the armed forces. In reference to specific poets and their work I rely upon the biographical and service information provided by the editors. In some cases the sex of a poet is unclear.

Ellis, who enlisted in 1939 and served as a subaltern, warns his readers about the experience of indoctrination. His representation of the division between civilian and military life is more frightening than uplifting.

Down between you and the world now drops the invisible curtain,  
 Fine, invisible, tougher than steel, more fluid than water,  
 .....  
 In between you and your friends and your house, between you and your  
       clothes too  
 Sliding, sealing you off from all that is known and familiar.  
 There you have now no place, you move in another dimension  
 .....  
 Subject to new and mysterious laws, experience useless . . . . (6)

Lindsay and Ellis portray disparate responses to military indoctrination—integration and alienation. Some, like Lindsay, take to their new identities, while others question and resent the separation of the soldier from the civilian parts of himself. Ellis describes the brutal prerequisites of this adjustment in “Poem XI.”

. . . Knowledge that other men’s lives lie in your untrained, unfit hands,  
 And that store of the mind, the gain of a lifetime’s learning,  
 Treasures of feeling and sense, so carefully, consciously chosen,  
 Objects of art and virtù, on the mind’s shelves neatly assembled,  
 All must be instantly tumbled and broken and ruthlessly swept out,  
 Out to make room for the graceless terms of the art of destruction . . . . (129-

In order to fulfill an obligation antithetical to his nature, Ellis evacuates his fears, “feeling and sense,” “art and virtue,” and replaces them with irony—“Slaughter of course is the aim, but we never, never say so”—dissociation and denial—“Learn your stuff, and muffle your mind, and we’ll have a good *party*” (130). “The Officer Cadet” by Richard Spender suggests that the poet’s confidence in his pre-military identity determines how this transformation shapes his thinking and impacts his sense of self.

. . . I cannot understand why  
 To fight for a few simple things  
 Necessitates polishing the toes of one’s boots  
 ‘Until you can see your face in them.’  
 I have no wish to see my face;  
 And there are mirrors. . . . (14)

Spender’s cadet expresses himself directly—one idea per line—without the regimented rhymes and line lengths which he would likely judge as unnecessary to the poem as shiny-toed boots to the “fight for a few simple things.” Spender’s poem depicts a compromise between the individual and his new duties and a rational civilian’s response to the irrational aspects of military service.

The military disappoints some, particularly when the reality of service challenges images of honor and pride in duty. Timothy Corsellis describes unpleasant surprises lurking behind the glamour of flight in “What I Never Saw.”

. . . When I was a civilian I hoped high,  
 Dreamt my future cartwheels in the sky,  
 Almost forgot to arm myself  
 Against the boredom and the inefficiency

The petty injustice and the everlasting grudges,  
 The sacrifice is greater than I ever expected. (178)

As Corsellis's ambition, expressed in the rhyming couplet, dissolves, the poem's tone and syntax revert into speech patterns. The military leverages the individuals' commitment to the cause even as it subverts his will by requiring his submission to authority and the primacy of the group. Some men, like Spender and Corsellis's speakers, retain their pre-military mentality and resist or resent the rigidity of military order. Simultaneous support for the war and dislike of the military spark disdainful descriptions of those who favor the military over the cause. While military structure stifles some, it comforts others, particularly in contrast to the chaos of war. Many poets, like Tony Goldsmith, a lieutenant in the Royal Artillery, are unsympathetic to this attitude. Goldsmith depicts one such individual in "The I.G. at War," using strict rhyme and meter to convey the order of military life.

I'm Captain Blenkinsop. I.G.,  
 Sent by mistake across the sea,  
 To land upon this dismal shore  
 And find myself involved in war. . . .

The Inspector of Gunnery complains that the enemy and battle conditions interfere with his intended use of the guns: "It's plain that the opposing forces, / Have not been on the proper courses." He pleads to return to the ordered life of Royal Artillery headquarters.

Larkhill's the only place for me,  
 Where I could live at ease and free  
 And frame, with sharpened pencil stroke  
 A barrage of predicted smoke.  
 Worked out for sixteen different breezes,

With extra graphs, in case it freezes,  
 For non-rigidity corrected,  
 And on a Merton Grid projected!  
 O take me to the R.A. Mess,  
 To dwell in red brick happiness,  
 Enfold my body, leather chair,  
 And let me fight the War from there! (138)

Goldsmith shows that the ideals of military precision are at odds with the split-second decisions and individual agency required by battle. The Inspector's enthusiastic preparation for hypothetical contingencies does not prepare him to deal with life at the front for which his plans are intended. His precision requires regular meals and leather seating, and the language with which he expresses himself echoes the overwrought practices that are a hindrance to efficacy rather than competent preparation for war. This poem shows the interdependence of individual character and military training, and hints at the risks implicit in the violation of Ellis's curtain. The curtain protects the individual from behavior antithetical to his conception of himself while necessitating a separation of the serviceman from himself and inhibiting his connection to others.

"Armament Instructor" by Herbert Corby helps one begin to build a picture of the consequences of long-term military service on someone like Ellis's enlisted man. Corby calls the man "[d]rysouled," a "[m]useumpiece" whose words are "[n]ever gay or merry." In response to fidgeting students,

he pops with frightened temper like a rabbit.

.....

Sometimes, despite his fear, he's almost human,

and leaving guns, to human things he looks,

and matters of glory and honour, both from books. (4)

Infused with contempt for his instructor, glory, honor, books and the inculcation of new generations in the knowledge of their elders, Corby's speaker invites questions about the nature of "human things" in wartime. Are glory and honor meaningful ideas? damaging ideals? a goal of military service? an empty promise? More generally, how do different organizing principles shape one's interpretation of the world and one's place in it? The poet's encounter with this teacher shows uncertainty about sources of meaning and value. This poem reads as a response to the undermining of systems by which people construct their definitions of humanity. Faced with a new "tough" and "fluid" division between himself and others and the irrelevance of his life experience to this new role, the soldier tests new ways to maintain a connection between his military and civilian identities. For Corby's speaker, the armament instructor's attempt to bridge the gulf with a conversation about "human things" fails with both "the men of guts and men of letters." The book-learned glory and honor do not impress the gutsy for whom experience trumps knowledge. The use of "human things" to mitigate or explain the war and military service undermines the instructor's credibility with the bookish. Despite the apparent conclusion that books as repositories of 'human things' are rendered inaccessible and suspect in wartime, the existence of Corby's poem argues for a reclamation of literature-as-humanity by soldiers, and prompts a mode of writing which conveys the potential for estrangement from literature and the 'human things.'

As many poets wrestle with the paradox of humanity and inhumanity in wartime, some share their internal struggles, some their observations of other's. Any kind of writing could do this work; the use of poetry suggests that the men and women embroiled in this



conflict strive toward an artistic, connective, redemptive vision of humanity, one enriched by language, informed by traditions, but richer and more complicated than previously imagined and ultimately irreducible. Keith Douglas's poem "How to Kill" articulates how killing turns "a child . . . into a man" (34). Douglas uses supernatural terms to express the conflict between one's emotions and one's actions that accompanies ending another man's life.

. . . Now in my dial of glass appears  
 the soldier who is going to die.  
 He smiles, and moves about in ways  
 his mother knows, habits of his.  
 The wires touch his face; I cry  
 NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears  
  
 and look, has made a man of dust  
 of a man of flesh. This sorcery  
 I do. Being damned, I am amused  
 to see the centre of love diffused  
 and the waves of love travel into vacancy.  
  
 How easy it is to make a ghost. . . .

Spontaneous maturation, sorcery and ghosts mark his experience of killing as more than strange, a condition that poetry is peculiarly well-suited to express. The simultaneous feelings of damnation and amusement represent a moment of split identity. Each stanza's rhyme scheme, *abcba*, collapses into itself and pulls in opposite directions, conveying the simultaneous senses of unity and division with which the speaker struggles. The end rhymes pair terms that make meaning together and contribute that meaning to the text. Douglas uses rhyme to connect vision and hearing, magic and emptiness, humor and pain, death and

breath. Douglas's internal experience of the strangeness of his actions—rendered in the poem as competing and coexisting points of view—support the claims other poets make about consequences of military indoctrination. The content of “How to Kill” suggests that it is damaging to feel personally accountable for one's actions in war, and unhealthy to be unaffected by them; its form embodies this abstract tension in a way that obstructs any urge to reduce the problem to simple opposition.

Victor West recounts the effects of survival on his character and his ability to maintain interpersonal connections in “*La Belle Indifference*.”

I hate that which is changing me  
 to treat all my past friends  
 with cold, impersonal disinterest  
 Perhaps War makes inevitable  
 that false, local loyalty, only  
 to the immediate companions  
 of your own small circle.  
 One grows armoured like a lobster  
 against loss – can grow new limbs, claws.  
 Survival inhibits any feeling, save the joy  
 of survival. Your own miserable hide . . .  
 To hell with the Rest, England Home and Duty. . . .

As evidence of his deadened feelings, West recounts learning that a close friend was blinded when he “[t]ook a Bren into the Railway Tunnel / so that you blighters could get out . . .”

I say nothing.

Betray no reaction. Cannot feel. Terry BLIND!

I cannot even breathe, 'Poor bastard.'

.....

Either I have a character defect

or else my loyalties froze hard up there. . . . (84-5)

West's poem argues that success as a soldier erodes human feelings, and the qualities of life that make it worth keeping. Will his lobster armor, like Lindsay's shell, protect him for a chance to recover later? or will he end the war empty of all that was worth protecting? The uncertainty he expresses feels brittle and unspeakably sad. The existence of the poem—its figure of the lobster, image of frozen feelings, passionate denial of ideals and bleak pursuit of survival—speaks to existence of a damaged but still vital and reflective self. In the context of events described in the poem, the speaker's indifference is frightening, yet as a poem, *La Belle Indifference* demonstrates the capacity of soldiers—even those with emotions rubbed raw—to write their way back into human feelings.

The coexistence of soldier and civilian selves precipitates a conflict between experience and knowledge, actions and beliefs. West depicts a crisis of indifference and fear of indifference. Some soldiers, like the one Uys Krige describes in "The Taking of the Koppie," appear able to completely compartmentalize discordant truths, eliminating conflict between what one wants to do and what one must do. Krige's poem reads as study of a young soldier who seems free from this inner conflict. The young man tells "us about the death of the colonel and the major / whom all the men, especially the younger ones, worshipped." The speaker contrasts the boy's innocent appearance with his brutal tale about the officers' deaths and the "three Ities curled up on some straw in a sort of dugout" whom he bayoneted as they slept, "each of them in turn, just in the right place."

There was no sadism in his voice, no savagery, no brutal pride or perverse  
 eagerness to impress,  
 no joys, no exultation.

He spoke as if he were telling of a rugby match  
 in which he wasn't much interested  
 and in which he took no sides.

And as I looked at his eyes again  
 I was struck with wonderment  
 at their bigness, their blueness, their clarity  
 and how young they were, how innocent. . . . (50-1)

The speaker's fascination with the disjunction between the boy's air of innocence and his violent story suggests that the young man's affect is remarkable. The boy's disinterested attitude and game mentality may help him to survive, but how are they sustained? At what cost? How (long) can one remain unreflective about one's actions? The speaker lists a spectrum of emotions all absent from the boy's voice, showing not only how some individuals manage their war experience but the extent of the boy's perceived separation from his feelings. That degree of emotional numbness offers a counterpoint to the poems about internal conflict and warns about the effects of war on individuals and the consequences for societies which divide the minds and hearts of those they call upon to serve. The speaker's awed attraction and almost clinical detachment distances him from the scene; following his rugby metaphor the speaker is a spectator of spectators. His inability to understand the boy's feelings echoes the boy's lack of feeling for the men he killed or the act of killing.

F.T. Prince, a captain in the Intelligence Corps, depicts the soldiers' dual identities with a palpable sympathy for the men in question. In "Soldiers Bathing," one of the most famous poems of the war, Prince questions the way in which play allows people to test and change roles and sustain a flexible attitude towards human identity.

. . . Their flesh, worn by the trade of war, revives  
 And my mind towards the meaning of it strives.  
 All's pathos now. The body that was gross,  
 Rank, ravenous, disgusting in the act or in repose,  
 All fever, filth and sweat, its bestial strength  
 And bestial decay, by pain and labour grows at length  
 Fragile and luminous. . . .

Standing in the waves, "Their frothy tongues about his feet," he "forgets / His hatred of the war, its terrible pressure that begets / A machinery of death and slavery, / Each being a slave and making slaves of others. . . ." The bather "[r]emembers his old freedom in a game." He "mimics fear and shame. // He plays with death and animality . . ." (72-4). Prince depicts both the complexity and the fluidity of a soldier's identity. In "Sleeping" George T. Gillespie, writing in Ranchi, Burma, describes the effect of the military on the "sproutings of [his] being" represented by his pre-war bedroom.

. . . All my life is clipped away,  
 until all that remains of my character  
 will pack up in a tin box and a bedding-roll.  
 . . . . .  
 Perhaps, when the necessary lopping of my mind  
 has ended and the grim battle is fought out,

I shall be allowed to sprout again;  
 but let it not be deformed or doubled  
 like the lost limbs of newts and frogs. (*Poems* 323)

Gillespie's hope for a normal future depends not only on his own actions, and his physical and mental health, but on how others treat him—as a creature exiting dormancy or one deformed by loss. Not only do soldiers face a post-war reintegration of their military and civilian selves, the countries that send men to war must make space for them at home again.

Many poems address the ways soldiers and civilians view one another, both during the war and after. Terence Tiller offers a civilian's account of soldiers. In "Lecturing to Troops" Tiller describes an encounter at Coastal Battery, Tripolitania, during which he perceives a divide between his audience of "strange violent men, with dirty unfamiliar muscles, / sweating down the brown breast, wanting girls and beer" and his own "clean cleverness."

. . . They have walked horror's coast,  
 loosened the flesh in flame, slept with naked war:  
 while I come taut and scatheless with a virgin air,  
 diffident as a looking-glass,  
 with the fat lexicon of peace. (81-2)

Tiller's book-learning and "fat lexicon of peace" do not help him understand the soldiers, neither do they prevent him from sympathizing with them. The lecture and the larger project of education and enrichment for soldiers of which it is part point to the importance of the Humanities in grounding the identities of those facing a crisis of humanity. Although many servicemen participated in arts and education programs, for some, military service offers a manly alternative to interest in the humanities. "Conscript" by F.A. Horn depicts

the satisfaction of civilians in the transformation that military service can bring in a young man's life.

'Of course its done him worlds of good', they said.  
 'He's twice the man he was – a puny chap  
 he use to be, if you remember – always at books and that,  
 but since he joined  
 he's broadened out. They've made a man of him;  
 You wouldn't know him now'.

