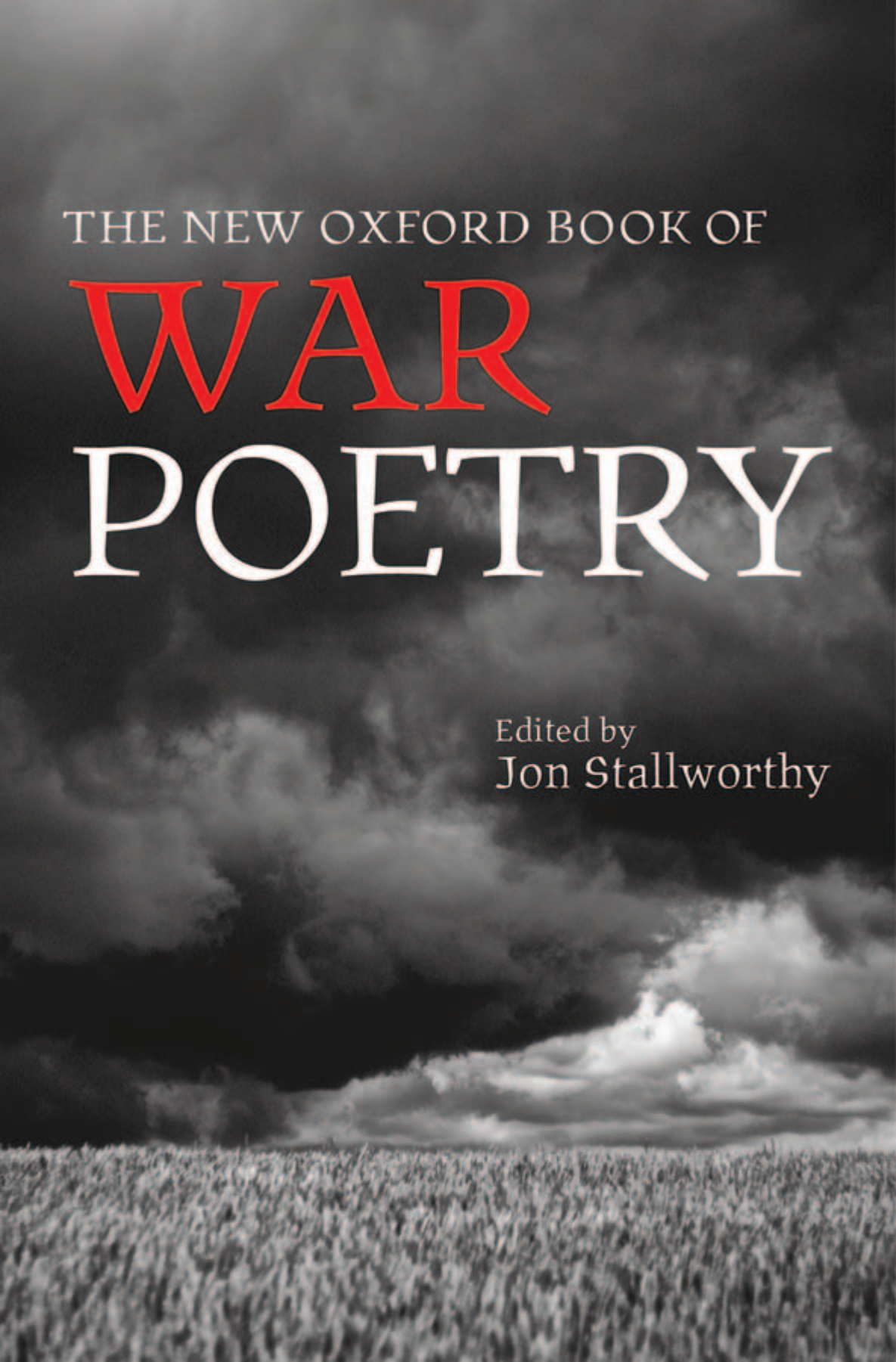
THE NEW OXFORD BOOK OF
WAR
POETRY
Edited by
Jon Stallworthy

Jon Stallworthy was educated at Rugby, in the West African Frontier Force, and at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he won the Newdigate Prize for Poetry. His books include two critical studies of Yeats's poetry; two biographies: *Wilfred Owen* (which won the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize, the WH Smith Award and the E.M. Forster Award) and *Louis MacNeice* (which won the Southern Arts Literary Prize); editions of Wilfred Owen's *Complete Poems and Fragments* and *War Poems*; and two critical studies of war poetry: *Anthem for Doomed Youth: Twelve Soldier Poets of the First World War* and *Survivors' Songs: From Maldon to the Somme*. Most recently he has published *War Poet*, a selection of his own war poems. He has been a Professor of English Literature at Cornell and Oxford, and is now a Senior Research Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, and a Fellow of the British Academy.

The New Oxford Book of War Poetry

Chosen and Edited by

Jon Stallworthy

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First edition published by Oxford University Press 1984
This edition published 2014
Impression: 1

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN 978–0–19–870447–8

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

'POETRY', Wordsworth reminds us, 'is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', and there can be no area of human experience that has generated a wider range of powerful feelings than war: hope and fear; exhilaration and humiliation; hatred—not only for the enemy, but also for generals, politicians, and war-profiteers; love—for fellow soldiers, for women and children left behind, for country (often) and cause (occasionally).

