

Homesick For The Hills: Ivor Gurney (1890 – 1937)



Ivor Gurney was unusual in that he was a major poet of the First World War but not a member of the officer class. He enlisted as a Private in the Gloucestershire Regiment in 1915. He had been initially turned down due to his poor eyesight but the British army was so desperately short of soldiers due to such heavy early losses that they weren't fussy as to who they enlisted.

Ivor was the son of a tailor and was born in Gloucester and, like many poets, he had a lifelong love affair with the landscapes of his childhood. He was a highly talented musician and he was educated as a chorister at King's School in Gloucester and won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music. However, after two years at the Royal College where he studied under such eminent composers as Charles Stanford, he was sent home after he suffered a mental breakdown. It is now believed that he suffered from bipolar disorder which was to recur throughout his life.

Gurney believed that poets had a special duty in time of war and despite the horror around them, they must not relinquish their craft and must show the same courage in the face of death as any other soldier. In his poem, *To the Poet Before Battle* he writes: *Remember thy great craft's honour, that they may say/ Nothing in*

shame of poets. In a poem simply entitled *Pain*, he describes the horror and suffering of war in an elegant Petrarchan sonnet. In Gurney's poems, suffering and beauty are inextricably bound up with each other: this is the central paradox of art. The last line also gives voice to the view that we either have to dispense with belief in God or dispense with the infantile conception of Him so often preached in the established church.

*Pain, pain continual; pain unending;
Hard even to the roughest, but to those
Hungry for beauty . . . Not the wisest knows,
Nor most pitiful-hearted, what the wending
Of one hour's way meant. Grey monotony lending
Weight to the grey skies, grey mud where goes
An army of grey bedrenched scarecrows in rows
Careless at last of cruellest Fate-sending.
Seeing the pitiful eyes of men foredone,
Or horses shot, too tired merely to stir,
Dying in shell-holes both, slain by the mud.
Men broken, shrieking even to hear a gun. -
Till pain grinds down, or lethargy numbs her,
The amazed heart cries angrily out on God.*

Another paradox is that Gurney suffered less from his mental illness in the field of battle than he did at any other time of his life. It's as if the constant threat of imminent death and his sense that he was fulfilling his vocation by bearing witness and creating beauty out of horror kept his inner demons at bay. In the trenches, it was easier for him to devote his considerable talents more to poetry than to music but he did compose some songs, including setting the words of his fellow Gloucestershire poet, FW Harvey to music. The words express Gurney's own deep love for the gentle hills of home which seem all the more peaceful and beautiful when recalled amid the shell-shocked landscape in which he found himself.

In Flanders

*I'm homesick for my hills again -
To see above the Severn plain
Unscabbarded against the sky
The blue high blade of Cotswold
lie;
The giant clouds go royally
By jagged Malvern with a train
Of shadows.*

*Where the land is low
Like a huge imprisoning O
I hear a heart that's sound and
high,
I hear the heart within me cry:
"I'm homesick for my hills again
-
Cotswold or Malvern, sun or
rain!
My hills again!"*

During the Battle of the Somme, Gurney was wounded and spent time recuperating in a hospital in Rouen. A few months later, he was choked with gas and sent home to the Edinburgh War Hospital. It was when he was in this hospital that his first collection of poems, *Severn and Somme*, was published. The title is appropriate as he lived between those two worlds of the loveliness of the natural world of his childhood haunts and the carnage of the First World War. In *Song of Beauty and Pain* he imagines a time when all suffering might be transfigured into something beautiful if only he could alter his perception of the world.

*O may these days of pain,
These wasted-seeming days,
Somewhere reflower again
With scent and savour of praise.
Draw out of memory all bitterness
Of night with Thy sun's rays.*

*And strengthen Thou in me
The love of men here found,
And eager charity,
That, out of difficult ground,
Spring like flowers in barren deserts,
or
Like light, or a lovely sound.*

*A simpler heart than mine
Might have seen beauty clear
When I could see no sign
Of Thee, but only fear.
Strengthen me, make me to see
They beauty always
In every happening here.*

It was in the Edinburgh hospital that he met and fell in love with a VAD nurse, Annie Drummond but the breakdown of the relationship was harmful to his precarious psychological condition and he suffered another mental breakdown and threatened to kill himself and was taken to the psychiatric ward in Brancepeth Castle in County Durham. His mental illness was put down to shell shock – no mention was made of his pre-existing mental health problems – and he was given an honourable discharge from the army.

His second collection of poems, *War's Embers* was published in 1919 but he was unable to make a living through his writing and composing and for the next three years he supported himself by working as a farm labourer, a pianist in a cinema and as a clerk in a tax office. He made a brief return to the Royal College of Music but his mental condition continued to deteriorate and in 1922, his family had him officially declared as insane. For the last fifteen years of his life Gurney was a patient in a succession of psychiatric hospitals in which he continued to compose and to write prolifically. He wrote dramatic tragedies but the real tragedy was that the writer of them had become convinced that he was William Shakespeare. Much of the poetry and music he wrote during this period remains unpublished to the day.

He died at the age of forty-seven and his body was returned to the county he loved most: Gloucestershire. One of Gurney's most moving poems is called *To His Love* and it describes the coming home of a body shattered by war but made beautiful at the last with *memoried flowers*.

*He's gone, and all our plans
Are useless indeed.
We'll walk no more on Cotswolds
Where the sheep feed
Quietly and take no heed.*

*His body that was so quick
Is not as you
Knew it, on Severn River
Under the blue
Driving our small boat through.*

*You would not know him now...
But still he died
Nobly, so cover him over
With violets of pride
Purple from Severn side.*

*Cover him, cover him soon!
And with thick-set
Masses of memoried flowers-
Hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget.*