This definition of 'a man' and the harm that results from imposing it underscores the importance—to Horn and others—of maintaining multiple definitions of manhood, multiple ways of being. Horn's poem shows the power of human forces—particularly rigid definitions and inflexible beliefs about identity—on human lives. Horn describes the cost of the soldier's complete transformation, reflecting,

. . . a pity, though,  
 his life should run, like bright oil down a gutter,  
 to implement some politician's brag.

His world went out  
 Through that neat hole in temple, quickly and easily  
 as words from windy mouths. And loves unknown,  
 and skies unseen, and books unread,  
 forever lost, he's dead.

You wouldn't know him now. (101-2)

Horn's contempt for the civilians' attitude conveys a soldier's anger at the constant pressure to act in accordance with expectations that devalue individuality. The ability to distinguish between an individual and a group, and to preserve the idea of a group as a collection of individuals rather than a repetition of a type is crucial to maintaining awareness of others' identities. "Conscript" and other poems show that poets are concerned about the way that wartime duties reshape or erode individuality. The tendencies to categorization further divide soldiers from their civilian selves, as Jim Hovell observes in "Alien Country."

Coming on leave,  
 while the world goes up in flames,  
 is to come, not home,  
 but to an alien and mysterious country,  
 where the language and pre-occupations  
 are remote from one's own  
 and difficult to interpret.  
 .....  
 The talk of my friends is guarded.  
 I come and go on leave and (as they see it)  
 am uncommitted, disinterested, uninvolved, transient,  
 a tourist, circumspectly welcomed  
 temporarily among them but not, now, one of them,  
 not, now, one of the natives of this place.  
 .....  
 I venture with trepidation into this alien country  
 with its ambiguous landscape, obscure pre-occupations



and shifting relationships. (102-4)

The alienation of home destabilizes connections, requires new manners and underscores the impermanence of roles and friendships. This external distinction between military and civilians or the home services dispossess the soldier of his home even as he fights for it. His ‘guarded’ friends may be protecting themselves from grief, but the distance they create deprives them of the friendship they fear to lose. In “Portsmouth” W. J. Harvey puzzles over civilians’ ability to distance themselves from the war he’s fighting.

. . . To the east lie the merchants and their bankers,  
and cringing upon the fringes of respectability  
a multitude shrinking from the omniscient historical embrace;  
yet, as Auden observed, some of these people are somehow happy.

*(Poems 161)*

The notion of respectability seems quaint in comparison to the reality of warfare. In a way, the capacity for happiness is encouraging, but the cost—separating oneself from history—is high, and paid by others—non-merchants and non-bankers—who cannot choose to abstain. According to Martin Bell’s poem “Three Days: The War Ends,” the division between civilians and soldiers remains after V-J Day.

. . . It wasn’t we weren’t pleased the new invention  
Had finally finished things off. And no fear now, etc.  
But there wasn’t much celebration, there wasn’t much beer in the town,  
And the locals wouldn’t have a lot to do with us.  
They’d had time to get used to soldiers, all through the war. *(Poems 351)*

As a military weapon used on civilians, the “new invention” further divides soldiers from locals, and ultimately increases rather than diminishes fear. The military may be seen by the

aloof townspeople as a group that causes suffering more than one that ends it. These perceived divisions further strain beliefs about identity.

The bomb is only one piece of military weaponry that gets identified with the people who make and use it. Individuality and agency are challenged by the machinery and weapons with which the war is fought. In “Ack Ack Said The Instructor” Brian Allwood details the instructor’s enthusiasm for “bofors tommy gun lewis gun,” effectively pairing weapons training with national pride.

. . . EACH THE GRANDEST BRIGHTEST BESTEST

EACH THE ONLY GOD-DAMN THING

ON THE MARKET

GUARANTEED WARRANTEED MONEY BACK IF NOT SATISFIED

and this thing here’s called the cruciform

(didn’t any of you bastards

ever go to church?)

as you can see it’s shaped like a cross . . . .

Allwood critiques the instructor’s pride in the weapon and its craftsmanship, his enthusiasm for which may transfer to the killing for which it is used. The sighting cross implicitly reinforces the weapon’s virtue as a tool against the enemy and validates the user’s decision to “blow [the enemy’s] bloody brains out” (3). The power of modern weapons and the ingenuity they represent inspire different feelings in servicemen and civilians. Gavin Ewart, RA, describes how complaisance, pride and fear create the need for more powerful weapons in “The Bofors AA Gun.”

Such marvelous ways to kill a man!

An ‘instrument of precision’, a beauty,

The well-oiled shining marvel of our day  
 Points an accusing finger at the sky.  
 – But suddenly, traversing, elevating madly,  
 It plunges into action, more than eager  
 For the steel blood of those romantic birds  
 That threaten all the towns and roads.  
 O, that man's ingenuity, in this so subtle,  
 In such harmonious synchronization of parts,  
 Should against man be turned and he complaisant,  
 The pheasant-shooter be himself the pheasant! (7)

Ewart's sardonic tone belies the strength of positive opinion about the Bofors. His description of the gun's 'accusing finger' and its thirst for "steel blood" reinforces the sense of human and weapon fusing into a single instrument of destruction. The poem implies that the unexamined beliefs upon which satisfaction with the inventions depends pose as great a threat as the weapons themselves: the juxtaposition of the gun and the airplane, great inventions deployed as implements of destruction, argues that fear-fueled admiration for the gun and an immediate need for safety may prove the most destructive force of all.

Individual contributions to the war effort bring private life and warfare together in different ways, as in Elsie Cawser's poem "Salvage Song (or: The Housewife's Dream)."

My saucepans have all been surrendered,  
 The teapot is gone from the hob,  
 The colander's leaving the cabbage  
 For a very much different job.  
 So now, when I hear on the wireless

Of Hurricanes showing their mettle,  
 I see, in a vision before me,  
 A Dornier chased by my kettle. (94-5)

Cawser's kettle is one of millions of repurposed objects, and many people have also left home for a "different job." The individual's contribution of household objects as scrap for use in creating weapons and equipment builds a sense of personal investment in the winning of the war.

The use of these products results in the conflation of people and equipment. In "Unseen Fire" R.N. Curry's speaker describes an enemy pilot in these terms: "To us he is no more than a machine." Curry's poem recounts a nighttime bombardment that begins with conflict and ends with an uncomfortable union of oppositions.

This is a damned inhuman sort of war.  
 I have been fighting in a dressing-gown  
 Most of the night; I cannot see the guns,  
 The sweating gun-detachments or the planes[.]

Curry's "inhuman sort of war" gathers together the light offense of inconvenient clothes, with the terrific amplification of human power by heavy weapons, the inability to see one's enemies and the depersonalizing distance between planes and oneself as their intended targets. Curry's part in the simultaneously distant and immediate battle is made possible by radar screens and telephone lines.

I sweat down here before a symbol thrown  
 Upon a screen, sift facts, initiate  
 Swift calculations and swift orders; wait  
 For the precise split-second to order fire.

.....

A ghost repeats the orders to the guns:

One Fire . . . Two Fire . . . ghosts answer: the guns roar

Abruptly; and an aircraft waging war

Inhumanly from nearly five miles height

Meets our bouquet of death [. . .]

Inhumanity makes the war possible; it allows one to feel pride in a precisely delivered

“bouquet of death.” From that distance, Curry reflects on the function of inhuman thinking.

This is a damned unnatural sort of war;

The pilot sits among the clouds, quite sure

About the values he is fighting for;

He cannot hear beyond his veil of sound,

He cannot see the people on the ground;

.....

. . . country people creep

Like ants – and who cares if ants laugh or weep?

To us he is no more than a machine

Shown on an instrument; what can he mean

In human terms? – a man, somebody’s son,

Proud of his skill; compact of flesh and bone

Fragile as Icarus – and our desire

To see that damned machine come down on fire.

While the parties maintain physical distance from one another and think only of themselves, their values, their desires, they can continue to imagine their enemies as ants and machines rather than ‘in human terms.’ As the burning plane plummets to the earth, however, “Fire and the force of gravity, unite / To humanize the flying god and proclaim // His common clay;” the gunners run toward the burning wreckage to fight the fire they caused. They find a “frame like a picked fish-bone,” and “charred bodies, more like trunks of trees than men.” The plane’s ammunition begins to explode, driving away the would-be rescuers, and Curry’s poem ends with a fusion of humanity caused by inhumanity: “We could not help them, six men burned to death – / I’ve had their burnt flesh in my lungs all day!” (5-6). The veil “tougher than steel, more fluid than water” insulates fighting men from the humanity of their enemies and the inhumanity of their own actions. Poems about encounters like this show how poets encounter and negotiate their altered senses of themselves. These poems contribute to a meaningful context for larger questions of humanity and inhumanity, nature and the unnatural as manipulated by war and experienced by members of the forces. Some poems show people distancing themselves from undesired feelings and feeling distanced from a longed-for certainty of their own identities. The war and the poems it inspires reveal, first to poet then to reader, that confidence in one’s identity may be propped up by beliefs of questionable purpose and value. The poems suggest that when tangible experience challenges intangible belief, individuals feel pressure to choose between belief and experience.

### **‘Unnatural’ War in the Natural World**

Wartime actions expose a conflict with nature and within human nature. For many, war meant spending much more time out-of-doors than ever before. Immersion in the natural world, particularly juxtaposed with warfare and weaponry, raised questions about the

relationship between man and nature during and after the war. In his unpublished poem “The Four Seasons” Paul Aller describes his experience of the connection between each season and a memory of the war.

. . . Far crueler, fighting was  
 ’mongst poppy fields and ripening wheat –  
 Promises of Nature’s fruitfulness –  
 Than in Holland’s barren wastes of snow,  
 Where War against the hated foe  
 Seemed less like war ’gainst what we know  
 Is God’s eternal goodness.  
 . . . (ts archive)

In a setting that reveals “God’s eternal goodness,” fighting not only despoils the landscape but also defiles the soldier’s spirit. As combatants Aller, and the “hated foe . . . war ’gainst” God and Nature, so the return of summer in subsequent years recalls their unnatural and godless acts of war. The seasons also call to mind “those who are not here / Throughout the changing scene” (ts).

Military training included a new way of understanding and talking about the landscape. In Alun Lewis’s poem “All Day It Has Rained” the physical experience of living closer to nature eventually supplants thoughts of war, the past or the future. The men lie in tents, smoking, talking and engaging in small tasks.

. . . I saw a fox  
 And mentioned it in the note I scribbled home; –  
 And we talked of girls and dropping bombs on Rome,  
 And thought of the quiet dead and the loud celebrities

Exhorting us to slaughter, and the herded refugees;  
 – Yet thought softly, morosely of them, and as indifferently  
 As of ourselves or those whom we  
 For years have loved, and will again  
 Tomorrow maybe love; but now it is the rain  
 Possesses us entirely, the twilight and the rain. . . . (8)

The canvas shell of the tent and the wind and rain that keep them within it doubly insulate them in the present, together in small groups divided from their pasts and futures. As the rain creates a screen of sound, separates men from their homes, and interrupts love, the use of *rain* at the end of the final two lines draws attention to the division represented by the other couplets end rhymes. The distance between (and uncomfortable juxtaposition of) ‘home’ and ‘Rome,’ ‘celebrities’ and ‘refugees,’ ‘indifferently’ and ‘we’ is physically represented for the poet and in the poem as ‘rain,’ and rain works in the poem as a metaphor for war. By pairing the familiar and the unfamiliar, Lewis shows how war loosens definitions and enables shifting interpretations. Similarly, Alexander McKee explores man’s place in and apart from nature in “The Question.”

. . . Who am I to play at fate,  
 To aim, and fire, and arbitrate  
 ’Tween life and death; not knowing hate,  
 To send with sad, departing whine  
 Irrevocable death across the Rhine.  
 The willows answer not. The scent  
 Of clover lingered while I went  
 Between the fields where ruins stand;



Dead horses lie along the land,  
 Who died, and did not understand  
 Why this should be; no more may I  
 Explain why any man should die.  
 And still I fired; and wonder why. (229)

Trampling the landscape, littering it with bodies, creating boundaries between nations, men, McKee suggests, treat the world badly in pursuit of treating one another badly without fully understanding why. The speaker does not use nature to explain his actions, yet his study of the war-torn landscape suggests that an answer may lie before him. “Naming of Parts,” part one of Henry Reed’s poem “Lessons of the War,” couples rifle parts and details of the landscape in a similar exercise of meaning testing. Reed brings together two voices, one giving the military lesson and the other describing elements of the landscape in surprising and perplexing contests of knowledge: “Japonica / Glistens like coral in all the neighbouring gardens / And today we naming of parts.” Reed shows how naming shapes interpretation, assigns value and makes meaning. Learning new names for things prompts reflection on old knowledge, and in “Naming of Parts” Reed tests meaning with pairs of familiar and unfamiliar things: tree branches and sling swivels, “fragile and motionless” blossoms and the safety-catch. There is a spirit of one-up-manship in the poem—of the man-made and botanical in competition—that peaks in the last two stanzas.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this  
 Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it  
 Rapidly backwards and forwards; we call this  
 Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards  
 The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:

They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring; it is perfectly easy  
 If you have any strength in your thumb: like a bolt,  
 And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,  
 Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom  
 Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards.

For today we have the naming of parts. (10-11)

Reed's attention to naming and assignments of meaning plays with the ways language helps to explain and normalize the world, in this case, inviting questions about how sources of meaning are privileged. The bolt and the bees are parts of very different systems.

War reassigns meaning to the natural world. In "Recce in Bocage Country, 1944" Peter Young explains "the landscape of war is different / admitting no valleys but re-entrants / no hollows but dead ground / churches neither gothic nor Romanesque only with spire or tower" (240-1). In part two of "Lessons of the War," "Judging Distances," Reed writes in the instructor's voice, sharing his lesson about how to describe a landscape and to replace familiar details with odd generalities.

Not only how far away, but the way you say it  
 Is very important. Perhaps you may never get  
 The knack of judging distance, but at least you know  
 How to report on a landscape: the central sector,  
 The right of arc and that, which we had last Tuesday,  
 And at least you know  
 That maps are of time, not place, so far as the army

Happens to be concerned – the reason being,  
 Is one which need not delay us. Again, you know  
 There are three kinds of tree, three only, the fir and the poplar,  
 And those which have bushy tops to; and lastly  
 That things only seem to be things.