Man's early war-songs and love-songs were generally exhortations to action, or celebrations of action, in one or other field, but no such similarity exists between what we now more broadly define as love poetry and war poetry. Whereas most love poems have been in favour of love, much—and most recent—war poetry has been implicitly, if not explicitly, anti-war. So long as warrior met warrior in equal combat with sword or lance, poets could celebrate their courage and chivalry, but as technology put ever-increasing distance between combatants and, then, ceased to distinguish between combatant and civilian, poets more and more responded to 'man's inhumanity to man'. Not that heroic societies were oblivious to the domestic consequences of their heroes' 'brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art'. *The Iliad* (3)[1] ends with Andromache watching from the walls of Troy, as her husband's broken body is dragged away behind his killer's chariot: 'she mourned, and the women wailed in answer'. Similarly, as the hero's funeral pyre is lit at the close of the Old English epic, written 1,500 years later,

> his ancient wife with braided hair,
> Grief-stricken raised a song of lamentation
> For Beowulf; repeatedly she said
> That sore she dreaded evil days would come,
> Much carnage, war's alarms, captivity
> And ignominy. Heaven swallowed up the smoke.[2]

Hers, however, is not the last word. That is spoken by Beowulf's warriors, 'his hearth-companions':

> It was their part to mourn, bewail their king,
> Recite an elegy and acclaim the man;
> They praised his prowess, and his mighty deeds

[1] Numbers in brackets refer to poems in this anthology.
[2] Mary E. Waterhouse, trans., *Beowulf in Modern English*, 1949, p. 108.

> They fittingly extolled, as right it is
> A man should honour his kind lord in words. . . .
> They said that of all earthly kings he was
> Gentlest of men and kindest unto all,
> To men most gracious and most keen for praise.[3]

Such societies recognized the cost of warfare, but the code to which they subscribed counted it a necessary price for the pursuit of 'praise', honour, renown. This was to be acquired by generosity in peace, mighty deeds in war, loyalty to the living and loyalty to the dead.

That heroic tradition died, and another was transplanted to English soil, when King Harold's foot-soldiers were cut down on a ridge above Hastings by the cavalry of William, Duke of Normandy. Less than a hundred years before, one of the last Old English poets had chanted or declaimed in a Saxon hall the poem we know as 'The Battle of Maldon' (12). And three hundred years after Harold and his housecarls had gone the way of Byrtnoth and his thanes, the first new English poet introduced to a more cultivated audience

> A knight . . . a worthy man
> That fro the timė that he first bigan
> To riden out, he lovėd chivalry. . . .

The intervening years had seen Duke William's son Henry, in the words of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 'dubbed a rider', married to a Saxon girl, and the two people and the two languages fused and intermingled. Under the influence of the troubadours, the Church, and the new learning out of Italy, *chivalry* had come to mean more than *cavalry*, that other derivative of the Latin *caballarius*, a horseman. The descendant of Duke William's superbly efficient but hardly sophisticated *chevalier* could, like Chaucer's Squire,

> Wel . . . sitte on hors, and fairė ride;
> He coudė songės make, and wel endite,
> Juste and eek daunce, and wel portraye and write.

The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge had been founded before Chaucer was born, and in his lifetime the first of the so-called 'public schools', Winchester, opened its doors to the sons of noblemen and gentlemen. By 1440, when Eton was founded, the word *gentleman* had come to denote a clearly defined social status, inferior to nobility and superior to the yeomanry, but not necessarily dependent on ancestry. These schools and those others later modelled on them grafted the

[3] Ibid., p. 109.

'classical learning of the monastic schools upon the chivalric training in honour, in sport, in military exercise, in social intercourse, in courtesy and generosity, in reverence and devotion, of the schools of Christian knighthood'.[4]

Chaucer had seen military service—had been captured and ransomed—in France, where two centuries later fought and was wounded Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who returned to translate Books III and IV of the *Aeneid* into blank verse. Raleigh served in the Huguenot army at Jarnac and Moncoutour; Gascoigne saw military service in Holland; Donne took part in the Earl of Essex's two expeditions to Cadiz; Davenant was knighted by Charles I at the siege of Gloucester; Lovelace served in the Scottish expeditions of 1639; and the Earl of Rochester showed conspicuous courage in the Second Dutch War of 1665–6.

The chivalric tradition, transmuted into the courtly tradition of the High Renaissance, required proficiency in the arts of war as well as in such peaceable arts as music and poetry. The courtier-poet was expected to serve his king in much the same way as the Anglo-Saxon *scop* took his place in the shield-wall with his lord. The Earl of Surrey left a moving elegy to his Squire (20); Gascoigne, a rueful account of his capture and ransom (21); and Donne condensed his experience of Cadiz into an epigram (23). Considering how many courtier-poets had experience of battle, however, the reader in a later century—when war poems are commonly written by those who have never seen a battlefield—may be surprised by how rarely Renaissance poets write of war. Conventions had changed. Love had become the subject proper to a poet. On the rare occasion when the blast of war blows through a poem, it is likely to be the carefully orchestrated overture to a protestation of devotion, such as Lovelace, the dashing Cavalier, offers 'To Lucasta, Going to the Wars' (25). Paradoxically, the convention that proclaimed the subject of warfare too gross for the polite art of poetry sanctioned, and indeed required, a select use of military terminology in the imagery of the love lyric. Cupid is an archer. The besieging lover, having no shield proof against his darts, can only hope that his Beloved in a spirit of Christian compassion will surrender.

During the eighteenth century, soldiering reached the low place in British society that it was to hold until the Great War; an occupation despised by the middle and working classes as a disgrace hardly less than prison. If an eighteenth-century poet wrote of war—which he

[4] F. J. C. Hearnshaw, 'Chivalry and its place in History', *Chivalry*, ed. Edgar Prestage, 1928, p. 22.

seldom did—it was as a remote phenomenon. So John Scott of Amwell declares (36):

> I hate that drum's discordant sound,
> Parading round, and round, and round:
> To me it talks of ravaged plains,
> And burning towns, and ruined swains,
> And mangled limbs, and dying groans,
> And widows' tears, and orphans' moans;
> And all that Misery's hand bestows,
> To fill the catalogue of human woes.

