

William Noel Hodgson

The Gentle Poet



The Devonshires held this trench. The Devonshires hold it still.

William Noel Hodgson 1893 – 1916

William Noel Hodgson was a Second Lieutenant in the 9th Devonshires who was well-known for his poetry and prose before and during his time in the army. This is a discussion of some of those poems.

Background

William Noel Hodgson was born in 1893 in Thornbury near Bristol, the youngest son of the vicar of the parish; his father went on to become a bishop and Hodgson's feelings about the glory of God's creation are perhaps part of the root of his evident ambivalence about war.

His poems reflect a love of nature, particularly the northern landscape he loved. There is also a clear sense of his belief that war was brutal and achieved nothing, yet was an inescapable part of human history.

He grew up in Berwick-upon-Tweed and went to school in Durham before studying for his degree at Christ Church College, Oxford. Hodgson enlisted when war broke out and was commissioned in September 1914 as a temporary 2nd Lieutenant with the 9th (Service) Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment. During the war he published stories and poems under the pen name Edward Melbourne.

Popular in the Battalion, he was known as 'Smiler' to his comrades. He was awarded the MC and mentioned in despatches following the Battle of Loos when he was involved in holding a captured trench for 36 hours without reinforcements.

Hodgson was killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in the opening minutes of the advance, as he appears to have predicted. He was aged 23. All but one of the officers became casualties as well.

England to her Sons:

Sons of mine, I hear you thrilling
To the trumpet call of war,
Gird ye then, I give you freely,
As I give your sires before,
All the noblest of the children I in love and anguish bore.

Free in service, wise in justice,
Fearing but dishonours breath;
Steeled to suffer uncomplaining
Loss of failure, pain of death
Strong in faith which sees the issue and in hope that triumpheth.

Go, and may the God of battles
You in his good guidance keep:
And if he wisdom giveth
Unto his beloved sleep
I accept nothing asking, save little space to weep.

England to her sons was written in 1914 and very much reflects the atmosphere of enthusiasm and determination common in poems from the beginning of WW1. It is an anthem lending itself to musical adaptation and personifies England as a mother prepared to release her precious sons to fight in her defence. The tone of encouragement invites the reader to join up, to be one of the 'noblest of the children' and the verb 'thrilling' suggests excitement and eagerness to be a part of the war effort. The 'trumpet call of war' supports this and the historical connotations of the phrase 'As I gave your sires before' create a sense of being a part of something significant. This is war propaganda at its best, telling the reader that the only thing to fear is 'dishonour's breath' and using positive language – 'steemed', 'uncomplaining', 'strong in faith' and 'triumpheth' to influence potential soldiers.

Strong alliteration ('Go, 'God', 'good guidance' reinforces the positive tone and 'wise in justice' reminds us that the cause is one worth fighting for.

Discussion point: How do the references to God and religion affect your reading of Hodgson's poems?

The Call

Ah! We have dwelt in Arcady long time
With sun and youth eternal round our ways
And in the magic of that golden clime
We loved the pageant of the passing days.

The wonderful white dawns of frost and flame
In winter, and the swift sun's upward leap;
Or summer's stealthy wakening that came
Soft as a whisper on the lips of sleep.

And there were woodland hollows of green lawn,
Where boys with windy hair and wine wet lips
Danced on the sun-splashed grass; and hills of dawn
That looked out seaward to the distant ships.

In infinite still night the moon swam low
And saffron in a silver dusted sky;
Beauty and sorrow hand in hand with slow
Soft wings and soundless passage wandered by.

And white roads vanishing beneath the sky
Called for our feet, and there were countless things
That we must see and do, while blood was high
And time still hovered on reluctant wings.

And these were good; yet in our hearts we knew
These were not all, - that still through toil and pains
Deeds of a purer lustre given to few,
Made for the perfect glory that remains.

And when the summons in our ears was shrill
Unshaken in our trust we rose, and then
Flung but a backward glance, and care-free still
Went strongly forth to do the work of men.

Hodgson uses bright colours with positive connotations (golden, white, green, saffron, silver) to evoke an idyllic paradise – ‘Arcady’ – remembered from a ‘youth eternal’ which now seems magical. The gentle alliteration and sibilance of stanzas 2, 3 and 4 create a setting of peace and optimism as the seasons give way to each other, winter to summer. A strong image of carefree youth is conjured in phrases such as

'boys with windy hair and wine wet lips' and 'sun-splashed grass'; 'infinite night' suggests that the magical time might have lasted forever. However, the use of past tense reminds us that this idealised world is gone, and 'beauty and sorrow hand in hand' may indicate the knowledge that war was coming. The last two stanzas tell us that the carefree innocence of youth is not enough and that the 'perfect glory' must be earned through 'toil and pains'. The young men, their youth emphasised by the use of the word 'boys', are 'unshaken in our trust' and believe wholeheartedly in the call to fight for their country; they leave behind the innocent pleasures of boyhood to become men.

Discussion point: The changing of seasons could be interpreted as a metaphor for life – does Hodgson seem entirely prepared for the next stage of his life in this poem?



Reverie

At home they see on Skiddaw

His royal purple lie,
And autumn up in Newlands
Arrayed in russet die,
Or under burning woodland
The still lake's gramarye.
And far off and grim and sable
The menace of the Gable
Lifts up his stark aloofness
Against the western sky.

At vesper-time in Durham
The level evening falls
Upon the shadowy river
That slides by ancient walls,
Where out of crannied turrets
The mellow belfry calls.
And there sleep brings forgetting
And morning no regretting,
And love is laughter-wedded
To health in happy halls.