A barn is not called a barn, to put it more plainly,  
 Or a field in the distance, where sheep may be safely grazing.  
 You must never be over-sure. You must say, when reporting:  
 At five o'clock in the central sector is a dozen  
 Of what appear to be animals; whatever you do,  
 Don't call the bleeders *sheep*. . . . (10-11)

Avoiding over-sureness requires suppressing what knowledge one has, reverting to generalities and blunting the senses. Using new language to describe familiar things subverts individual experience and may alienate people from their previous familiarity with nature. For those in unfamiliar landscapes, the struggle is not translating the familiar into unfamiliar terms but creating a meaningful picture of an alien landscape. In “Poem XIV” R.H. Ellis explains the appeal of maps.

Officers feed upon maps as their intellectual forage.  
 Spread out a map on a table, to us it's as hay in a manger,  
 Rumps in a row as we bend and browse, heads swaying, perpendent,  
 Pondering where we were, are now, and (God willing) shall be.

A map does not account for the “fall night, fall mild rain,” “the puddles and ruts of the hill road” nor the “sharp, sweet . . . scent of the chestnuts” (130). Maps are products of human judgment and as such reveal the limits of individuals’ ability to represent the natural world.

So while they help make knowledge and contribute to a sense of control, using them requires depending upon the map-maker's judgment and interpretive skills. Ellis experiences this challenge first hand.

Who was the bastard who called this a path? It's a bleeding *torrente*—  
 These aren't steps, it's a waterfall – look at the rocks and the boulders—  
 Meant for the stream to go down and not, repeat not, to be climbed up,  
 Though (the good Lord being merciful) presently lacking in water  
 Save for enough to run over our boots and get in through the lace-holes.

(132)

Redmond Macdonogh records a similar, if more fearful, misreading of nature in “To Germany, Three Nights a Week.”

. . . Near Maastricht now: my gunner shouts  
 ‘Fighter with lights on, Skip, the starboard bow’.  
 A tyro he: I turn to look but see  
 No enemy with ‘lights on’. Then he fires  
 A hundred rounds at Venus, low ensconced.  
 I muse. If stared at, stars *do* seem to move. . . . (182)

Ellis and Macdonogh present these mistakes with humor. These gaps of understanding and difficulties communicating take place in familiar territory. Writing about the North Africa and the desert tests poets' ability to convey alien action in an alien landscape. Hamish Henderson calls the North African desert a “limitless / shabby lion-pelt,” a “landscape of half-wit / stunted ill-will. For the land is insatiate / and necrophilous” (42-3). Uys Krige surveys “grey wastes (haunted by the wind, made spectral by the driving dust), dim now,

dimmer than dreams, / where no sun shines, nothing gleams” as he anxiously awaits a tank battle

in the dead heart of this dearest of dead lands  
 where nothing, nothing stands  
 fast or fixed, erect in a horizontal world,  
 only the sand lifts . . . . (52).

Sorley McLean sees the desert sun as “so indifferent / so white and painful,” and “the stars of Africa, / jeweled and beautiful” (62). The desert marks its inhabitants. In “The Captured” William E. Morris tells of “Hitler’s beaten army” and their

tired features creased by particles of desert dust  
 shabby uniforms infested by its all embracing crust,  
 dust – entrenched itself in ridges on head gear sadly worn,  
 irritated sweated forelocks closely shorn.  
 Down-at-heel boots made no imprint in sand  
 fringing polluted land – ugly born. . . . (67)

In “So Long” Hamish Henderson bids farewell to “the African deadland.” In a conversational style Henderson says goodnight to the war in Africa, the abandoned vehicles, the “thousands of crosses,” and takes his leave of it all: “To the sodding desert – you know what you can do with yourself” (44-5). In “Sand” John Jarman, a captain in an anti-tank unit, describes “sand frothing like the sea / [a]bout our wheels and in our wake, / [c]louds rolling yellow and opaque” and those bound to navigate through it who “[c]ursed this sullen gritty land” (47-8). Frank Thompson hints at the scale and visual monotony of the desert in “Day’s Journey.”

We left the well on our right and the crosses,

Drove west all day through the camel-scrub,  
 Tossing in convoy like a mobile orchard,  
 An olive-yard on wheels, irregular,  
 Spaced over miles: were bombed: were bombed again,  
 Until the air was dust . . . . (80)

The green life of the uniformed men feels exotic in this landscape. Many desert poems convey the sense of human life as doubly threatened by the enemy and geography. Jocelyn Brooke depicts the harsh desert, its apparent antithesis to life, and consequent suitability for battle in "Landscape Near Tobruk."

This land was made for War. As glass  
 Resists the bite of vitriol, so this hard  
 And calcined earth rejects  
 The battle's hot, corrosive impact. Here  
 Is no nubile, girlish land, no green  
 And virginal countryside for War  
 To violate. This land is hard,  
 Inviolable, the battle's aftermath  
 Presents no ravaged and emotive scene,  
 No landscape à la Goya. . . .

.....

. . . .all

The rusted and angular detritus  
 Of war, seem scarcely to impinge  
 Upon the hard, resistant surface of

This lunar land . . . .

.....

. . . The soldiers camped

In the rock-strewn wadi merge

Like lizard or jerboa in the brown

And neutral ambient: stripped at gunsite,

Or splashing like glad beasts at sundown in

The brackish pool, their smooth

And lion-colored bodies seem

The indigenous fauna of an unexplored,

Unspoiled country: harmless, easy to trap,

And tender-fleshed – a hunter’s prize. (23-4)

The vulnerability of the soldiers, amplified by their nakedness in the inhospitable landscape, divides humanity and its proper habitat—a “green / And virginal countryside”—from the inhumanity of the “lunar land” and the “land . . . made for War.” How does one measure loss in a landscape that refuses any impact from even the most violent events? Brooke’s poem hooks into larger questions at work in the poems about the qualities of humans’ complex relation to nature and the capacity of the natural world to reflect human history. In the desert landscape and elsewhere these categories are in flux, tested and informed by experience.

In “Green, Green is El Aghir” Norman Cameron depicts the sensation caused by the free-flowing water that they found along the way: “we yelped and leapt from the truck and went at the double / To fill our bidons and bottles and drink and dabble.”

Cameron's final stanza describes the riches of the area in terms of the community the water supports rather than natural wonders.

Green, green is El Aghir. It has a railway-station,  
 And the wealth of its soil has borne many another fruit,  
 A mairie, a school and an elegant *Salle de Fêtes*.  
 Such blessings, as I remarked, in effect, to the waiter,  
 Are added unto them that have plenty of water. (*Poems* 61)

Water and its accompanying blessings are the celebrated exception to the rule of desert warfare. Among its alien(ating) qualities, however, the desert holds marvels. In "Sand" Jarmain recalls that they have "seen wonders, spinning towers of sand / – Moving pillars of cloud by day –" and "learned the sun and the stars / And new simplicities." The ubiquitous sand has been a comfort: "kind for us to lie at ease" upon.

. . . It's soft dug walls have sheltered and made a shield  
 From fear and danger, and the chilly night.  
 And as we quit this bare unlovely land,  
 Strangely again see houses, hills and trees,  
 We will remember older things than these,  
 Indigo skies pricked out with brilliant light,  
 The smooth unshadowed candour of the sand. (48)

For better or worse, the desert was a temporary home for some and a final resting place for others. The transition from North Africa to Italy promised a return to a more familiar and comfortable landscape. Rather than a perfect landscape for war, the northern Mediterranean was potentially verdant and rainy, with olive groves, vineyards, mountains and hills. Towns, farms and monasteries, not to mention roads, marked the Italian landscape as radically



different from the “hard, [i]nviolable” desert. Moreover, unlike the desert—upon which “the battle’s aftermath / Presents no ravaged and emotive scene, / No landscape à la Goya”—Italy, Greece and the Balkans were ravaged. The change made many poets uncomfortable, homesick, and introspective.

In the Northern Mediterranean, poets often describe local people—particularly peasants—in relation to nature and characterize the war as antithetical to their way of living. In “Dalmatian Islanders” Robin Benn depicts local people whose already difficult lives are disrupted by war. Benn praises the islanders’ remarkable resilience and ability to deal with the tremendous challenges they face from the natural world, exposing the irony that, having overcome so much out of human control, their survival is threatened by human conflict (117). After Egypt, New Zealander Gwenyth Hayes longed for a change of scene. “This Italy” recounts his anticipation.

I had not seen the earth so tender green  
 For two long dusty years:  
 Only I knew nostalgia too keen  
 Where sands of Egypt stretched  
 In utter desolation to the line  
 Of merging sand and sky . . .  
 Until at length with bridles hopes we came  
 Upon this little land  
 So like the sea-girt shores of home it seemed  
 That head and heart and eyes had spanned  
 The continents between [ . . . ]

Hayes finds the farms war-ravaged and the people stalwart. The “peasant folk” continue to coax grapes and olives “from reluctant sod” amid “heap[s] of rubble.” The human inhabitants, the persistence of nature, and the connection between farmers and their land fortify Hayes, who writes, “This, nature’s garnering, / The iron rape of war cannot despoil” (139-40). Although the damage was done before he arrived, as a soldier and part of the war machine that rapes the land, Hayes’s observation must be girded with hope. His perception of the tenacity of the people and the resilience of their land serves as reassurance of himself and speaks of a wish not to be responsible for destroying a way of life.

In the desert history resides in individuals, whereas in the northern Mediterranean the landscape bears the marks of human use and misuse. The greater stability of the landscape supports history, even as that history makes settlements more vulnerable. In “Sicilian Town: August 1943” N.T. Morris points to one consequence of stability: “What was your crime, you little mountain town? / Just that you lay upon the Armies’ route; / Two tracks met here by whim in ancient time” (153). In “Overseas” Alan White observes that chance also delivers them as soldiers rather than visitors to

. . . This is the country which we might so easily  
have visited as tourists,  
but with a camera rather than a pistol,  
rubbing on the thigh. . . (162)

In “Castiglione dei Pepoli” Guy Butler describes the impact of warfare on nature and by implication local people.

. . . Far down below, the railway bridge’s wreck,  
Black gunpits, transport random-parked,  
.....

Far up, beyond the woods, the summit's skull  
 Seizing the sky with its ragged fangs of rock.

Raw is the rock, uncut by chisels: nude  
 Trackless snow speaks no evangel.  
 The only movement in the earth and sky  
 Is a silver fighter, splendid, single,  
 Whose shadow, leaping the hillsides hints  
 The only too familiar angel. . . . (124)

Butler's poem shows that while people with chisels and footprints tarnish the seeming perfection of the environment, war consumes the land itself. The airplane, man's triumph over nature, threatens to spread the destruction in the valley to unmarked peaks and pristine snow. Butler casts man's destruction and consumption of nature as unnatural and shows how warfare separates men from nature, at once making the natural world more appealing and inaccessible, as man's presence destroys it.

Whereas the desert bore mute witness to soldiers' actions and emotions, soldiers check themselves upon encountering local people. A victory which might be openly celebrated in the desert is tempered by local peoples' hardships. In R.M. Roberts "Italian Road" women, children and old men travel as refugees down the road past the speaker who "watched in silence / From the high turrets / Of our brutal armour."

. . . In them is no hate  
 Yet must we avert our gaze  
 Lest our pride be dry in our mouths  
 And the sweetness of our dreams  
 Be bloodied by their wounded feet.

And as they pass in the bitter dust  
 Of trucks and noise and distant guns  
 Our column moves  
 As the advance grinds on. . . . (*Poems* 223)

Because this land is marked by war, soldiers' are more aware of the cost of their victories and consequently more guarded in their celebrations. Moreover, seeing the impact of one's actions on other people reveals the inhumanity of those actions, rendering pride shameful. An Italian winter landscape buoys Erik de Mauny's spirit in "Morning After Battle," but his happiness is tentative.

As if for the first time I have seen  
 The breathless outburst of this winter morning  
 And never before knew sun so tender in bare trees.  
 Nor, under the naked branches, green so green  
 As the silent fields. And the silence is  
 The calm of the late reprieve. We cannot bear  
 This silence speaking: so, as if ashamed  
 To show our joy, are wordless as we turn  
 Away from that country of fear no one has named.  
 There are birds singing in the crystal air. . . .

Faced with the death of "Tom (or Dick, or Joe)" and "the bright deep fury without a name," de Mauny is surprised by hope: "it seemed like the promise wrought, the miracle sign / When a girl smiled, drawing water at the well" (128-9). To the traditional symbolism of a well the context of war adds hope for future access to what is currently out of reach: the comforts of home, the full range of feelings and peace. In "The Weeping Beeches of

Sonnenberg” P.A. Hyatt finds comfort in a natural process that mirrors his own attempt to exorcise “melancholy anguish [he has] carried these many years” for those whom he killed and his grief for “long dead comrades” (227-8). Hyatt talks to the trees that war left “shattered, torn and broken,” and they answer “Look well my friend / for we are regrown and reborn, / Look closer, see we still carry scars.” The beeches ‘weep’ with joy.

Small nodules each with a tear duct I noticed everywhere,

Each nodule a piece of shrapnel ejected and rejected.

As they rejected they wept for joy, reaching up to the sky

and joyfully rejecting the iron from the soul.

And so the trees have repaired, regrown,

Deep and lovely are the groves of weeping beeches of Sonnenberg.

Hyatt interprets the trees’ recovery from their war damage as joy in resiliency and the choice to live in a natural and peaceful state. Hyatt’s communion with nature reconnects him with his innate capacity for healing. The natural world’s power to restore itself models the kind of self-healing that humans need to recover from the damage they inflicted on themselves and each other in an unnatural conflict.

### **Living with Death**

As the threat of death becomes a feature of daily life, poets articulate their thoughts and feelings about this central aspect of war. In “The 31<sup>st</sup> Operation...” George Cocker describes the uncertainty of the times: “Tomorrow was a night of fear away . . . / And sure returns / Were not the order of the day . . .” (173). The sense of chance as the determining factor in one’s life, of dreams out of reach, the fear of loss, and the uncertainty pervading daily life inspire many poems about risk and escape, the power of denial and the price of

survival, that express a pervasive awareness of one's life and death being wholly out of one's control. Bill Rainford's poem "It Will Never Happen to Me" recounts the fates of men who use charms, talisman and lucky stars to cope with the danger of flying (186-7). Others have no thought of the future, as Olivia Fitzroy writes in "Fleet Fighter:" "And what will you do afterwards?" I said. / Then saw his puzzled face and caught my breath. / There was no afterwards for him but death" (201). In "Alternative" Louis Challoner's graveyard humor and an illusion of choice restores some sense of human agency to death: "The question rises almost daily / In the gunpit, grimly, gaily – / Is it the shelling you prefer / Or the bombing?" The speaker argues for bombs, preferring the "sheer beauty of the speeding / planes . . . ."