As the French Revolution made its contribution to that catalogue, warfare once more became a subject of interest to British poets. The Napoleonic wars moved Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Campbell to patriotic outpourings (37). Coleridge and Wordsworth, on the other hand, 'hailed the rising orb of liberty'. Both were subsequently disillusioned, and in Book 4 of *The Prelude* Wordsworth writes movingly of his meeting with a battered veteran of Wellington's armies. No poet of the Romantic period, however, was more alive to the horrors of war than Byron; alive not only to the sufferings of the combatants but to the domestic consequences. The eyes of the dying Gladiator in *Childe Harold* are

> with his heart and that was far away;
> He recked not of the life he lost nor prize,
> But where his rude hut by the Danube lay,
> *There* were his young barbarians all at play,
> *There* was their Dacian mother—he, their sire,
> Butchered to make a Roman holiday . . . .

Byron, as a schoolboy at Harrow, had been steeped in the classics. He visited Greece in 1809 and 1810 and the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*, based on his experiences, launched a tidal wave of literary philhellenism.

By the time of the Greek Revolution in 1821, the educated public in Europe had been deeply immersed in three attractive ideas—that Ancient Greece had been a paradise inhabited by supermen; that the Modern Greeks were the true descendants of the Ancient Greeks; and that a war against the Turks could somehow 'regenerate' the Modern Greeks and restore the former glories.[5]

Invoking the example of Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, commemorated in Simonides' epigram (4), Byron sounded the call to arms:

[5] William St Clair, *That Greece might Still be Free*, 1972, p. 19.

Must *we* but weep o'er days more blest?
Must *we* but blush?—Our fathers bled.
Earth! render back from out thy breast
A remnant of our Spartan dead!
Of the three hundred grant but three,
To make a new Thermopylae.

His love for the land of Pericles and Homer proving stronger than his hatred of war, he set off for Greece with half a dozen military uniforms and a couple of helmets, gilded, crested, and bearing the family motto: 'Crede Byron'.

Like every other philhellene who took that road, he was to learn how unrelated were the reality and the dream. Those more fortunate, who returned with their lives, brought tales of betrayal and brutality, squalor and needless suffering, that anticipate the war correspondents' revelations from the Crimea thirty years later. The philanthropic spirit of the age that urged Florence Nightingale to the hospitals of Scutari found expression in anti-war poems by Thackeray (62) and others, but these were counterbalanced by many sounding a savage note, and the one poem from the Crimean War to have survived in the popular memory celebrates a heroic exploit. Significantly, since Tennyson's imagination had long been engaged with the chivalric world of King Arthur and his knights, it was the *cavalry* charge of the Light Brigade in 1854 that spurred him into song (60).

It is one thing to 'Honour the charge' of professional cavalrymen of one's own country against foreign gunners thousands of miles away; but quite another to watch one's own countrymen—many of them boy civilians in uniform—killing and maiming each other. Walt Whitman was drawn into the American Civil War by a brother, wounded in the battle of Fredericksburg, who was in need of nursing. He remained, long after his brother was better, a non-combatant witness to the horrors of war, tending the wounded (67):

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go . . .

He regards them as '*my* wounded', seeing the results of cavalry action from a markedly *un*-Tennysonian perspective:

The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine,
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard,
(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!
In mercy come quickly.)

His eyes unclouded by the chivalric vision, his tongue untrammelled by the chivalric diction and rhetoric, he perceives 'in camp in the

daybreak grey and dim' what Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were to perceive in the trenches of the Western Front:

Young man I think I know you—I think this face is the face
of the Christ himself,
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

While America was forging a new society in the fires of Civil War, Britain was making one of those cautious adjustments to the old society by which she had avoided civil strife for three hundred years. Thomas Arnold, as headmaster of Rugby from 1827 to 1842, had revitalized the public school system. Perceiving that the country and the empire needed more—and more efficient—civil servants and managers than the aristocracy and landed gentry could supply, he and the headmasters of the many Anglican boarding schools that opened their gates in the 1850s sought to make 'Christian gentlemen' of the sons of the middle classes. The ethos of these schools was essentially chivalric. As readers of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* will remember, schoolboy fights were elevated into gentlemanly duels, and on the playing fields the same code of etiquette called for 'fair play' and 'the team spirit'. Each school was dominated by its chapel, which suited the philistine respectability of the devout bourgeois, and the curriculum was dominated by Latin, and to a lesser extent, Greek. In 1884 there were twenty-eight classics masters at Eton, six mathematics masters, one historian, no modern language teachers, and no scientists. As late as 1905, classics masters still formed more than half the teaching staff.

The poet-spokesman for the public schools at the end of the nineteenth century was Henry Newbolt. The title of his poem 'Clifton Chapel' acknowledges a debt to Matthew Arnold's 'Rugby Chapel', but whereas the headmaster's son addresses his father and 'the noble and great who are gone', Newbolt exhorts a new generation of imperialists:

To set the cause above renown,
To love the game beyond the prize,
To honour, while you strike him down,
The foe that comes with fearless eyes;
To count the life of battle good,
And dear the land that gave you birth,
And dearer yet the brotherhood
That binds the brave of all the earth.

* * *

God send you fortune: yet be sure,
Among the lights that gleam and pass,

You'll live to follow none more pure
  Than that which glows on yonder brass:
'*Qui procul hinc*,' the legend's writ,—
  The frontier-grave is far away—
'*Qui ante diem periit:*
  Sed miles, sed pro patria.'[6]

In a more famous or notorious poem, 'Vitaï Lampada' (84)—a title taken from Lucretius, meaning '[They pass on] the Torch of Life'—he envisaged the public-school ethic at work on a frontier far away:

The river of death has brimmed his banks,
  And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
  'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

Newbolt's repeated celebration of the imperialist officer and gentleman, carrying to his country's battlefields a sporting code acquired on the playing fields of his public school, parallels a poetic reappraisal of the private soldier initiated by Kipling's *Barrack-room Ballads* (82) and sustained by Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (91).

