

Twelve River RIPPLES

Favourite Poem



Anthem for Doomed Youth

by Wilfred Owen

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
 Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Favourite Poem cont.

For about 35 years I have had on my poetry shelves a book entitled *The Pity of War* (Shepherd-Walwyn (Publishers) Ltd), a selection by Jill Balcon of First World War Poets. The entire book of poems was transcribed by hand by my friend, Rosemary Grossman, a professional calligrapher, and illustrated most sensitively with drawings by Barrington Barber. Everything about this book is moving – the poetic content, the fine illustrations, the care with which it has been produced. It never fails to have a profound effect on me – the camaraderie, courage, even acceptance of the men, though perhaps acceptance cannot be applied to these war poets, witness to the utter uselessness of any war. In some sense, though, they describe glimpses of Heaven, like thin shards of crystal reflecting light in the squalid mud of Hell. But mostly they reflect their own dull resignation and sense of futility, and their compassion for the fear and misery of each ordinary soldier – on both sides of the wire.

'Anthem For Doomed Youth' is one of many poems I could have chosen to remember the fallen at this time of year. Wilfred Owen is one of the many poets

who took it upon themselves to celebrate the ultimate sacrifice made in a war which would "end all wars". I particularly love the last line: *And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.*"

Jill Balcon chose her poets from the sixteen commemorated in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. I list all those she included in this book. They deserve at least that: Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, Herbert Read, Wilfrid Gibson, Isaac Rosenberg, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Julian Grenfell, Charles Sorley, Ivor Gurney and Edward Thomas.

In his preface to the book, the then Dean of Westminster, Edward Carpenter (in 1985) quoted "...one of the most fertile of English authors (I presume he was referring to William Shakespeare) has written, 'Poets are the trumpets which sing to battle, poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'"

If you can find a copy of this book, buy it! Shepherd-Walwyn (Publishers) Ltd is still in business.

Lynne Nesbit



Drawing by Barrington Barber from *The Pity of War*