I'd rather look death in the face  
 Borne by a bomber's speed and grace –  
 Swinging down its rainbow arc  
 Like a falcon to its mark –  
 Than grovel like a nerveless slave  
 With nothing but his skin to save,  
 Crouching beneath the ugly Hell  
 Made by the calculated shell. (30)

The face of death is an event, a pilot, his plane and the bomb. Looking death in the face means being present and aware until the end. In contrast, shelling dehumanizes. The shelling victim is a spiritless "slave" with nothing more than his body's life to live for. Challoner's speaker encourages living and dying with as much awareness of one's own humanity as possible.

“Doodlebugs” by Grace Griffiths depicts a widespread experience for those on the home front: the threat of death by bombing made mundane by daily repetition and the constant fear of death amplified by a mounting number of escapes.

A bomb, last night, fell close by Radlett.  
 The pulsing engine stopped right overhead.  
 Four minutes to the crash. Slowly we counted;  
 One girl cried ‘O God! Dear God!’  
 The tension grew to bursting point; the blast  
 Shattered the windows. We breathed again.  
 Always the bombs come over in early evening  
 Just before we go on shift. We talk of rush-hour traffic  
 But underneath the fear remains. Death can come  
 From so many angles. Tomorrow, next week, next month  
 It may not pass us by. (100)

The schedule of early evening bombing reinforces a sense of normality, making visits to the bomb-shelter and pre-shift chats part of the routine of daily life. Griffiths shows, however, amidst this sense of order, an unexpected death feels postponed rather than prevented. In “Survivors,” Alan Ross describes a variant of this feeling in men pulled out of the ocean after a shipwreck react to their escape.

. . . But soon they joke, easy and warm,  
 As men will who have died once  
 Yet somehow were able to find their way –  
 Muttering this was not included in their pay.  
  
 Later, sleepless at night, the brain spinning

With cracked images, they won't forget  
 The confusion and the oily dead,  
 Nor yet the casual knack of living. (205-6)

Ross speaks to the difference between how one feels and how one 'should' feel. Joy and grief combine in a self-perpetuating guilt fueled by memory. The sailors' capacity to cope, their "casual knack of living" is both vital and embarrassing. Insulating oneself from grief appears inhumane even as it enables humans' survival. In his poem about flying, "To Germany, Three Nights a Week," Redmond Macdonogh depicts the returning men's gratitude for their lives and the companionship of survivors.

. . . We bomb, come home and end  
 In the debriefing room, all smiles and mugs of tea.  
 The stories mount to epics, lies abound,  
 Are checked, debunked. We count the missing dead.  
 The eyes are young now, thankfully, we know  
 We have, each of us, two more days of life. . . . (182-3)

Breaking the line after "end," Macdonogh creates a moment to consider other outcomes and, by extension, those who meet them. Counting "the missing dead" marks their loss, yet the speaker is not mired in grief. The reward for surviving is life, which Macdonogh argues is for living, not grieving. The price of survival is loss. Ross and Macdonogh describe a version of Victor West's "*La Belle Indifference*" in which "[o]nly the Section counts." David Stafford Clark juxtaposes the competing impulses to empathy and apathy in "Casualty."

[. . .] His face is frozen:  
 Cannon shells pumped into his side  
 From neck to knee. Skin white like rigid lard,



Eyes glazed, with frosted lashes,  
 Flying suit crusted with red chalk  
 That was his blood . . .

Such is the cold

In a smashed turret open to the wind  
 Torn at that height and speed through icy darkness.

Yesterday

I heard someone complain  
 'Last night the bombers in procession  
 Kept me awake . . . ?' (*Poems* 246-7)

The coldness of the complaint recalls the gunner's frozen body: both are insensate and seemingly inhuman. Redmond Macdonogh's poem "Heil Hamburg, Forty One" describes a bombing mission "In a Bristol Blenheim, Autumn 1941" according to the poet's note. Macdonough's poem offers an alternative perspective on the serviceman's feelings about death.

[. . .] Now into the glare – ahead the searchlights probe, then group,  
 And in their mingling hold a victim, their moth,  
 The guns are on him now: we watch the killing  
 In that bright slaughterhouse where we shall be  
 Two minutes hence. I check the time and wait.  
 And there he goes! He burns, he falls, he spins,  
 And still he drops, and still we look and pray for 'chutes –  
 But none, he's gone. There will be no prisoners to feed.  
 God rest them all. And now . . . it's us in the crucible:

We start survival drill. I turn full five to starboard,  
 Two hundred up, then port for ten. Down again, five more,  
 No constant course to aid the murd'rous guns below,  
 No rest, no peace, no hiding place, naught our human skill our aid.  
 and then the last of it – and us? – the straight run in on target. . . . (*Poems* 254)

Describing the destruction of the plane preceding his own, Macdonough shows a compassion for the other crew which does not mature into grief. Acceptance of risk and a firm self-reliance shape his response to the death of that crew. The speaker leaves thoughts of others and belief in God behind upon entering the “crucible” which tests human skill. Is the poem’s tone a product of the thrill of survival? Does it indicate a potential balance between empathy and apathy? or depend upon the sincerity of “God rest them all?” Under what conditions is such a reaction sustainable? Macdonogh’s two poems show intense fear and danger separated by days of safety between missions. Others, such as the men in the siege at Anzio, experience unrelenting danger and loss.

“Infantry Coming out of the Line: Anzio” by Randall Swingler depicts men pushed beyond indifference to the point where meaning breaks down—“Brittle the tension now / Between the real and the dream”—and senses retreat—“every feature bleak, / The nerves withdrawn and hiding, / . . . They walk / like blind men.”

. . . Inside

The skull their riot begins,  
 The mob of memory straining  
 Against the cordon of pride.  
 Rest will be no rest  
 But a fear of falling, till

Sleep softly supervenes  
 And slips the knot of will,  
 Horror with laughter mingling,  
 And the frontier melt  
 Between despair and longing  
 And felt things be but things  
 Divested of emotion (159-60)

The “knot of will” (which Lindsay found “re-welded, richer”) secures the “cordon of pride,” but training cannot control the rioting mind. Conditioning breaks down; pride reverts to shock. Physical exhaustion cannot overpower emotional fatigue and in sleep boundaries dissolve. Swingler and others show servicemen and women struggling to cope and reaching the limits of their endurance. When the mind cannot explain events or regulate emotions, something breaks down: the rules, beliefs and doctrines which ordered one’s thinking or the individual’s spirit. When allegiance to ideology, outweighed by experience, becomes unsupportable, men either make new meaning for themselves or go mad. Swingler and others use the lines of their poetry to tether these men and their struggles to a world of meaning.

Some craft their own lifelines. Mary E. Harrison, a topographical model maker, struggles with this allegiance to duty. She wrote “My Hands” after seeing the post-raid photos of an area she had modeled. Harrison presses her readers with questions, challenging us to examine the justification for war and all the individual actions that contribute to “the madness we choose to call War.”

Do you know what it is like to have death in your hands  
 when you haven’t a murderer’s mind?

Do you know how it feels when you could be the cause  
of a child being blind?

How many people have died through me  
From the skill in my finger tips?

For I fashion the clay and portray the landscape  
As the fliers are briefed for their trips

.....

If there is a God up above who listens at all

Does he know why this has to be.

Did he give me my hands just to fashion the plans

That my own land may always be free? (179-80)

The poem's rhyming quatrains and strong-stress ballad measure organize Harrison's urgency as though the structure of the poem represents her sense of duty, while the erratic line lengths and unanswerable questions express her helplessness. The questions in the final stanza challenge belief in God and Country by framing the assurances of ingrained beliefs as uncertainties and showing that the answers which others attribute to God are wholly human assumptions. K.N. Batley's poem "Chindit" also uses questions to involve the reader in a moral dilemma.

Have you ever seen a column march away,  
And left you lying, too damned sick to care?  
Have you ever watched the night crawl into day  
With red-rimmed eyes that are too tired to stare?  
Have you ever bled beside a jungle trace  
In thick brown mud like coagulating stew?

Have you ever counted leeches loping back  
 Along the trail of sweat that leads to you?  
 Have you ever heard your pals shout 'cheerio',  
 Knowing that this is no 'Auf wiedersehn'?  
 Have you ever prayed, alone, for help although  
 The stench of mules has vanished in the rain?  
 Have you ever thought 'what a bloody way to die!',  
 Left in the tree-roots, rotting, there to stay?  
 God, I remember last poignant 'Goodbye';  
 I was one of the men that marched away. (244)

By placing himself for most of the poem in the place of the abandoned man questioning the reader before assuming his place as “one of the men that marched away,” Batley calls for empathy both for both soldiers. The shifting subject positions create a moment of simultaneous self-reflection and empathy. Batley’s poem works like a pair of parallel mirrors between which he places the speaker, creating an endless line of reflections in both directions—toward the reader and the abandoned dying soldier. Batley’s form—ballad-rhymed quatrains bound together into a single stanza—reinforces the poem’s reflection and connection. “Chindit” shows how subjectivity is problematized by military service: for example, the opening image of a “column” marching away marks the group as acting as soldiers rather than individuals. The individuation occurs in Batley’s recollection of his “last poignant ‘Goodbye.’”

Les Cleveland also chooses the lyric to explore a complicated interpersonal experience. In “Cassino” Cleveland describes soldiers as members of one body a “newborn

organism scuttling, / limbs entangled, heads devoutly flattened to earth, / huddling together under the barrage.”

Each man clasps his blood brother  
 on that ancient rock of community  
 till every autonomous fibre is willed  
 into one prostrate, protesting entity  
 as the ponderous imperatives of shellfire

Signal that the position has been outflanked.

We, the living, hitch at weapons and scabble  
 under cover of counter-battery fire

.....

The dying wane with the expected stoic calm

Toward their silent territory;

They are already cast out.

**Stay with the mob, you can't go wrong.**

Now that soldier in the rubble

flinches, and instantly I feel

the thump of shrapnel pillaging

my temporary brother's flesh:

he cries out for help, and grips me

in a child-like hold;

.....

*Kaput*, the stretcher bearers say,

Don't waste time on him:

.....

we run,

while I formulate the usual lies,

the righteous words to ease guilt

and sanctify the ritual death

of the man whose abandoned body

has been an expendable shield,

a viable husk in the ruthless cycle

of the omnipotent organism.

We run,

And awkwardly, gun at the ready,

I try to wipe from my shivery hands

The salutary, scab-like-clots

Of the necessary victim's blood. (125-6)

Cleveland describes the fusion of the organism and its continual reformulation. The mob requires closeness and callousness. The speaker feels the bullets entering his neighbor's body, imagines the "stoic calm" of the dying, and employs "the usual lies" and "righteous words" and to transform his "temporary brother" into a "necessary" victim. Cleveland's demonstrates the power of beliefs—about unity, death and survival—to reframe experience in a poem that ruthlessly exposes the limitations, and perhaps the falseness, of those beliefs.

### **Bodies and Burials**

Beliefs divide the warring sides, but the death that results from that conflict connects them. Servicemen and women's experience of death, particularly their exposure to a

tremendous number of dead bodies, inspires poems which speak to the way in which death exposes commonalities that bridge the opposing sides in the conflict. These poems further test the beliefs underpinning the war. “Not British and not German now he’s dead,” writes D.M. Davin in “Grave Near Sitre” (32). The speaker in C.P.S. Denholm-Young’s poem for a “Dead German Youth” dreams of peace, in which nationality does not divide people.

. . . I feel no anger towards you, German boy,  
 Whom war has driven down the path of pain.  
 Would God we could have met in peace  
 And laughed and talked with tankards full of beer,  
 For I would rather hear your youthful mirth  
 At stories which I often loved to tell  
 Than stand here looking down at you  
 So terrible, so quiet and so still. (31-2)

With his poem and his offer of stories, Denholm-Young imagines connecting with the boy through language, suggesting that in life they should share conversation rather than conflict. Because his message reaches readers rather than the German, the poem works against the reader’s fear or hatred of the enemy with the authority of one who has met the enemy. “In a Ruined Country” Jim Hovell describes the defeated enemy as a mix of “crazed fanatics, sober patriots / and reluctant conscripts” (226). The “picture of his girl / who has written: *Steffi, Vergissmeinnicht* / in a copy book Gothic script” personalizes the subject of Keith Douglas’s “Elegy for an 88 Gunner.”

. . . For here the lover and the killer are mingled  
 Who had one body and one heart;  
 And Death, who had the soldier singled



Has done the lover mortal hurt. (36)

In Kenneth Slessor's poem "Beach Burial" death overcomes the divisions by which men are known in life. Slessor imagines a community of

. . . Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,  
 Whether as enemies they fought,  
 Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,  
 Enlisted on the other front. (80)

In "Poem" Molly Repard expresses the loss and grief shared by loved ones those on both sides of the conflict.

Beside his aircraft,  
 Twisted lies my love,  
 Charred are the limbs that once lay close to me  
  
 No doubt some German woman weeps  
 For him that you shot down.  
  
 For all of Woman  
 War is agony. (187)

Repard personalizes her loss for the reader with the image of a familiar body burnt and broken yet her conclusion forestalls mounting anger and the assignment of blame by claiming the universality of the her suffering. John Waller poem "On the Meaning of War" marvels over "How frequently the last time / Comes and we do not know / That this is indeed the last time . . ." (*Poems* 47). Taken together, these poems demonstrate poets' belief that those on both sides of the war share responses to death and loss. The mutual infliction of grief and pain is one way in which war seems 'inhuman': how can we do this to each other

knowing how it feels? Yet both the capacity for these feelings and the violence which precipitates them are uniquely human.

Poems about death, the treatment of the dead, burial practices and memorialization, explore this boundary and the rules for human behavior during an ‘inhuman’ war.<sup>2</sup> Some poets claim that the dead have escaped the irrational and contradictory circumstance of war. In “The Fallen” G.S. Fraser writes,

None but fools offer their pity  
To the fallen who at last,  
Driven from their tyrant city,  
Into freedom have been cast. (40-1)

Fraser’s escape from tyranny is another man’s perpetual service. Such is William Clarke’s interpretation in “Military Cemetery.”

Such discipline on parade  
Would put to shame a Guards’ Brigade;  
So long, so rigid, to remain like this  
And still no order to dismiss. (*Poems* 29)

Frank Thompson’s “Requiescat in Pace” deflates soothing claims about both rest and peace.