Requirements for a commission in the army had altered radically since the 1850s. 'In place of the old patronage system came, first, limited competition—examination for the select few whom the authorities had personally nominated—and then, in 1870, open competition.'[7] The year 1870, of course, saw the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War that inaugurated the era of violence in international politics, precipitating further army reforms, the rapid mechanization of warfare, and the growth of imperialist ideologies. Malvern van Wyk Smith has shown how in Britain, at the start of the Boer War, militarist and pacifist doctrines were clearly defined and opposed; and how, because the Education Acts of 1870 and 1876 had made the army that sailed for South Africa the first literate army in history, the British Tommy sent home letters and poems that anticipate those his sons were to send back from the Western Front.[8]

These factual and often bitter accounts of combat, to say nothing of the greater poems by Thomas Hardy (85), had been forgotten by 1914 when that War we still—many wars later—know by the adjective Great was greeted in some quarters with a curious gaiety and

[6] 'He who lies far from this place . . . died before daybreak: but he was a soldier and he died for his country.'

[7] Rupert Wilkinson, *Gentlemanly Power: British Leadership and the Public School Tradition*, 1964, p. 10.

[8] *Drummer Hodge: The Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War*, 1978.

exhilaration. Rupert Brooke captured the mood of that moment in a sonnet to which he gave the paradoxical title of 'Peace' (103). His first line 'Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour'—and the 'hand' and the 'hearts' that follow—reveal one of his sources: the hymn, and ironically it is a hymn translated from the German, beginning

> Now thank we all our God
> With heart, and hands, and voices. . . .

Shortly before Brooke's death, the Dean of St Paul's read aloud in a sermon from the Cathedral pulpit another of his 'war sonnets', 'The Soldier' (105). So the soldier poet was canonized by the Church, and many other poets—civilians and soldiers alike—found inspiration for their battle-hymns, elegies, exhortations, in the well-thumbed pages of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

Most of the British poets we associate with the years 1914 and 1915 had a public-school education and this, more than any other factor, distinguishes them from those we associate with the later phases of the war. The early poems return again and again to the appallingly anachronistic concept of war as a game; a concept most clearly articulated by E. B. Osborn, in the introduction to his best-selling anthology *The Muse in Arms*, published in 1917. He wrote:

Modern battles are so vast and so extended in both space and time that composed battle-pieces, such as have come down to us from the far-off centuries of archery and ballad-making, may no longer be looked for. The thread on which all such pictures are strung—the new impressions such as 'The Assault' [a poem by Robert Nichols] and old ballads such as 'Agincourt, or the English Bowman's Glory'—is the insular conception of fighting as the greatest of all great games, that which is the most shrewdly spiced with deadly danger. The Germans, and even our allies, cannot understand why this stout old nation persists in thinking of war as a sport; they do not know that sportsmanship is our new homely name, derived from a racial predilection for comparing great things with small, for the *chevalerie* of the Middle Ages. In 'The English Bowman's Glory', written before any of our co-operative pastimes were thought of, the fine idea is veiled in this homely term:

> Agincourt, Agincourt!
> Know ye not Agincourt?
> Oh, it was noble sport!
> Then did we owe men;
> Men, who a victory won us
> 'Gainst any odds among us:
> Such were our bowmen.

Light is thrown on this phase of the British Soldier's mentality by the verse . . . he writes in honour of the games and the field-sports in which he acquired the basal elements of all true discipline—confidence in his companions and readiness to sacrifice the desire for personal distinction to the common interest of his team, which is, of course, a mimic army in being.

The legacy of the public-school classroom was as significant for the poets as that of the playing field. Paul Fussell rightly points out in his stimulating book, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, that the British soldier tended to look at the war through literary spectacles. He evidences the popularity of Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse*, but surprisingly overlooks the extent to which the public-school poets' attitude to war was conditioned by their years of immersion in the works of Caesar, Virgil, Horace, and Homer. A reading of these authors would leave no intelligent boy in any doubt that war was a brutal business, but by setting 'The Kaiser's War' in a long, and dare one say a time-honoured tradition, the classics encouraged a detached perspective—quite apart from offering the soldier, by analogy, the intoxicating prospect of a place in history and literature. In the poems of 1914 and the first half of 1915, there are countless references to sword and legion, not a few to chariot and oriflamme, but almost none to gun and platoon. Siegfried Sassoon writes, in a poem of 1916, 'We are the happy legion'; while Herbert Asquith begins his elegy, 'The Volunteer' (100),

> Here lies a clerk who half his life had spent
> Toiling at ledgers in a city grey,
> Thinking that so his days would drift away
> With no lance broken in life's tournament.
> Yet ever 'twixt the books and his bright eyes
> The gleaming eagles of the legions came,
> And horsemen, charging under phantom skies,
> Went thundering past beneath the oriflamme.

A similar vision prompted Rupert Brooke, under orders for the Dardanelles, to write to Asquith's sister, Violet:

Do you *think* perhaps the fort on the Asiatic corner will want *quelling*, and we'll land and come at it from behind and they'll make a sortie and meet us on the plains of Troy? . . .

I've never been quite so happy in my life, I think. Not quite so *pervasively* happy; like a stream flowing entirely to one end. I suddenly realize that the ambition of my life has been—since I was two—to go on a military expedition against Constantinople.[9]

[9] Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *The Letters of Rupert Brooke*, 1968, pp. 662–3.

On the troopship, he and his friends read Homer to each other, and in a verse-letter from the trenches, Charles Hamilton Sorley remembers how Homer sung

> Tales of great war and strong hearts wrung,
> Of clash of arms, of council's brawl,
> Of beauty that must early fall,
> Of battle hate and battle joy
> By the old windy walls of Troy. . . .
> And now the fight begins again,
> The old war-joy, the old war-pain.
> Sons of one school across the sea
> We have no fear to fight. . . .[10]

The poems of these young men move us, as human documents, more than many better poems. They illustrate the hypnotic power of a long cultural tradition; the tragic outcome of educating a generation to face not the future but the past. By the end of 1915, Brooke, Sorley, and many lesser public-school poets were dead. Sassoon, it is true, survived to follow Sorley's lead and break the code of his upbringing—and all honour to him. By publicly protesting in 1917 against the continuance of the war, and by lashing the leaders of Church and State and the Armed Forces in his poems, he rejected the obedience to authority that is one of the prime tenets of the public-school system. The poets who followed him—Owen, Rosenberg, Gurney—had no such conventions to reject. They went to war, as Whitman had done, with no Homeric expectations, and set themselves to expose what Owen called

> The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
> Pro patria mori.

