



Hugh's News

Reflecting on war poetry

by Hugh Turley

In 1963, addressing Amherst College, President John F. Kennedy said, "When power corrupts, poetry cleanses, for art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment." After more than a decade of fighting, Americans might reflect on war poetry. The website www.warpoetry.co.uk features poetry from World War I to the present, including Afghanistan.

At its best, poetry is an art form that captures the truth and is timeless. Siegfried Sassoon's WWI poem "Suicide in the Trenches" is pertinent today, as American soldiers kill themselves in record numbers:

*I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonely dark,
And whistled early with the lark.
In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain,
No one spoke of him again.
You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and hope you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.*

Sassoon joined the war filled with patriotic spirit. After several distressing experiences he suffered "combat fatigue," now called post-traumatic stress disorder. Sassoon was once hurled into the air by a mortar and landed beside the remains of a fellow officer.

Sassoon encouraged Wilfred Owen, one of the best-known WWI poets. Owen wrote over 600 letters, most to his mother, and she saved them all. In one letter to her in May 1917, he wrote, "I am more and more a Christian. ... Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed: but do not kill."

While their poetry condemned war, both Sassoon and Owen won the Military Cross for their gallantry. Sassoon, of a prominent Jewish family, survived the war and later

became a Roman Catholic.

But Owen, just seven days before the war ended, was shot and killed near Ors, France. His mother received the news of his death as church bells tolled the end of the war.

In the current conflicts in the Middle East, British officers are still writing poetry. In memory of two men killed in Afghanistan in 2009, Ed Poynter wrote "Dulled Senses":

*Pomp, ceremony and bold rhetoric,
like the smiling face of Janus
allow man and nation to beautify
this savage calling;
to believe that this destruction of
bodies and souls can be justified,
nay ... required and even lauded!
Medals, congratulations, proud
condolences and bacchic parties,
with revellers in braid and lace,
believe the sin that man commits
against his naked self.*

Mark Lentz of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, wrote the song "At What a Cost" after listening to the reflections of a First Gulf War veteran. "After one too many drinks," said Lentz, "he started .. saying how he had to be a rock, could not show any emotion, had to kill against his beliefs. How could this be him?"

Lentz's song can be heard on YouTube:

*You planted the seed
I fought for your greed
Now I live with the deed
I'm your rock.*

The local Busboys & Poets might consider a War Poetry event and invite Lentz to perform. In the words of Wilfred Owen, "All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poet must be truthful."