. . . Shed no tears for him, for

---

<sup>2</sup> In a longer study, I would include poems which describe encounters with the living enemy, particularly in prisoner of war camps. In poems written by prisoners one sees both the enemy and the poet’s perception of being the enemy. These texts are particularly rich. Readers interested in this subject might begin with these poems: Brian Gallie, “To a German Airman who flew slowly through the British Fleet” (*Poems* 81-82); William E. Morris, “The Captured” (*Poems* 110-111); Robert Garioch, “Kriegy Ballad” (*Poems* 193-195); N. Robinson, “P.O.W. Camp, Italy” (*Poems* 224); Alan White, “German P.O.W. Camp” (*Poems* 235); E.G.C. Beckwith, “Innocence (28 July 1943)” (*Poems* 289-90); J.F. McGregor, “Rice” (*Poems* 330-1); Hamish Henderson, “Seven Good Germans” (*Poems* 88-90); John Jarmain, “Prisoners of War” (145-6); Uys Krige, “Midwinter” and “The White Road” (146-9); Peter Roberts, “RAF Raid Heard From a Prison Camp Near Berlin” (194-5); Melville Hardiment, “Poor Dead Panzer” (220-1); W.G. Holloway, “German Prisoners of War – Antwerp, 1944” (225).

he has a resting-place of panoramic view  
 carefully sited  
 tactically sound  
 with excellent field of fire.

.....

He shall be exposed  
 to all the changing seasons  
 and the gentle soothing rain  
 and he shall lie at peace – forever.

Or at least, until  
 the War Graves people  
 bag him up  
 move him on. (161)

Thompson's tongue-in-cheek explanation of the military advantages to this resting place invites scrutiny of other consolations offered to the grieving, and his use of free verse enables a casual tone, both of which undercut the stability of "forever." The farcical quality of John Brookes's poem "Burial Party" emphasizes not only one range of human feeling, but the capacity to entertain competing emotions even extreme circumstances. Brookes's casual tone expresses fondness for the dead man in question, and the humor of the scene is not mean-spirited; it is unsentimental.

The stairs were shot away so someone fetched  
 a ladder, up we went and found him stretched  
 out on the balcony. His eyes were closed,  
 his face serene. You might have diagnosed

it simply as malingering except  
 that when we turned him over . . . thus we kept  
 him face up which enabled him to show  
 his medal ribbons to advantage. [ . . . ]

The men wrapped the body in an Italian flag and tied his feet with a rope.

He offered no objections so we laid  
 him uncomplaining on the balustrade,  
 made a sign of the Cross to please the Pope,  
 prepared to take the strain upon the rope –  
 and pushed him off. The trouble was a ledge  
 projected from the cornice and its edge  
 lent him a foothold. Hanging by the toes  
 head down he must have looked like one of those  
 high-wire trapezists when we hold our breath  
 below while watching them perform their death  
 defying feats; indeed a passing troop  
 of soldiery had gathered in a group  
 to see the fun. . . . (119-20)

The watching soldiers “accustomed to a much / more solemn undertaking” cheer the dead man’s “danse macabre,” and the “joke” ends with the body landing headfirst on the pavement with the sound of “a sack / of water melons.” Brookes observes “War kills of course, but furthermore it warps / men’s sense of humour – laughing at a corpse!” The story invites admonition, (“Someone said / ‘That’s cheating mate, he was already dead!’”) yet the soldiers’ response and Brookes’s light-hearted tone belie a vital capacity for adaptation to

new situations that test human responses. These soldiers' reactions are not guided by rules about death and the treatment of the dead, but by spontaneous feelings. The 'warping' Brookes describes could also be explained as a privileging of such feelings over conventions of behavior.

This exchange of expediency for engrained codes of behavior takes a toll. Memories of battlefield burials haunts Martin Southall who admits “. . . I hate / [t]he sound a branch makes / [w]hen I step on it” and “the snapping of a stick of celery” because these sounds call to mind the breaking of “stiffened arms / wildly semaphoring / for help that would never come.” Southall describes how they did it—one man standing on the chest of the dead while another moved the limbs like “an old-time railwayman / wrenching the huge levers / in a manually-operated / signal-box”— and why: “not from respect / but simply to lessen / the burden of digging” (“Memories” 236-7). Others respond to graves and memorialization with raw anger. In his poem “At a War Grave,” written at El Alamein on October 30, 1942, John Jarman rejects the traditional interpretation of the grave, insisting instead upon acknowledgement of what has been lost.

No grave is rich, the dust that herein lies  
 Beneath this white cross mixing with the sand  
 Was vital once, with skill of eye and hand  
 And speed of brain. These will not re-arise  
 These riches, nor will they be replaced;  
 They are lost and nothing now, and here is left  
 Only a worthless corpse of sense bereft,  
 Symbol of death, and sacrifice and waste. (48-9)

The consolation of the grave and the promise or resurrection implicit in its white cross are flatly denied in favor of a brutal truth of “death, and sacrifice and waste.” The wooden cross may soothe mourners, but infuriates Jarmain who implies that Christian beliefs about life after death and redemption ease the consciences of some and enable the perpetuation of war. The symbolism of cross as grave-marker is also questioned in Harold V.S. Page’s poem “Epitaph.”

. . . The army took him clad and trained,  
Produced a soldier from the dross,  
Sent him to battle, then ordained,  
His one award, a wooden cross.

Comfort ye, mourners at a humble grave,  
Who weeps for Hector now? The great  
Share their conclusion with the slave,  
And just as soon disintegrate. (*Poems* 219)

Page challenges the army’s use of religious identification with the allusion to pre-Christian Hector, implying that the consolations of religion—the cross as award—are empty, false, a shield for guilt and blame. The failings of memorialization are not limited to religious symbols. Written “near La Spezia in April 1945,” “War Dead” by Gavin Ewart describes the impact on the living of seeing bodies “like used equipment thrown aside.”

. . . Once war memorials, pitiful attempt  
In some vague way regretfully to atone  
For those lost futures that the dead had dreamt,  
Covered the land with their lamenting stone –  
But in our hearts we bear a heavier load:

The bodies of the dead beside the road. (134)

The sanitization of death by burial reduces the number of people bearing the ‘heavier load’ of eyewitnesses while war cemeteries represent the number of dead with symbols. Ewart’s poem brings our attention to the mediated presentation of the scale of death which war produces. W. J. Harvey’s poem “Maps” echoes this concern. He fears that abstraction may erase meaning.

Maps are terrible, dangerous things;  
 for one man’s death beneath the gathering waves  
 and one girl’s agony of heart  
 are but two meeting lines, abstract,  
 a point in space upon a barren chart,  
 a common symbol for a thousand graves. . . . (*Poems* 160)

Here the commonality of death and grief threaten to diminish individual losses. The cross on the map marking the sunken ship or the downed plane serves as the gravestone for an unrecovered body. The value of the grave as a site of mourning becomes clearer in this context. Acknowledging death and having a tangible sign or marker of loss is not always possible.

The absence of graves is particularly relevant for air- and seamen. Peter Roberts explains the situation in a note accompanying his poem about a funeral, “Frayed End:” “[T]he curious thing was that although losses in Bomber Command were so high, one’s friends normally just disappeared. It was strange on this occasion to be standing at a grave” (190). John Millett speaks to the anxiety about bodies in “Dead Air Gunner – 1943:” “I don’t know where they put him / I don’t know where they put any of them” (184). Millett’s confusion points to both the sudden absence of friends and the frequency with which they

are killed. Airmen prepare for this possibility, as Donald E. Vincent writes in “Empty Tent.” Within the eponymous tent there lies,

. . . amidst the photographs

A letter ready, to be sent

Should this just be

An empty tent. (190)

Those left behind must tidy up, as Anthony Richardson describes in “Kit and Effects.”

‘Reported missing . . .’ So they closed his room,

Packed up his kit, according to ‘King’s Regs.’

.....

The officer in charge

Made out the inventories, point by point –

.....

Then there were letters, beginning ‘Darling Dick’,

Photos and snapshots all of the same girl,

With a pale eager face and fluffy hair. . . .

This business put your brain-box in a whirl,

Sorting each item out. [. . .] (187-9)

Facing the loss of a fellow airman means facing the possibility of one’s own death, so dealing with loved ones, like Darling Dick’s fluffy-haired girl is particularly difficult, the myth and romance of flight—the girl requests her sweetheart’s wings—competes with the reality of danger, fear and disappearance, as Redmond Macdonogh writes in “Epitaph for Johnny Brown.”

[. . .] God rest you, Johnny, a shell removed your crew,



From starboard, three souls by blast heavensent.  
 Then Station Commander, warrior manqué, said  
 ‘Redmond, tonight, tell his widow . . . . . how it went’.  
 I braced my coward’s shaken self, frightened,  
 Told him ‘You tell her, sir, it’s not my job’.  
 That evening in the inn, and there she was,  
 Small, beautiful and brave, anxious,  
 I heard ‘My husband’s late, Redmond,’  
 And farked it, muttering,  
 ‘He was with us when we left’.  
 We had a drink, we kissed, then I walked back to camp.  
 I wouldn’t tell her, Johnny; let them do it.  
 They don’t fly. (*Poems* 256)

The attrition is painful for all those left behind, and the fear and waiting built into each mission takes a toll on ground crews. In “To Germany, Three Nights a Week,” Redmond Macdonogh explains.

. . . At home, the ground crews waiting,  
 Thaw cold, skilled hands on tiny spirit stoves.  
 No glamour here, those fitters, riggers, all  
 Who keep the planes aloft, who light with joy  
 When their own plane, own crew are back with them,  
 Anxious, stricken, when theirs are overdue. . . . (182-3)

Herbert Corby makes a similar observation in “Missing.”

They told me, when they cut the ready wheat

the hares are suddenly homeless and afraid,  
 and aimlessly circle the stubble with scared feet  
 finding no homes in sunlight or in shade.

.....  
 He walks distraught, circling the landing ground,  
 waiting the last one in that won't come back,  
 and like those hares he wanders round and round  
 bereft and desolate on the close-cropped track. (177)

The sense of displacement that Corby attributes to the waiting man speaks to the community of airmen as a stabilizing structure in a chaotic situation. In “. . . Ad Astra” Molly Corbally imagines an ending to the story of a disappearance, writing in the voice of one such pilot: “Ah! foolish friends, do not grieve for me, / For I heard God call in the silent night, / And flew on, into Eternity” (175-76). In “Reported Missing” John Bayliss envisions the surviving crew of damaged plane awaiting death: They “knew it was finished, looking at the sea . . . knew that their shadow would meet them by the way, / close and catch at them, drown their single hope / . . . So the two men waited, saw the third dead face, / and wondered when the wind would let them die” (*Poems* 245). John Moore describes an attempt to make sense of a pilot’s disappearance in “Carrier off Norway:” “We counted seven, and tried to make them eight, / But still there were seven, and when they had landed on / There were still seven, and we said ‘Billy’s late.’” The news travels quickly around the ship, and men are already praising Bill in the past tense, while on the deck, the speaker and others vigilantly listen for Bill’s returning plane. In a ship-board version of “postman,” the news comes round to them again.

We heard that a signal from Billy had been received:

‘Delayed by three Heinkels.’ Nothing more.

. . . We fell silent

Thinking the same thought, although nobody spoke

As we huddled together in the lee of the island:

‘Billy always had a smile and a joke.’ (*Poems* 274)

Explanations like this one may be a comfort, and the sense of community and closeness that the group’s silence represents offers some consolation. These poems about the missing show the ways in which the basic need for secure relationships is undercut daily by the very real danger of abandonment or death. To the extent that people understand themselves and others in terms of their stable relationships, war threatens the connections that underpin society and the foundation upon which beliefs and structures are founded. Poems that ‘recover’ the missing by imagining the last, unknowable moments of their lives approximate the graves of the dead by creating a space in which to remember and mourn them.

### **Masking Experience: Slogans and History**

The rhetoric of glory and honor that roused early recruits to the First World War are widely discounted by the start of the Second. Bernard Gutteridge describes this shift in his poem “In September 1939.”

The last war was my favourite picture story.

*Illustrated London News* bound in the study;

The German bayonet we believed still bloody

But was just rusty. . . . (*Poems* 24)

Gutteridge’s characterization of the last war as a children’s story shows the maturation not only of the speaker but also society in response to that war. The fable and the relic of battle

which were so infused with meaning and belief are revealed as illusions. The poets of this war take issue with certainty itself and the systems of belief which depend upon it. As Sidney Keyes shows in “Advice for a Journey” the presumptive starting point for most entering the war was uncertainty.

. . . O my friends, we are too young  
 To be explorers, have no skill nor compass,  
 Nor even that iron certitude which swung  
 Our fathers at their self-fulfilling North

So take no rations, remember not your homes—  
 Only the blind and stubborn hope to track  
 This wilderness. The thoughtful leave their bones  
 In windy foodless meadows of despair.

Never look back, nor too far forward search  
 . . . . .  
 You’ll find, maybe, the dream under the hill —  
 But never Canaan, nor any golden mountain. (46-7)

The sojourning attitude Keyes describes seems rudderless, but his advice precludes disillusionment by affirming the uncertainty of a soldier’s fate. In “Foreign Commission,” Hampson shows empathy and admiration for the men and women called to service while making clear that respect is no compensation for their sacrifice.

. . . There are no killers here, whom crusted pride  
 Armours against their own humanity,  
 Or bigot’s eyes can blind to bloody hands;

The quiet counties are their pedigree  
 Whose honest living asks no easy answer  
 Nor moves the goal to meet their straying ways.  
 Look for no tragic actors great in stature,  
 Whose blazing hearts might kindle half a world,  
 These lives obscure, only their sorrows vast  
 Winds of humanity that sigh by night  
 Through all the peopled earth: the men who bear  
 A fate acceptance cannot make less real. (*Poems* 270-271)

Hampson rejects the meaning-maker's attempt to integrate war experience into established systems of belief. By showing how everyday people really experience war, he takes a stand against the myths of greatness and valiant sacrifice used to glorify or justify it. Eliminating expectations and ignoring spirit-boosting propaganda allows one to approach the war and one's service in it honestly. In "Searchlights over Berlin" Thomas Rahilly Hodgson shows the uselessness of slogans when working, despite fear and the risk of death, to do a job which inflicts fear and death on others.

Their silver scalpels probe the wound of night  
 seeking our doom, a death  
 to death. And now  
 no highflung phrase, no braggart  
 gesture of the hand or jaw  
 can still the double fear. Who fly  
 ten thousand feet above in the shrill dark  
 are linked with those who cower

under earth to hear, vague as sea  
 upon an inland wind, the murmur  
 which is, for some  
 eternity, for some  
 an ending.

And he is rising mad who searches here  
 for meaning. (*Poems* 252)

Privileging the link between the bomber and the bombed over explanations that would value his work, Hodgson insists on honest emotion and acknowledgment of a truth shared by people on both sides of the conflict: “our doom” means “a death / to death” for them. Facing this realization, many find that the ideas which may have motivated them to fight are no match for their emotional responses to war.

Many draw upon past enemies and historical events to shape feelings about the current conflict. Calling the German army “The Hun,” for example, evokes past threats. History informs interpretation of contemporary battles, especially in the Northern Mediterranean where the ancient world feels particularly present. In “Thermopylae 1941,” John Brookes plays with the relation between past and present.