One, indeed, had Whitman in mind. 'When I think of *Drum Taps*,' wrote Rosenberg three months before he was killed, '[*my* poems] are absurd.'

It is often assumed that chivalry died with the cavalry, scythed by machine guns, in the Battle of the Somme. Auden, characterizing the past in his poem 'Spain 1937' (198) wrote:

> Yesterday the belief in the absolute value of Greek;
> The fall of the curtain upon the death of a hero . . .

[10] *Marlborough and Other Poems*, 1919, pp. 82–3.

The curtain may have fallen, but it was to rise and fall again. It is a commonplace that traditions die hard, and none die harder than military ones. Leaving Oxford in 1940 to join a cavalry regiment, Keith Douglas embellished a photograph of himself in uniform—humorously, it must be said—with the scrolled caption 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'. Two years later, chafing at his enforced inactivity behind the lines while his regiment was engaging Rommel's tanks in the Western Desert, Douglas drove off—in a two-ton truck and direct disobedience of orders—to join them; earning thereby his batman's commendation: 'I like you, sir. You're shit or bust!' His subsequent achievement as a poet was to celebrate the last stand of the chivalric hero (224),

> the doomed boy, the fool
> whose perfectly mannered flesh fell
> in opening the door for a shell
> as he had learnt to do at school.

In 1915, on the Western Front, Julian Grenfell had written of the cavalryman (108) that

> In dreary, doubtful waiting hours,
> Before the brazen frenzy starts,
> The horses show him nobler powers;
> O patient eyes, courageous hearts!

So Douglas, in his fine elegy, 'Aristocrats' (226), takes the horse as the natural symbol for his anachronistic hero, and in its last line we seem to hear the last echo from the Pass at Roncesvalles: 'It is not gunfire I hear but a hunting horn.' The poem succeeds where most poems of 1914 and 1915 fail. It is sharply focused, acknowledging both the stupidity and the chivalry, the folly and the glamour of cavalrymen on mechanical mounts duelling in the desert. Douglas's language, finely responsive to his theme, fuses ancient and modern: his heroes are 'gentle'—like Chaucer's 'verray parfit gentil knight'—and at the same time 'obsolescent'.

Sidney Keyes was killed on his first patrol in North Africa, but in such poems of 1942 as 'Orestes and the Furies' and 'Rome Remember' he sees the Gorgon-head reflected in the classical shield he had acquired at a public school. He wrote:

> I am the man who groped for words and found
> An arrow in my hand.

Not a rifle, but an arrow. Henry Reed celebrated the rifle in the first of his 'Lessons of the War' (214), but the ironic detachment of these superb meditations on war and peace owes something to the poet whose lines, saucily emended, stand as epigraph to the sequence:

Vixi puellis nuper idoneus
Et militavi non sine gloria.

wrote Horace (*Odes*, iii. 26), which may be roughly rendered:

Lately, I have lived among girls, creditably enough,
and have soldiered, not without glory.

By changing *puellis*, to *duellis*, exchanging girls for battles, Reed cunningly announces and encapsulates the theme of his Lessons.

By no means all British poets of the Second World War came from public schools, and many more spoke a language that had more in common with Owen and Rosenberg. None, however, offers so sharp a contrast to the work of Douglas and Keyes as the American infantry-man-poets Louis Simpson and Lincoln Kirstein. Simpson tells us that after the war he suffered from amnesia, eventually broken by dreams of battle that—as with Owen—released his poems. He has, indeed, other resemblances to Owen—admiration for the soldier's endurance, compassion for his suffering, of which he writes with something of the same reverberant simplicity (242):

Most clearly of that battle I remember
The tiredness in eyes, how hands looked thin
Around a cigarette, and the bright ember
Would pulse with all the life there was within.

In his long poem 'The Runner', Simpson's college-boy anti-hero Dodd is humiliated by the rest of his platoon for a momentary act of cowardice; although like the Youth in *The Red Badge of Courage* he redeems himself subsequently. Cowardice, a taboo subject to poets in the chivalric tradition, is a theme of Kirstein's *Rhymes of a PFC*, the first poem of which ends:

The rage of armies is the shame of boys;
A hero's panic or a coward's whim
Is triggered by nerve or nervousness.
We wish to sink. We do not choose to swim.

Where Douglas had asked, in 'Gallantry' (224), 'Was George fond of little boys?' and had answered

> . . . who will say: since George was hit
> we never mention our surmise.

Kirstein writes openly and tenderly of homosexual love. Similarly, he and Simpson share—and show in their poems—what Simpson has described as 'the dog-face's suspicion of the officer class, with their abstract language and indifference to individual, human suffering'. It is interesting that he identifies the general infantryman with the animal that used to run beside the huntsman-cavalryman's horse. Simpson and Kirstein speak for the civilian stuffed into uniform not very tidily and against his will. They write of a wider range of military experience—not excluding cowardice and homosexuality—because they write as men rather than as soldiers conscious of soldierly tradition.