Glossary

Skiddaw and Great Gable: mountains in the Lake District – Cumbria

Newlands Valley – picturesque valley in the Lake District

Gramarye – archaic – occult learning, magic

Vesper time – evening prayers

Reverie is an homage to the Cumbrian landscape, with mention of picturesque mountains such as Skiddaw and Great Gable and Newlands Valley. Colour and sound engage the senses to evoke a beautiful autumn evening in a magical place – ‘the still lake’s gramarye’ enchants the reader. There is a tone of peace, tranquillity and nostalgia. The rhyme and the gentle alliteration of ‘love is laughter-wedded’ and ‘health in happy halls’ and emphasise the harmony of life away from battle and a more peaceful time.

However, there are suggestions here of a threat – the ‘burning woodland’ could describe the fiery light of the evening sun on the trees but also hints at the coming devastation of vast areas of forest; words such as ‘grim’, ‘menace’ and ‘stark’ contrast with the positive images.

Discussion point: This poem was published in 1917 – does the phrase ‘sleep brings forgetting’ suggest time on leave or something else?

Back to Rest

A leaping wind from England,
The skies without a stain,
Clean cut against the morning
Slim poplars after rain,
The foolish noise of sparrows
And starlings in a wood -
After the grime of battle
We know that these are good.

Death whining down from heaven,
Death roaring from the ground,
Death stinking in the nostril,
Death shrill in every sound,
Doubting we charged and conquered -
Hopeless we struck and stood;
Now when the fight is ended
We know that it was good.

We that have seen the strongest
Cry like a beaten child,
The sanest eyes unholy,
The cleanest hands defiled,
We that have known the heart-blood
Less than the lees of wine,
We that have seen men broken,
We know that man is divine.

Composed while marching to rest-camp after the battle of Loos in which Hodgson won an MC.

Back to Rest conjures peaceful pastoral images in the first stanza that contrast with 'the grime of battle'. The 'leaping wind', 'skies...clean cut against the morning', 'poplars after rain', 'sparrows' and 'starlings' create a nostalgic picture of the land left behind and express joy at simply being alive.

The certainty of the last lines of stanzas 1 and 2 about what is good contrasts with the uncertainty of war in words like 'doubting' and 'hopeless'. The repetition of 'Death' opening the first four lines of stanza 2 emphasises the horrors that the poet and his comrades have just experienced, while verbs of action – 'whining', 'roaring' and 'stinking' – create a sense of panic and chaos.

The second stanza's variation of what 'was good' may reflect a sense of victory after the regiment has 'charged and conquered', yet it followed by a description in stanza 3 of the terrible effects fighting has had on the soldiers: 'the strongest/ Cry like a beaten child', 'the cleanest hands defiled' and 'men broken'. The last line of the stanza perhaps shows Hodgson's admiration for the ability of soldiers to withstand the trauma as he knows that 'man is divine'.

Discussion point: To what extent does it seem that this poem reflects Hodgson's conflicting feelings about the battle he has just survived?



Before Action

By all the glories of the day,
And the cool evening's benison,
By that last sunset touch that lay,
Upon the hills when day was done,
By beauty lavishly outpoured,
And blessings carelessly received,
By all the days that I have lived,
Make me a soldier, Lord.

By all of man's hopes and fears,
And all the wonders poets sing,
The laughter of unclouded years,
And every sad and lovely thing;
By the romantic ages stored
With high endeavour that was his,
By all his mad catastrophes
Make me a man, O Lord.

I, that on my unfamiliar hill
Saw with uncomprehending eyes
A hundred of thy sunsets spill
Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice,
Ere the sun swings his noonday sword
Must say good-bye to all of this;-
By all delights that I shall miss,
Help me to die, O Lord.

Published two days before he was killed in action on The Somme. Before Action is seen as a prayer for courage in the face of death. By the time this poem was written, Hodgson would have seen much horror and death.

In the first stanza, the poet invokes the beauty of Nature as evidence of the power of God, sufficient to 'Make me a soldier'. It is interesting that he had been a soldier for some time already. The second stanza ends with an entreaty to 'Make me a man, O Lord' which seems to underline the doubts that may have beset Hodgson and many other soldiers by this stage of the war.

The natural beauty of the 'last sunset touch' also seems to suggest a sense of ending, not just of the day; in the third stanza, 'A hundred of thy sunsets spill/ Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice' conveys an ambiguous feeling of optimism alongside the imagery of blood in the colours. The sheer number of deaths is simply implied here.

The 'blessings carelessly received' might indicate an awareness of how life is taken for granted until it is so readily threatened.

Hodgson's feelings about the futility of war are echoed in references to 'mad catastrophes' and 'uncomprehending eyes'. His recognition of the need to 'say goodbye to all of this' and the chilling final line 'Help me to die, O Lord' are strangely prophetic, written two days before he did indeed lose his life.

The Devons were tasked with capturing Orchard Trench near the heavily-defended Mametz. The route planned took the soldiers through a small wood known as Mansell Copse. Captain Martin of the 9th Devons identified a problem with this following the briefing – a German machine gun post high up in a corner of the nearby cemetery would have an unobstructed line of fire over No-Man's-Land, exposing the Battalions to severe risk. He created a plasticine model to demonstrate this while on leave; his commanding officers acknowledged that this was correct but felt that extensive bombardment would eliminate the danger.

The advance went ahead as planned. The troops were ordered to march in line, without stopping; as they reached No-Man's-Land, the German machine gun began firing. Hodgson was killed instantly by a bullet through the neck. He and over 160 of his comrades were buried near Mansell Copse.

Discussion point: What does 'Before Action' tell us about Hodgson's feelings?