. . . the significance  
 of our deployment on the forward slopes  
 of this position was not lost on us.  
 No purpose served consulting horoscopes  
 at Delphi; students of Herodotus  
 would know withdrawal to Thermopylae  
 and putting up barbed wire could only mean

fighting a rearguard action Q.E.D,  
 as Euclid would have put it. We had been  
 deposited into the warlike lap  
 of ancient deities. . . . (120)

On the site of an ancient battle, Brookes's section waits for orders, and the past blends with the present. Although he wishes to change the historic outcome, the speaker extends the parallel of his geographic setting to his current leader and fellow soldiers.

[. . .] It was the Colonel broke  
 the news, like some deus ex machina  
 descending from above. THEY SHALL NOT PASS . . .  
 THE LAST LINE OF DEFENCE etcetera,  
 all sentiments of which Leonidas  
 would have approved, [. . .]  
 .....

[. . .] everybody cheered  
 instead of putting flowers in their hair,  
 but muted just in case the Germans were  
 in earshot and from feeling (for myself  
 at any rate) that we should much prefer  
 that history did not repeat itself. [. . .] (122)

Brookes's inclusion of the contemporary uses of the ancient language shows how the past echoes in the present and a fear of repeated history competes with a hope for a different outcome. Brookes writes about a repeated event, more than a return to a place. Other poems specifically address the effect of the current war on the history of particular places.

Battles, bombing and other forms of destruction threaten to unmake a place's history. Monte Cassino and the protracted battle waged upon "That ancient rock of community" appears in many poems (125). A well known monastery with a long history, Cassino attracts many poets interested in the continuity of history and the impact of war on the story of a place. In "Monastery Hill (Cassino)" Alan White describes the city itself as dead: "Below there sprawls Cassino, / hiding its rubble carcass / underneath a winding sheet of smoke." White questions the monastery's future and the lasting effects of the battle.

We wonder too if monks will ever  
 resurrect the spirit of the monastery,  
 or if it will be forbidden them,  
 forever branded as an evil monument,  
 a bastion, fêted by historians,  
 and once a valuable accomplice  
 in the art of war (162-3)

White depicts a struggle good and evil, between Cassino's history of monastic spirit and its moment as the site of battle. White suggests that historical interpretation can act as warfare, prompting the question: If one allows a battle to redefine a place, to supplant the spirit of serenity and brotherhood which it previously represented, is one also remaking the identities of those who fought in the battle? If the place is tainted because of what they did, are they also "branded" and barred from "resurrect[ing] the spirit of the monastery?" White and others depict a vexed relationship with history, particularly with respect to battlegrounds. Douglas Street's poem "Cassino Revisited" envisions a story of battle in an obliterated place, and suggests that without a place, past events may become myth.

This place did catch a vast pox from off the Moon;



Crater and wrinkle all are here,  
 And we are travellers from another Time;  
 .....  
 Yet tribes, I know, lived here, those loved and clumsy tribes  
 That men call regiments . . .  
 .....  
 And all read letters smelling of the mules,  
 And talked of two myth-planets, Rome and Home;  
 For battle cries they used shy word – ‘Perhaps’ or ‘Fairly soon’. (157-8)

Street describes men separated from home and dying in a place where something was. How does the story he tells of “loved and clumsy tribes” benefit from the distance he creates in space and time for their story? “Cassino Revisited” points to the question at the heart of many poems: how are battlegrounds and those who died upon them remembered by survivors and how are the events presented to those where were not there? Too often, constructors of historical narratives separate reason and emotion in order to explain complicated events clearly; in such narratives, facts supersede feelings. Decisions and actions are easier to understand (and misunderstand), stripped of the human feelings and experience that informed the events. Leslie Spooner in “Burma: Reflections” explains how this transformation reduces many peoples’ experiences to a single event.

. . . what to you was a lifetime  
 Has shrunk as the years have rolled on  
 To one or two words in the history  
 Of how the Far East was won. . . . (*Poems* 346)

The condensation of experience, particularly when it can be expressed without the voices of those who were there, creates new narratives which can contribute to and reinforce the beliefs that the omitted experience would challenge. In “Christmas in Italy, 1944” Erik de Mauny anticipates the narrative that might be made from his experience that night, predicting the account of the battle that “History will tell” and the transmutations that the truth will undergo.

. . . No word of mine  
 Can change the mystery. So many have seen  
 The teacher dumbfounded, the lesson gone awry.  
 In dogmas is danger: that I know, having been  
 Last night in the garden, under the darkened trees  
 When the bombs came; with the wounded child in my arms. (128)

The stripping away of the emotions which accompanied the actions enables the repetition of history, ‘dooming’ new generations to repeat, not only the actions of which histories tell but crucially the experiences they do not. Norman Hampson’s poem “Assault Convoy” reveals the problem.

Only at intervals the truth breaks on us  
 Like catspaws, ruffling these quiet waters.  
 Our future is unreal, a thing to read of  
 Later; a chapter in a history book.  
 . . . . .  
 We are dead numbed, atrophied, sunk in the swamps of war  
 Each of those thousands is a life entire.  
 No skilful simile can hide their sheer humanity. . . . (204-5)

Hampson shows that the men's real feelings do not make it into a history book. They and we will be told what happened but not how it felt. Despite his feeling that war saps his capacity to articulate his experience, Hampson tells what he feels and cannot feel. He writes his own history. The poems offer a competing account of history, more complete by virtue of its subjectivity, individuality and immediacy.

### **Re-thinking and New Thinking**

The Salamander Oasis Trust poems show old myths about war well debunked and question the beliefs that underpin British and Commonwealth societies. Individuals' war experiences test religious convictions and expose the structures of daily life—family, work and community—to scrutiny. The Salamander Oasis Trust poets challenge beliefs and their use in justifying war and wartime behavior. G. Stewart-Peter's take on Rousseau—"Man is born free / But everywhere he is in queues"—pokes fun at the ubiquitous disconnection between lofty principles and the mundane actions which undercut them (*Poems* 347). The minor indignity of queues relative to the gross injustice of slavery makes a good joke, but under the pressure of a wartime mentality, the small scale complacency that enables patient queuing may lead to behavior inconsistent with beliefs. The liberty of some is preserved at the expense of others. Some poets show that the same core beliefs which inspire our highest values can be leveraged to promote actions antithetical to those values.

The Salamander Oasis poets have seen where certainty, enabled by complacency, can lead. Hearing that "[s]ome Nazi or other has said that the Fuehrer had restored to German manhood the 'right and joy of dying in battle,'" Sorley McLean speculates about the path that led a soldier to his death in "Death Valley."

. . . Was the boy of the band  
who abused the Jews

and Communists, or of the greater  
band of those

led, from the beginning of generations,  
unwillingly to the trial  
and mad delirium of every war  
for the sake of rulers?

Complicity of the masses with the smaller “band” of wrong-doers leads to conflict, and the leadership that sparks conflict is consequently suspect—not only in the country that started the war, but in all those fighting it, as people see that hateful behavior precipitates harmful behavior; good people do bad things in pursuit of their own security.

Whatever his desire or mishap,  
his innocence or malignity,  
he showed no pleasure in his death  
below the Ruweisat Ridge. (61)

McLean shows that regardless of the boy’s motives his end is the same and implies that the same holds true for ‘our boys.’ In the elegy “End of a Campaign” Hamish Henderson writes about the common humanity of the dead and, by extension of the living.

There were our own, there were the others.  
Their deaths are like their lives. human and animal.  
There were no gods and precious few heroes.  
What they regretted when they died had nothing to do with race and leader,  
realm indivisible,  
laboured Augustan speeches or vague imperial heritage. (42)

Instead, their “longing turned” to the intimacy of home, family and friends, connections and mementos: objects of longing common to and valued by both sides. Henderson and others show that ideology dies with the mind, while the body, in death, represents our common humanity.

Many question the use and value of religious beliefs in wartime. Reverend K.W. Parkhurst wrote “The Padre” while serving with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in 1940. Parkhurst’s speaker is not a clergyman but a soldier who scoffs that the Padre’s “got a cushy job” “wears his collar back to front, and looks professional / But don’t you let him take you in, he doesn’t work at all.” The poem, in rhyming quatrains, responds to the query: “is there anybody who knows what a Padre’s for?” Unlike commanding, medical and mechanical transport officers and quartermasters who tell soldiers how to fight, patch them up, get them moving and keep them supplied, “only the Almighty knows just what the Padre’s for.” Parkhurst puts some of the purposes of the clergy into the mouth of his speaker and builds on the intimacy of the speaker’s thoughts by addressing them to one man, Bill.

I get my problems and my thoughts, I get temptations, too,  
 And secret fears I’d like to share with someone, Bill, don’t you?  
 We’re not the only ones like that, there must be many more,  
 And so I’ve sometimes wondered if that’s what Padre’s for.

Beyond the sharing of private thoughts, the speaker imagines the Padre being present for the dead: “if I get knocked out tonight and laid I don’t know where, / Although I’m not a churchy chap I wouldn’t mind a prayer;” for a bereaved mother: “If Padre wrote it couldn’t bring him back, for nothing could, / And yet she’d be relieved to know that someone understood . . . .” Initially, the quatrain’s rhyming couplets seem to mark the divide between the would-be shepherd and his sheep. The *aabb* pattern underscores the speaker’s ‘us and

him' attitude toward the Padre. As the speaker imagines the ways in which the chaplain could help him, his fellow soldiers and their families, the same *aabb* rhyme scheme seems to partner the chaplain and the soldier rather than divide them. In the final stanza the speaker concludes that the Padre's mere presence has an effect on those serving.

I've asked you what a Padre's for: well now, I wonder, Bill  
 If he's been sent by Jesus Christ to help us up the hill?  
 He's not a saint and yet it's grand, tho' some might think it odd,  
 That we should have a fellow here to make us think of God. (9-10)

The speaker answers the poem's originating question "is there anybody who knows what a Padre's for?" himself, despite ostensibly having asked it of Bill. In this way Parkhurst makes a claim for the influence people have on one another, even in the absence of direct interaction. Bill does not respond to the speaker; the speaker does not address the Padre. Nevertheless, the question to Bill elicits the speaker's answer to his own question as the mere presence of the Padre brings thoughts of God to the minds of those serving in the Army.

Where God and God's representatives are perceived as having different goals, individuals take action. In his poem "Spring," subtitled "Demolition: Liri Valley," Les Cleveland recounts taking an axe to "six-foot lengths of oak" in a church to make firewood.

Stop! yelled the priest,  
 barbarians make war on churches!  
 'The flock are cold  
 and your bloody old church is kaput'.  
 Antichrist! moaned the priest.  
 'Scapare via', I said,

‘no priest tells us what to do’.  
 Bandits! he shouted  
 and went to look for the CO.  
 But first he cursed us  
 in medieval Latin doggerel  
 that crackled like dry bones  
 around our arrogant ears.

Cleveland’s assessment of the church as *kaput*—broken or dead—serves as an indictment of the priest’s preference for the protection of his parish over the preservation of his parishioners.

Before we left for the line  
 we chopped up every stick  
 in the mortuary, coffins first  
 then beams from the roof.  
 Pregnant Maria and family  
 had warm fires and food  
 while we caroused in their kitchen.  
 It was a good spring. (126-7)

The warmth of Maria’s kitchen, food and family camaraderie supply greater comfort than the church. The irony of the priest calling Cleveland’s act unchristian and Cleveland’s defiance of the priest’s authority highlight the tension between systems of beliefs and the actions that result from them. Religious practices inform decisions even in wartime, but the meaning of those practices seems to shift from cerebral belief to feeling and personal experience. For example, the Commander in Chief’s Order of the Day—“This is the Lord’s doing; it is

marvelous in our eyes” prompts John Buxton Hilton to write “Christian Soldiers” in Antwerp, in September 1944. Hilton uses biblical language to expose the incompatibility of the concepts of infallibility and war, religion and battle, Christianity and soldiery.

The Lord is with us, saith the General,  
Behold His doing; war is nearly done.  
He will bring the Hun to book,  
With one last Divine Left Hook;  
Fill your soul with Christian courage.

Clean your gun.

Was it the Lord, then, made things happen thus?

.....

*I praised the Lord the day He shelled those trees:*

*A mortar there was making life too hot.*

*The Lord, He missed, and maimed a dozen kids.*

*Almighty God, Thou art a rotten shot:*

*Wrong bearing, Lord.*

We often hear Thee, Lord, about Thy work,

.....

We bow before Thy Shrapnel Incarnation,

.....

*And yet, oh Lord, perhaps our General has his lesson wrong,*

*Unless Thy tone has changed since we last met.*

*I hate to think that Thou wouldst thus unsay*



*Thy sweet unmartial thoughts*

*On Olivet. (More Poems 296-7)*

Hilton conveys a sense of being constrained to act militarily without respect to his beliefs and experiences the religious justification as a perversion. The growing sense of wrongness is not limited to offensive applications of scripture.

The uncomfortable conjunction of youth with infirmity and death problematizes the wartime practice of endangering the young and healthy on behalf of everyone else. In “Walking Wounded” Vernon Scannell characterizes the harmed yet whole as “a humble brotherhood:” “Not one was suffering from a lethal hurt, / They were not magnified by noble wounds, / There was no splendour in that company” (235). On the battlefield, the dead are often figured as children, frequently with blond hair and curls. Of “The Soldiers At Lauro” Spike Milligan writes “Young are our dead” they are “like babies,” “fresh-cut reeds,” and “winter seeds” deaf to the call of spring. Milligan suggests that their perpetual youth defies time:

They sleep on  
in silent dust  
As crosses rot  
And helmets rust. (151)

The wind “tousles bobbing curls that frame the child, / Who lolls at ease among the chattels piled” with “crumpled dolls” (“Refugees” 16-17). The eponymous “Dead German Youth”

. . . looked so tired, as if his life had been  
Too full of pain and anguish to endure,  
And like a weary child who tires of play  
He lay there, waiting for decay. . . . (31)

In “I think I am Becoming a God” Keith Douglas writes,

. . . Pete was unfortunately killed by an 88:

it took his leg away – he died in the ambulance.

When I saw him crawling, he said:

‘It’s most unfair – they’ve shot my foot off.’ . . .

Douglas compares “this gentle / Obsolescent breed of heroes” to unicorns, challenging the “two legends / in which their stupidity and chivalry / are celebrated. Each, fool and hero, will be immortal” (35). Soldiers confront the bodies of the dead, but the public faces the wounded. The living bodies of wounded and maimed servicemen challenge the public with physical representations of sanctioned violence.