What may be termed the anti-heroic tradition is at least as old as Falstaff. It makes sporadic appearances in eighteenth-century English poetry, but does not oust its older rival until transplanted to America in the next century. A civil war fought by large numbers of conscripted civilians, a high proportion of them literate (but few versed in classical literature), was a new kind of conflict, and America's produced a new kind of poetry. Its principal poets, Whitman and Melville, were civilians and they established a perspective and a tone that would be adopted by those that followed them, combatant and civilian alike: so James Dickey, veteran of a hundred combat missions, begins 'The Firebombing' (250): 'Homeowners unite'. That, surely, is the one hope for the human race. Only if the poets' perception that we are all civilians gains universal acceptance will we be spared the fulfilment of Peter Porter's dark prophecy, 'Your Attention Please' (292).

The poems in this anthology have, with few exceptions, been arranged chronologically by conflict. Thus, Tate's 1928 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' (78), appearing with other poems of the American Civil War, comes before earlier evocations of the Franco-Prussian War by Rilke (79) and Rimbaud (80). The exceptions to this arrangement are mainly such nineteenth-century versions of heroic epic as Arnold's 'Sohrab and Rustum' (58), that tell us more about the period of their composition than that of their historical origin.

Long poems pose a special problem in an anthology of this kind, and I have preferred to print extracts than to omit them altogether as, for reasons of space, I felt obliged to omit dramatic poetry. It would have been unthinkable to exclude, for example, representative passages from the Greek and Latin epics that have so influenced war poetry in English. Translations from other literatures have been admitted when—but only when—they seem to me English poems in their own right.

The resulting selection necessarily includes many more 'horse-face' poems than 'dog-face' ones, and I am aware that the latter category could have been swelled by the addition of popular ballads such as appear in the 'Soldiers and Sailors' section of Frederick Woods's excellent *Oxford Book of English Traditional Verse*. I decided, however, that they show to better advantage in that context than they would in this.

Many friends helped in the preparation of the anthology, and I am particularly indebted to Miss Jacqueline Doyle, Professor Steven Fix, Professor Ephim Fogel, Professor Anthony Hecht, Professor Alan Heuser, Dr Dominic Hibberd, Professor Mary Jacobus, Professor Gwyn Jones, Mrs Judith Luna, Professor Kevin McManus, Professor Stephen Parrish, Mrs Jacqueline Simms, and Mr Charles Tomlinson. I am also grateful to the Royal Society of Literature, in whose transactions, *Essays by Divers Hands* (new series, vol. xli, edited by Brian Fothergill, 1980), a version of this essay appeared.

JON STALLWORTHY

Cornell University, 1984

THIRTY YEARS ON

THIS Oxford Book has been on active service for thirty years, one hundredth part of the history of warfare to which poets have borne witness. At no point in that history did man's inhumanity to man generate more eloquent testimony from more poets than in the two world wars of the last century, the Second no less than the First. Indeed, when account is taken of the memorable British, American, and European voices of 1941–45 and the aftermath of that conflict, the widespread ignorance of Second World War poetry is disturbing. Why it persists is a question cultural historians should address and a curriculum imbalance that educationalists should urgently correct. Too many schoolchildren (and too many teachers) need to be reminded how warfare—and poetry—have changed since 1918. For three-quarters of a century, hostile fire from the sky has been as common as fire from the ground; and poetry has sought to regain territory 'lost' to prose fiction, frequently with prosaic results. The Second World War produced at least as many potent poems as the First, but, like any war, many more that were impotent.

To demonstrate the qualitative range of poems prompted by warfare, and to suggest why many fail, a brief case-study of the poetry of the Vietnam War may be instructive.[1] This falls, more starkly than the poems of any earlier conflict, into two principal categories: those written by so-called 'Stateside' poets, who never left America, and those of the 'Vets', the veterans, who did. The Stateside poems can themselves be divided into two categories: first, the poetry of first-hand witness to the moral and other effects of the war on *America*—poems by Allen Ginsberg, for example; second, the poetry of second-hand witness to the war in *Vietnam*—too much of it like this:

[1] Some of what follows first appeared in 'The Fury and the Mire', in Jon Stallworthy, *Survivors' Songs from Maldon to the Somme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), an essay that was itself indebted to Subarno Chattarji, *Memories of a Lost War: American Poetic Responses to the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

Women, Children, Babies, Cows, Cats

> 'It was at My Lai or Sonmy or something,
> it was this afternoon. . . . We had these orders,
> we had all night to think about it—
> we was to burn and kill, then there'd be nothing
> standing, women, children, babies, cows, cats. . . .
> As soon as we hopped the choppers, we started shooting.
> I remember . . . as we was coming up upon one area
> in Pinkville, a man with a gun . . . running—this lady . . .
> Lieutenant LaGuerre said, "Shoot her." I said,
> "You shoot her, I don't want to shoot no lady."
> She had one foot in the door. . . . When I turned her,
> there was this little one-month-year-old baby
> I thought was her gun. It kind of cracked me up.'[2]

This was written by a great poet—Robert Lowell—but I cannot be alone in thinking it is not a great poem. In fact, I think it embarrassing in its blend of black demotic ('I don't want to shoot no lady') with the literary ('we hopped the choppers', and the coy 'Lieutenant LaGuerre'). The speaker does not persuade me he mistook the baby (so neatly foreshadowed in his orders) for a gun; or that 'It kind of cracked [him] up'. It would tell us—even if we did not know that Lowell never served in Vietnam—that his testimony is second-hand. In this, it is strikingly unlike his poignant and powerful poem 'Fall 1961' (270), which bears first-hand witness to a father's fear in the midst of the Cuban missile crisis:

> All autumn, the chafe and jar
> of nuclear war;
> we have talked our extinction to death.
> I swim like a minnow
> behind my studio window.
>
> Our end drifts nearer,
> the moon lifts,
> radiant with terror.
> [. . .]
> A father's no shield
> for his child [. . .]

If you feel more for the American father and his child than for the Vietnamese mother and baby, it might be that the poet felt more. Few

[2] Frank Bidart and David Grewanter (eds.), *Robert Lowell: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 596.

parents can feel as much pity and terror for a mother and baby seen in a newspaper or a television screen as for a threatened child of their own.