A returning force of maimed young men prompts an examination of attitudes towards the body and the distinction between life and quality of life and the relationship between the body and the mind. Some feel lucky to survive, as in John Sibly’s poem “I shall come limping home to you.”

. . . tutelary voices call

Lucky to have a leg at all!

Luck – you’re lucky to be alive,

A subaltern’s lucky to survive,

To be alive and draw his pay,

And eat his rations every day,

To be safe and moderately sound

When most of his pals are underground.

And so if I come home to you

Short of an inch of leg or two,

I won't complain and you won't complain

If I come home limping again. (*Poems* 339)

A missing bit of leg is not much to complain about in comparison to severe wounds. In J.G. Meddemmen's poem about the Long Range Desert Group, "L.R.D.G." the speaker explains, "You can't predict in war; / It's a matter of luck. . . ." He recalls the slow deaths of Darnley and Bowers and laughing "[w]hen blokes have chucked it in and gone daft," but the case that troubles him is Fat Riley who was found "blind, with both hands gone."

When we got him back inside the lines

He'd only say,

Over and over, 'the mines, the mines, the mines'.

It's the lucky ones get dead:

He's still alive. I wonder if his wife understands

How you can't even shoot yourself without your hands. (*Poems* 108-9)

Meddemmen conveys the sense of not being able to heal. The impossibility of recovery that he extends to the Rileys' marriage applies equally to the countries whose citizens face difficult questions. What will his wife, town, or country, do to restore him, to make a place for the severely wounded that acknowledges their sacrifice without recourse to trite sentiment or resentment for the one who bears the physical markers of our violent past?

Poems about hospitals and nurses expose beliefs about the wounded and dying. In "Hospital" Frank Thompson depicts a "[r]epair-shop for men" where the patients "[s]wop thumb-smudged photographs" of their girls and "the boy who lost a hand hangs on the wireless, / Shuffles his feet to music, gropes for rhythm." Thompson expresses a sense of hope about the resiliency of the young in the final stanza.

Two interruptions – when a sister passes,

Her smooth gray calves like magnets quickly covered  
 With hungry glances and when laughter breaks  
 Light and uncertain from that room,  
 Where the officer with a bullet in his skull  
 Has lain for months, and is said to have recovered. (81)

Thompson's description of the patients' reaction to the nurse underscores the patients' vitality, and her presence promises nurturing back to health for mind as well as the body, as evident in the recovering officer's laugh. A nurse's care has a different value than attention from loved ones. She is a stranger, a representative of strangers and a surrogate for acceptance by strangers. Patricia Ledward describes this difference in "Air-Raid Casualties: Ashridge Hospital."

On Sundays friends arrive with kindly words  
 To peer at those whom war has crushed;  
 They bring the roar of health into these hushed  
 And solemn wards –  
 .....  
 Nurses with level eyes, and chaste  
 In long starched dresses, move  
 Amongst the maimed, giving love  
 To strengthen bodies gone to waste. (104-5)

The nurses' uniform, attitude and professional gaze allow them to focus on the patients without reference to their particular identities—patients receive care because they exist, not because of who they are. Patients may chat amongst themselves or with visitors, while the

nurse's professional distance enables healing based on common humanity rather than social connections.

Like public interest in the wounded, a nurse's treatment may not always feel benevolent. In "Military Hospital" L.K. Lawler expresses concern about the relative strength of the matron and patient.

The Matron, red-caped, terrible,  
 Inspects the ward; incredible  
 How tall she is – six foot – how stare  
 Those brown, protuberant eyes – beware,  
 Beware lest looming by your bed  
 It enter into her great head –  
 So huge she is, so weak you are –  
 To order you an enema. (59)

The patient's fear is a product of vulnerability rather than danger. Whatever event led to the speaker entering the hospital was likely more frightening than an enema. The speaker's sense of powerlessness amplifies his fear. The relative strength of the nurse may threaten some patients, it serves a purpose. Jo Westren, an army nurse, describes that role in "Behind the Screens."

Meticulously  
 I dress your wound  
 knowing you cannot live.  
 In ten swift rivers  
 from my finger-tips  
 compassion runs

into your pale body  
that is so hurt  
it is no more  
than the keeper  
of your being.  
Behind these screens,  
soldier,  
we two are steeped  
in a peace deeper  
than life gives,  
you with closed eyes  
and I moving quietly  
as though you could wake,  
all my senses aware  
that your other self  
is here,  
waiting to begin  
life without end. (109)

Westren's emotional presence and caring create a moment of intimacy with a dying patient. Privacy and attendance makes death personal and honors life. By writing about her vigilant attention, Westren models communion with the dying as an alternative to public performances of grief.

Privacy becomes increasingly valuable as the war initiates a collision of public and private lives by bringing people together in new ways and subjecting them to new

experiences together. In “Poem XI” R.H. Ellis observes, “Odd too how from a private’s life all privacy’s lacking,” enclosing the thought in parenthesis to illustrate the point (129). One extreme and explicit intersection of public and private life inspired the anonymous poem “Leave, Compassionate, Children, Production, for the use of” which bears this explanatory note: “At the end of the war Sir James Grigg, Minister of War, authorized leave for fathering children.” The writer mixes military-speak in a parody of regulated reproduction.

In distant lands the stalwart bands of would-be fathers wait,  
 Certificates to join their mates upon affairs of State,  
 For para 3 (appendix B) will authorize a chap,  
 to reproduce, for scheduled use, the species homo sap.

When good Sir James takes down their names in files, to procreate,  
 This caveat the unborn brat must circumnavigate:  
 ‘All who have wives (past thirty-five) and children unbegot  
 And certified that they have tried, are able, and have not

‘May stake a claim . . . . (Poems 136)

Military involvement in family life extended beyond the War Minister’s fathering initiative. In “Budget for Romance” Joy Corfield, while a driver in Germany at the end of the war is assisted in her preparation for married life with “a course in domestic virtues / In *Bad Oeynhausen*.”

They taught us to cook, to clean and mend,  
 They lectured us on health, on sex and children:  
 They pointed out the problems  
 Of finding a home and how to equip it

Worst of all was 'The Budget'.  
 From our future husband's income  
 We deducted rent, food and heating,  
 With other essentials.  
 Only one girl could make it balance.  
 Her future husband was an electrician  
 And would earn £5 a week.  
 We were envious of her good luck.  
 We thought her life free from care. (277-8)

The transition from paid worker to home maker marks a return to pre-war gender roles. In this context Corfield's concern about the household budget speaks to the simultaneous familiarity and discomfort of such a reversion.

The independence and public profile of single women serving in the war strains assumptions about appropriate behavior and female independence. Canadian Patience Wheatley's poem "Convoy" describes a three week crossing of the windy gray North Atlantic by "forty seasick Cwacs" (212-3). Beaten down by the weather and unsure how to interpret the ships' "whooping horns" and "lamps blinking wildly" "especially when the ship behind / goes suddenly mad with signals," the confused young women

go below to the bar  
 to fraternize with the RAF –  
 boyfriends by mid-Atlantic.  
 Coming down the Channel  
 .....  
 we all have RAF fiancés.



Those signals from the ship astern –  
are from their wives.

The Cwacs act as a group; Wheatley describes one set of feelings and behavior as common to all. Women in service must negotiate individual and group identity, private life and public scrutiny, independent living and military regulation. In “I Didn’t Believe It . . . ” Joy Corfield shows how shared feelings and experiences create a sense of commonality which can mask individuality.

Two weeks in uniform  
Strangers now friends.  
Rosa teaching us to polish shoes;  
Senga, the expert, pressing skirts.  
Every morning  
Jacky rushes to help me make my bed . . . .

The list of each girl’s talent implies that with time one might learn everyone’s specialty and that individuality can coexist with communal living. Corfield’s lines suggest that fast friendship depends upon helpfulness, good behavior and, perhaps, untested assumptions of common values. After “Two weeks confined to barracks” the young women are “let free.” They head to town “Self-conscious, shy,” surprised to see their “familiar faces in unfamiliar clothes.” They “shared chocolate, fish and chips, / And returned sober and properly dressed / In good time.”

But three girls stayed out.  
They’d been seen in a pub  
With some Americans.

'They're fast,' someone whispered.

I couldn't believe it.

Seemed nice and friendly.

They were brought back by M.P.s

At lunchtime next day.

Dirty, untidy, defiant;

One wearing a U.S. army jacket.

They collected their things and left.

Never saw them again.

Someone shocked me saying,

'They boasted they'd each had thirty men.'

I didn't think it possible

So I didn't believe it, *then*. (95-6)

Corfield's assumption that "nice and friendly" and "fast" are mutually exclusive traits reveals the extent to which unstated assumptions buttress group identity. Her conclusion suggests that the dynamic environment of wartime service precipitated her discovery of multiple standards of behavior and cultivated both her imagination.

Many poems reflect an expanding awareness of intimate behavior. Both men and women write about love and longing. Stephanie Batstone's "Poem" explores the fear that her true love will die before they meet. In "Two Pairs of Shoes" Keith Footitt tells of a couple's first night together, the poignancy of their wartime love and their sense of urgency given their limited time together. Jo Westren's poem "Brief Sanctuary" depicts a young

couple's love-making as refuge from the war, an oasis of human connection in an wasteland of human destruction.

You from the guns  
and I from tending  
make love at an inn;  
deep-dusked  
in a narrow room  
were freed from war,  
from fear of our fear,  
made of our smooth limbs  
our sweet love  
sanctuary  
each for the other.

.....

When time moved from us  
and we must go,  
we drew our glasses close  
on the bare table,  
their shadows one.  
Look, we said,  
they will stand here  
together  
when we have gone,  
images of ourselves,

witnesses to our love.  
 As we left  
 you smiled at me  
 lifting the latch,  
 then the bombs came . . . (108-9)

Some loves provide sanctuary and wish for witnesses, sure of their rightness. They seem honorable, a counterpoint to war and something worth fighting for. Other poems describe affairs of opportunity and romance as a response to fear or simply opportunity. An anonymous poem “In Answer to a Sonnet from a Wren Hall Porter at Machrihanish” demonstrates the latter:

Do not pride yourself beloved that 'tis only you and all your charm  
 that makes me so rash and lose my head; you are but the field within  
 the farm to which the bull must dash to get his normal instincts fed.

God what a farm! But Darling, what a field! (218)

Kenneth Smith dedicates his poem “A Rose By Any Other Name” “to all the W.R.E.N.S.” Designed by “old curmudgeons” to deter the “forward suitor” and disappoint the “Leering eyes of lustful male” the Women’s Royal Navy Service uniform, which includes the Regulation Knicker, cotton stockings and woolen vests, fails to repel advances. The clothes that signal “*verboten*” tantalize the poet who claims the efforts of “Their Lords” are “in vain:” “Not two in fifty Wrens are virgins!!!” (*Poems* 167). Desexualizing uniforms are only one aspect of the military’s double standard for women. The “fast” girls dismissed from Corfield’s barracks are not alone. Patience Wheatley, who served in the Canadian Women’s Army Corps, describes infidelity and the consequences of romance for women in her poem “Messses.”

. . . Evenings  
 we sit beside the canteen's  
 small open window  
 hearing clinking glasses, voices, laughter  
 from the officers' verandah  
 and we gossip about their romances—  
 with married Captain this and Major that  
  
 And our Company Commander  
 living out a fantasy we've all had  
 takes unauthorized leave to go to Halifax  
 with her departing lover —  
 and is replaced (110)

Unauthorized leave coupled with sexual indiscretion makes the Company Commander unfit for service, while “married Captain this and Major that” are not punished for their affairs.

The scale of institutional hypocrisy is considerable: sex trafficking was so popular with servicemen in Cairo that medical officers dispensed prophylactics at sanctioned brothels.

Individuals' attitudes towards sex are more nuanced than public or official standards. In “Egypt” G.S. Fraser warns that the “easy loves” available in Egyptian brothels may spoil men's appreciation for the “home-town pretties” and their “shy finger-tips and sidelong eyes.” As he puts it:

Who knows the world, the flesh, the compromises  
 Would go back to the theory in the book:  
 Who knows the place the poster advertises  
 Back to the poster for another look. . . . (38)

Fraser cautions readers about the bitterness which may result from meaningless sex. His concern is more spiritual than moral—when so many other actions are stripped of meaning or completed without or against emotions, exposing oneself to “unloving hands” leaves the heart “hot and hungry.” In “The Going Rate” by R.W. Tuck catalogues the reactions of “Hardened soldiers” to a woman they see in the street struggling with a pram full of possessions from her “shattered home:”

Ribald comment hid their pity,  
 Low teasing whistles brought a smile  
 To her strained young face  
 ‘Old’ Bob, thought of a daughter safe and sound,  
 ‘Young’ Fred, a girlish wife,  
 Tom, a sister far away.  
 Others reacted to the smile in hope,  
 Would she?  
 Would she trade, for chocolate, or soap? (281-2)

The poem concludes with this moment of speculation, focusing attention on Tuck’s interpretation of the “Others” reaction as representative of both a yearning for connection and the reduction of sex to commerce. Chocolate and soap are pathetic inducements to prostitution, so Tuck’s choice of these commodities indicates that the hopeful soldiers imagine themselves taking part in some semblance of gift exchange which permits them to dismiss their qualms.

Madge Donald challenges the sexual double standard which pervades both social and military life. In her “Sonnet to Albert,” Donald uses a traditional form common to poems of argument and love to reframe the conventions of love and sex.

'I would not have her second-hand,' he said,  
 As gaze to gaze we drained a glass of beer.  
 I paused, and could not get it from my head –  
 What bitterness to drink to the New Year.  
 The thought came slow that this was sacrilege:  
 Love, like a worn-out garment handed down,  
 Love, which is bounded by no bond or pledge,  
 Patterned to this man's form – that woman's gown.  
 Ah no, if you have kissed beneath the stars  
 And felt the spirit striving through the clay  
 Remember that eternity was yours  
 Though love but lasted for a single day:  
 What matter if she loved a thousand more  
 Yet gave you love alone in that one hour. (98)

Donald's alternate morality, in which rejecting unsanctioned love is "sacrilege," offers a private alternative to public mores and privileges how people treat one another over moral conventions. Moments of renegotiation like the one in Donald's poem occur wherever the imperative to treat people with dignity conflicts with the standards and beliefs that prop up societies.

In many poems seemingly stable ideas are examined and renegotiated as a result of wartime experiences. This practice of challenging assumptions empowers individuals and fosters social change. The multiplicity of viewpoints and the wide range of voices collected by the Salamander Oasis Trust speaks to servicemen's and women's growing sense of

responsibility to think for themselves and capacity for personal expression. With a tradition spanning low and high culture, poetry is the natural medium for this conversation.

### **Finding Meaning in Memory and Memorial**

The Salamander Oasis poems have many potential uses. They document historical events, depict life in another time, and reflect the cultures and values of their moment. The Salamander Oasis poems both solicit and reject outsiders' understanding; they depend upon and subvert competing truths, including the imperative of remembrance and the impossibility of returning to the past, the intrusive nature of memory and its insulating properties.

Poems about returning to the scenes of battle, for example, show how time, memory and history change a place. In "El Alamein" Jarmain reports how a change in the landscape marks the alienation of experience.

There are flowers now, they say, at Alamein;  
 Yes, flowers in the minefields now.  
 So those that come to view that vacant scene,  
 Where death remains and agony has been  
 Will find the lilies grow –  
 Flowers, and nothing that we know.

Vacancy, rather than memorialization, marks the scene. "That crazy sea of sand" is transformed in a way that renders it false to the history of the place:

. . . this is not the place that we recall,  
 The crowded desert crossed with foaming tracks . . . .  
 . . . . .  
 So be it; none but us has known that land;



El Alamein will still be only ours  
 And those ten days of chaos in the sand.  
 Others will come who cannot understand,  
 Will halt beside the rusty minefield wires  
 and find there, flowers. (49-50)

Jarmain remembers an absence, a loss, rather than a presence. Vacancy allows possession of the absent past by those who were part of it, so while monuments, even flowers, mark the place for those who were not there, they seem, to those who were, to misrepresent the past. The simultaneous permanence of the desert and the impermanence of any mark upon it, renders it an enduring place that both holds and hides history; John Pudney calls it “the blind desert room.”

Winds carve this land  
 And velvet whorls of sand  
 Annul footprint and grave  
 Of lover, fool, and knave.

The vetch briefly blooms and dies, and the sand slowly absorbs the implements of war.

Their gear and shift  
 Smother in soft sand-drift,  
 Less perishable, less  
 Soon in rottenness.  
 Their war-spent tools of trade  
 In the huge space parade;

The changing desert does not preserve the history of the battles fought upon it, leading Pudney to wonder:

. . . who will see,  
 In such last anarchy  
 Of loveless lapse and loss  
 Which the blind sands now gloss,  
 The common heart which meant  
 Such good in its intent;  
 Such noble common dross  
 Suddenly spent. (74)

These poets read emptiness as the absence of something rather than the presence of nothing. The vanishing, in the mind and in the desert, is part of the memory—the transitory nature of the place makes time and space both exact and inaccessible, so the feeling of distance from the past is made more acute by the appearance of change.

For Paul Aller, seasons and weather, rather than a specific landscape, evoke the dead.

Fair Summer brings flowers and days of bliss  
 For some; if that is all, then do we miss  
 What we should remember.  
 That not long since in Normandy,  
 Men died on days like this. . . . (“The Four Seasons” ts)

As a sergeant in the 7<sup>th</sup> Parachute Battalion, 6<sup>th</sup> Airbourne Division, Aller’s memories of war in the summer, of Normandy and the dead have, perhaps, supplanted his other associations with the season in a way that they do not for others. The strength of the connection between “Fair Summer” and Normandy’s dead is non-transferable, so for civilians and post-war generations, the poem’s description of the seasonal cycles of Aller’s memory and his fear that “days of bliss” might pass without reference to Normandy conveys the importance (and

burden) of remembrance more powerfully than another kind of memorial. In a poem written in September 1943, Gordon Kenneth Adams of the 96 Wireless Wing in Northern Ireland predicts with anxiety and bitterness how quickly the war will be forgotten by survivors. In the explanatory letter accompanying his submissions to the archive, Adams explains “[t]his seemingly prophetic utterance was written . . . while I was . . . recovering from a break-down in health. I had dreamt the poem, and was constrained to write it exactly as it is, immediately on awakening at about 5.30 a.m.” (“Details” ts). The speaker of “’Tis Only the Dead who Remember.” bitterly decries the poor memories of the war’s survivors.

What are the thoughts of the days that are gone?  
 Of the toils and the sweat and the tears?  
 What do we think of those horrible days  
 As they fade in the dimness of years?  
 The poignantest aches and the bitt’rest woe  
 Become dim as the fire’s dying ember.  
 The living forget as they build once again,  
 ’Tis only the dead who remember!

The speaker chastises the ungrateful Russians for forgetting “Stalingrad’s price” and for receiving the guns, planes and tanks “[t]hat hard-pressed Britannia readily gave,” without “a murmur of thanks.” The living, by their “cheer[y] firesides,” “forget with their crocodile tears” the “host of the dead and forlorn . . . the myriads of men / [w]hose lives ended ere they’d begun” and the “pangs and the anguish of solit’ry death.” The Luftwaffe, the “boys who defeated the Hun, / [a]nd clawed all those death eagles down[,] . . . the bombs and the nightmare of fire / [t]hat followed that fateful September” are all forgotten by the “living . . . as their triumph they boast, / ’Tis only the dead who remember!” Given his substantial

memory the speaker must be, in some sense, dead. An afterlife (or life after war) of bitterness and betrayal in which memory and history are available but cannot be acted upon, implies that those who remember are, to some extent, dead. The poem's final stanza expresses another fear, a potential compounding of the injustice for those deadened by war.

What of the promises solemnly made,  
                     Of World-wide secureness from want?  
 What of the thousands of men newly home  
                     In their search for a World free from cant?  
 Who thinks of the sacrifices that they made  
                     In their struggle in life's grim December?  
 The living forget as their pleasure they seek,  
                     'Tis only the dead who remember!

The confusion about memory and the dead in this poem is further complicated by Adams neither having served in any of the places mentioned in the poem, nor having been wounded or bombed. He eventually fell into the category of those who the poem predicts will forget.

A vital part of the history of the Second World War is in the survivors' memories, so accessing the history of an event or place depends upon the survivors' willingness to return to the past. Many write about how their memories work, during the war and after. In "Christmas Letter Home (To my sister in Aberdeen)" G.S. Fraser describes his experience of pre-war memories in the present and predicts how he will remember the war when it is over.

Drifting and innocent and sad like snow,  
 Now memories tease me wherever I go.  
 .....  
 This is the sorrow everyone understands.

More than Rostov's artillery, more than the planes  
 Skirting the cyclonic islands, this remains,  
 The little, lovely taste of youth we had;  
 The guns and not our silliness were mad.  
 All the unloved and ugly seeking power  
 Were mad. . . .

.....  
 Some Christmas I shall meet you. Oh and then  
 Though all the boys you used to like are men,  
 Though all my girls are married, though my verse  
 Has pretty steadily been growing worse,  
 We shall be happy; we shall smile and say,

.....  
 'These years were painful then?' 'I hardly know.  
 Something lies gently over them, like snow,  
 A sort of numbing white forgetfulness.' (39-40)

Fraser prediction of a blanket of forgetfulness shielding his post-war life from the past indicates the need for insulation—even more to be desired than protection from the teasing, but pleasant memories of pre-war life. After the war, distance from memories is often desired but difficult to maintain. The title of J. Bevan's poem, "Ubique (Motto of the Royal Artillery)," signals the problem.

. . . The soul saves what it needs  
 from the waste, halts time at its will.  
 Those gun positions, those facets, those parallel pieces

are ranging on me still (*Poems* 177)

Bevan's unpunctuated final line suggests that, like the R.A., war memories are not only "everywhere" but illimitable. No longer behind a gun, Bevan nevertheless confronts "the waste," and despite the claim that his soul can "halt time" he perpetually confronts the past. Cloaking the past in forgetfulness and continuing to keep the past in the present are individual responses which address survivors' individual needs. Those who write poems and contribute them to a public archive choose to participate in the collection and preservation of their memories and experiences for others. Recording their experiences and making that record public invites others' reading and response. In "Return to Base" William Clarke depicts the need for survivors and non-survivors to participate in remembering the past.

It all looked pretty much the same and yet  
 Was not the same because the people there  
 Seemed unapproachable or chose to ignore  
 What brought you back that made you stand and stare,  
 The young too young to remember or forget;  
 The old too old to much care anymore. (*Poems* 146)

Clarke's return is undermined by the local peoples' refusal to participate in remembering. In 2008, readers "too young to remember or forget" can choose to attend to the history that calls the survivor back. The memories and experiences of Salamander Oasis contributors, shaped into verse and preserved for future generations, stake a claim as literary and cultural records we ought not choose to ignore.

A small sample of unpublished poems reveals some of the challenges that potential readers and anthologists face. While readers benefit from encountering the poems in the organizing structure of a sectioned anthology, the poems themselves defy strict

categorization. Is it possible to frame all the poems in a way that would convey their importance to readers? Many contributors stress the authenticity of their poems or the credentials of their experience. In “Flashback” Ann Berry writes, “the smell of new-mown hay / And the scent of hawthorn blossom take me back / To another time and place: a wartime June . . . .” The poem gives “an account of an air battle between two fighter pilots, witnessed in June, 1940 . . . on the coast North of Hull, between midday and 1 o’clock when the children and teachers, from Maybury Road school, were in the school playing field” (Letter ts). The poem is undated, and its title implies post-war composition, so “Flashback” would not be included in an anthology that required contemporary composition, despite its similarity to other poems about air battles, the power of planes to mesmerize witnesses, and a life and death struggle between two enemies. Her other submission “tells of a sad love affair between my friend, Daisy, who was a teacher in Liverpool, and her boy-friend, Jan, a Polish fighter pilot.” Of “Daisy” Berry asserts: “This story is completely true. The time was June, 1940, and the place an airfield on the outskirts of Liverpool” (Letter ts). Submission letters show how important the poems are to their authors. Marion Power writes “I do not lay claim to being a great poet but I was in the services for 6½ years during the last war and wrote a good many poems during that time, some of which are included in the enclosed book that was privately printed. . . . If this book is of no use to you, or the poems not of high enough standard, I should be obliged if you would return it as I have only two other copies left” (Letter ts).

Unpublished poems can still contribute to our understanding of the attitudes of regular people to poetry at the time. The tremendous scale of the war and the breadth of the archive create a substantial sample of poems and explanations for poems by men and women writing at the time. For example, Gordon Adams’s poem “’Tis Only the Dead Who

Remember” was not published. His distance from the events described may have been deemed too great, or the verse too unrefined. The information Adams supplied with his submissions conveys his attitude toward and understanding of poetry. “[T]he seeds . . . that have developed into a vital growth of the love of Poetry and the use of words,” Adams writes, were sown “under the guidance of Mr. George Morris, B.A.,” his secondary school teacher in Ogmoo Valley, Gilfach (“Some Biographical Details” ts). According to the “[d]etails of the places where the poems were written, and the circumstances leading to their composition” Adams mainly wrote in response to specific events, including his arriving in Ireland, learning of the deaths of his brother-in-law and best friend, the dissolution of the 96 Wireless Wing, the liberation of Paris and the end of the war in Europe. The dream, finding a frozen crushed snowdrop “high up in the Sperrin Mountains in Tyrone,” and a bet with a colleague prompted another three poems. Adams explains the wager-inspired poem as follows.

A colleague, Jim Crawford and I were discussing Poetry and its writing. Jim asked me if I’d ever written any ‘Free Verse’, on receiving a somewhat scathing negative reply, he challenged me to do so there and then! I tried to escape by asking Jim for a subject; I should have know the canny Scot better, for he immediately said, ‘Ireland’. I was trapped, so I craved its variation ‘In Search of Ireland’, as I had not seen it all. Jim agreed, and I proceeded to write the poem at top speed, the result being as shown on the ms., [n]ot one word has been altered. (“Details” ts)

His specific reference to the unaltered states of two of the poems suggests that for Adams “Poetry and its writing” are products of inspiration rather than craft. The pressure of a



wager and the urgency of a dream produce verse which Adams judged as worthy of submission as elegies for loved-ones.

All submitted poems written during the war by a member of the services were kept in the archive, regardless of their inclusion in anthologies. In the case of poets some of whose work was anthologized, the poems editors chose to include indicate their priorities for a particular anthology, rather than a judgment about a poet. Two of Phillip Whitfield's published poems, "Casualties, Normandy, 1944" and "Day of Liberation, Bergen-Belsen, May 1945," relate directly to his role as a physician, while an unpublished poem "Billeted at the Sub-Commandant's House (Bergen-Belsen, May 1945)," which depicts the interaction between Whitfield and the Sub-Commandant's wife, explores questions unrelated to his professional responsibilities. The published poems deal with prominent historical events, but the unpublished "Billeted at the Sub-Commandant's House" contributes to a different picture—how members of opposing sides view each other, how they behave in defeat, how they wish to be seen by others.

The texts collected in the archive could be used to produce different kinds of books. The Salamander Oasis Trust's appeal for poetry has coincidentally collected other documents of interest to scholars of poetry and the war. Future publications could develop the model of context and verse exemplified by *From Oasis Into Italy*, which included prose and poems, or *Return to Oasis*, which was well supplemented with reminiscences. One candidate for inclusion in such a book is C. Beam, whose diary, written while he was a prisoner of war in Japan, includes remarkable and moving details amid camouflaging remarks about "climate, temperature etc etc . . . intended to make the Japs think it was partly a constructive diary" (Letter ts). Beam explains, "the first one I had was discovered by the Japs in Java and was, there is no doubt, not very complimentary to their cause, for which I suffered. – I made

remarks about weather – vegetables – birds etc etc in the second to cushion the effect if the diary was taken from me in Japan. (It has 480 pages.) It was not discovered of course.”

The photocopy Beam included with his letter reproduces the diary’s actual size: a page  $4\frac{1}{2}$  by  $5\frac{7}{8}$  inches on which 14 days of illness, brutal beatings, bitterly cold weather, reduced rations, punishing labor and several deaths from beri beri are recorded in very small script. Beam’s apparently contemporary poem “Japan P.O.W. Days” has not been published, neither has his post-war remembrance “The Second World War – Far East 1942-1945” or post-war poem “Thoughts after Prisoner of War days in Java and Japan.” His hope that the editors “may be able to sort out something from these poems” has not been met. Yet.

With the death of Victor Selwyn, the Salamander Oasis Trust and its archive enter a new phase in which interest in the texts and future publication will depend upon the passion and curiosity of a new generation of readers. Those willing to bring their own questions to the texts and to think about poetry in flexible and egalitarian terms will find the archive richly rewards their interest.

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1999-2000 Tutor; Sum. 2001, Tutor Supervisor; Fall 2005, Desk Staff

**Department of Literatures in English, Rutgers University, New Brunswick**

2000-2005 Teaching Assistant

**Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy, Rutgers University, New Brunswick**

2001-02 and 2004-07 Educational Opportunity Fund Summer Program Writing Instructor

**University College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick**

2002-03 Academic Advisor, Office of Advising, Counseling & EOF