It does not follow, however, that a poem of first-hand witness will necessarily be better—more moving because more focused—than one of second-hand witness. Tennyson did not see the Charge of the Light Brigade (60) other than with his mind's eye, but his lifelong absorption in Arthurian legend and chivalry enabled him to take his place, imaginatively, with the 'Noble six hundred'. He feels—and enables us to feel—fury, and horror, and pity, and amazed admiration. Thomas Hardy did not see the Boer War burial party 'throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest / Uncoffined—just as found', but his lifelong absorption in the little world of Wessex enabled him to take his place, imaginatively, at the boy's graveside:

> Young Hodge the Drummer never knew—
> Fresh from his Wessex home—
> The meaning of the broad Karoo,
> The Bush, the dusty loam,
> And why uprose to nightly view
> Strange stars amid the gloam.

There is no fury in Hardy's 'Drummer Hodge' (88), but only profound pity and sadness—as for the son he never had. These poems of second-hand witness have an immediacy and power equal to any of first-hand witness, being the work of great poets, each with a lifelong imaginative investment in his subject. But such poems are rare. The second-hand testimony of lesser poets, lacking such investment, is seldom impressive and often embarrassing.

For demographic and social-historical reasons, the ratio of poets to other servicemen and women serving in Vietnam was less than in either world war. Most American intellectuals disapproved of the Vietnam War, and men of military age, particularly white men of military age, could avoid conscription by signing up for university education. And many did. The ratio of Stateside poets to battlefield poets was, therefore, greater than in either world war. There were hundreds of armchair poets pretending, like Lowell, to first-hand witness and/or degrees of moral commitment to which they were not entitled. Few were as good as Lowell, and collectively they deserved the savage rebuke offered by one front-line veteran of the Second World War, Anthony Hecht. Hecht wrote of one such (fortunately unidentified) armchair poet:

> Here lies fierce Strephon, whose poetic rage
> Lashed out on Vietnam from page and stage;

Whereby from basements of Bohemia he
Rose to the lofts of sweet celebrity,
Being, by Fortune, (our Eternal Whore)
One of the few to profit by that war,
A fate he shared—it bears much thinking on—
With certain persons at the Pentagon.[3]

The knock-out punch of the last line should not blind us to the lightning jab of the first: 'Here *lies* fierce Strephon'. Is he lying in the grave or telling lies, or both? The fury driving this poem is directed, I assume, not at a Stateside poet bearing true witness to the impact of the war on America, but one pretending to first-hand witness of combat in Vietnam. Hecht's rebuke comes with the moral authority of a poet burdened with the responsibility of bearing witness to the ultimate brutality of the Second World War. He served with the Infantry Division that discovered Flossenburg, an annex of Buchenwald, an experience that changed his life and his poetry.

The charge against a poem like Lowell's 'Women, Children, Babies, Cows, Cats' is that, far from shocking an exposed nerve, it has the numbing effect of second-hand journalism, thereby contributing to the insensitive apathy that enables us to turn, unmoved, from our newspaper's coverage of disaster to that of a football match. Hecht's rebuke to 'fierce Strephon' points up the further disturbing fact that many of those protesting against the war made money from appearances on 'page and stage'.

The situation and the poetry of the combatant 'Vets' could not have been more different. Their poems of first-hand experience often have a raw power, but I know of none that lives in the memory like Hecht's 'More Light! More Light!' (253). A problem for many American poets then aspiring to be war poets was that, rightly perceiving it to be an unjust war, they could not participate as servicemen or women; and lacking first-hand experience, could not write convincingly of the war 'on the ground'. Given some of their trumpeted expressions of moral commitment to the anti-war cause, it is perhaps surprising that none of them felt strongly enough to follow the example of W. H. Auden who, in January 1937, prompted a banner headline of the *Daily Worker*: 'FAMOUS POET TO DRIVE AMBULANCE IN SPAIN.' Explaining his decision to a friend, he wrote: 'I shall probably be a bloody bad soldier but how can I speak to/for them without becoming one?'[4]

[3] Anthony Hecht, *Anthony Hecht in Conversation with Philip Hoy* (Oxford: Between the Lines, 1999), p. 77.

[4] W. H. Auden, quoted in E. R. Dodds, *Missing Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 133.

One American poet *did* follow Auden's example. John Balaban went to Vietnam, but not as an ambulance-driver. He went as a Conscientious Objector to work in an orphanage (for children orphaned by his country's war), learnt Vietnamese, and stayed after the war to teach in a Vietnamese university. His poems of those years have a fine grain, a specificity of detail, rare in the many poems bearing first-hand witness to an armchair reading of newspapers or the watching of television news. As with the war poems of earlier wars, many of Balaban's best were written after the guns had fallen silent, most notably 'In Celebration of Spring' (280). That poem speaks of 'Our Asian war' and, of course, it *was* an American war, but not all its poets were American. Britain had its 'Stateside' contingent of armchair witnesses, and one—so far as I am aware, only one—poet-witness to the war on the ground: James Fenton. In the 1970s, Fenton was a freelance reporter in Indo-China and a foreign correspondent in Germany for the *Guardian*. Like Hecht a poet of the School of Auden, his German experience fuelled one of the great English-language poems of the holocaust. *A German Requiem*.[5] This was published in 1981, the same year as one of the great English-language poems of the South-East Asian wars, his 'Dead Soldiers' (282). The power and poignancy of each derives from Fenton's first-hand experience of human suffering, but the poignancy is sharpened by his deployment of grimly comic detail and a refusal to lapse into mawkish solemnity.

What do these and other war poems achieve? In that their subject is tragedy, they can—when made with passion and precision—move us (as Aristotle said) to pity and terror; also, I suggest, to a measure of fury. And just as we go to a performance of Shakespeare's *King Lear* or Britten's *War Requiem* for pleasure, we return (or at least I return) to Homer or Owen or Auden for the pleasurable satisfaction that masterpieces afford.

In the short term, one must doubt whether the poems about Vietnam had any significant effect on the course of the war. Certainly the (much better) poems of 1914–18 and 1939–45 had no significant effect on the course of the two World Wars. In the longer term, however, war poems *have* through history had a significant effect in shaping their societies' attitudes to warfare. The epics of heroic ages—*The Iliad, Beowulf*—encouraged the pursuit of glory with their celebration of courage and skilful swordplay. Over the centuries, all that changed. More British poems of the First World War confirmed 'The Old Lie:

[5] James Fenton, *The Memory of War* (Edinburgh: The Salamander Press, 1982), pp. 9–19.

Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori' than challenged it; but, with few exceptions, they have been relegated to the dustbin of history. The poets whose work has survived sing a very different song: one that has played a significant part in introducing subsequent generations to the realities of modern warfare.

The poems of the Second World War have had less impact—not because they were less good, but because the reading public has become increasingly attuned to prose, and because the Word (prose as well as verse) has increasingly lost ground to the Image. Our knowledge of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan derived as much from newspaper and television images as from the spoken or written word. Many poems from or about those wars have been published on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, but all the precedents suggest that the definitive poems from those conflicts have yet to be written—with, I suggest, one exception, Peter Wyton's 'Unmentioned in Dispatches' (289). As and when others emerge, I believe they are as likely to come from the hand of a frontline medic or war correspondent as from a professional soldier.

I am grateful to the Oxford University Press for commissioning me to recruit reinforcements; and to Fran Brearton, Sandie Byrne, Subarno Chattarji, Santanu Das, Hannah Field, Peter and Sian France, Margit Kail, Tim Kendall, Nancy Macky, Carol O'Brien, and Mary Jo Salter for their help and advice.

NOTE ON DATES USED

In this anthology, the date of composition, where that can be established, is given in italics at the end of the poem (ranged right); where that date is unknown, the date of first book publication is given in roman (ranged left).

Wolfson College, Oxford, 2014

THE BIBLE

1 from *The Book of Exodus*

Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation: my father's God, and I will exalt him.

The Lord is a man of war: the Lord is his name.

Pharaoh's chariots and his host hath he cast into the sea: his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red sea.

The depths have covered them: they sank into the bottom as a stone.

Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy.

And in the greatness of thine excellency thou hast overthrown them that rose up against thee: thou sentest forth thy wrath, which consumed them as stubble.

And with the blast of thy nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as an heap and the depths were congealed in the heart of the sea.

The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.

Thou didst blow with thy wind, the sea covered them: they sank as lead in the mighty waters.

Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the Gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?

Thou stretchedst out thy right hand, the earth swallowed them.

Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed: thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation.

The people shall hear, and be afraid: sorrow shall take hold on the inhabitants of Palestina.

Then the dukes of Edon shall be amazed; the mighty men of Moab, trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away.

Fear and dread shall fall upon them; by the greatness of thine arm they shall be as still as a stone; till thy people pass over, O Lord, till the people pass over, which thou hast purchased.

Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, in the Sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established.

The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.

Translated from the Hebrew by William Tyndale

2 from *The Second Book of Samuel*

The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen!

Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.

Ye mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew, neither let there be rain, upon you, nor fields of offerings: for there the shield of the mighty is vilely cast away, the shield of Saul, as though he had not been anointed with oil.

From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty.

Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights, who put on ornaments of gold upon your apparel.

How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thine high places.

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

Translated from the Hebrew by William Tyndale

HOMER

c.900 BC

3 from *The Iliad*, book 16

Zeus who gathers cloud said: 'Come, dear Phoebus,
wipe away the blood mantling Sarpedon;
take him up, out of the play of spears,
a long way off, and wash him in the river,
anoint him with ambrosia, put ambrosial
clothing on him. Then have him conveyed
by those escorting spirits quick as wind,
sweet Sleep and Death, who are twin brothers. These
will set him down in the rich broad land of Lycia,
and there his kin and friends may bury him
with tomb and stone, the trophies of the dead.'
Attentive to his father, Lord Apollo
went down the foothills of Ida to the field
and lifted Prince Sarpedon clear of it.
He bore him far and bathed him in the river,
scented him with ambrosia, put ambrosial
clothing on him, then had him conveyed
by those escorting spirits quick as wind,
sweet Sleep and Death, who are twin brothers. These
returned him to the rich broad land of Lycia.

from *The Iliad*, book 22

Achilles with wild fury in his heart
pulled in upon his chest his beautiful shield—
his helmet with four burnished metal ridges
nodding above it, and the golden crest
Hephaestus locked there tossing in the wind.
Conspicuous as the evening star that comes,
amid the first in heaven, at fall of night,
and stands most lovely in the west, so shone
in sunlight the fine-pointed spear
Achilles poised in his right hand, with deadly
aim at Hector, at the skin where most
it lay exposed. But nearly all was covered
by the bronze gear he took from slain Patroclus,
showing only, where his collarbones
divided neck and shoulders, the bare throat
where the destruction of a life is quickest.
Here, then, as the Trojan charged, Achilles
drove his point straight through the tender neck,
but did not cut the windpipe, leaving Hector
able to speak and to respond. He fell
aside into the dust. And Prince Achilles
now exulted:

'Hector, had you thought
that you could kill Patroclus and be safe?
Nothing to dread from me; I was not there.
All childishness. Though distant then, Patroclus,
comrade in arms was greater far than he—
and it is I who had been left behind
that day beside the deepsea ships who now
have made your knees give way. The dogs and kites
will rip your body. His will lie in honour
when the Achaeans give him funeral.'

Hector, barely whispering, replied:

'I beg you by your soul and by your parents,
do not let the dogs feed on me
in your encampment by the ships. Accept
the bronze and gold my father will provide
as gifts, my father and her ladyship
my mother. Let them have my body back,