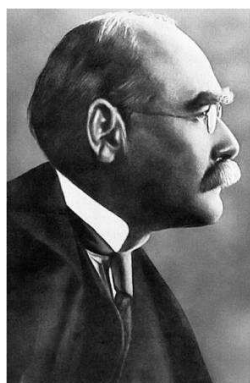


Poetry in the 20th Century

As the new century opened, Britain's most popular poet was Rudyard Kipling, closely followed by the best-selling A.E.Housman, although the serious literary critics of the time preferred the more difficult and mystical verse of W.B. Yeats. The First World War brought to prominence a number of younger soldier-poets, several of whom died at an early age because of the war.

In between the Wars the most prominent of English poets were T.S.Eliot, an American who became a British citizen, and W.H. Auden, an Englishman who became an American. These two writers are the giants of 20th Century English poetry. The second half of the century brought to prominence Dylan Thomas, Philip Larkin, and a few others. However, we are probably a little too close to that period to make final judgements on their lasting contribution.

RUDYARD KIPLING (1865-1936)



Kipling was born to English parents in India, which was then ruled by the British. He began writing stories and poems about India, a place he loved for its ancient and sophisticated culture. Some of his poems were printed in "Barrack Room Ballads" (1892) and this sold extremely well, making him a well-known name. He later wrote novels and stories like "The Jungle Book" (1894), "Kim" (1901) and the "Just So Stories" (1902). His most famous poem is called "If", a memorable statement of the Victorian values of stoicism and the "stiff upper lip" that is supposed to be a traditional British virtue. It is often voted Britain's favourite poem., and used to be learnt by heart in all British schools. The poem includes the lines:

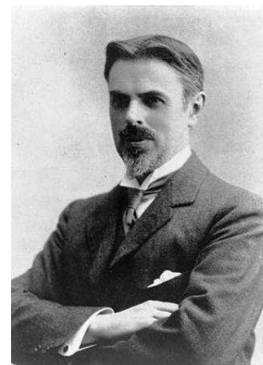
If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
.....
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings - nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run -
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man my son!

The poem's lines, "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster/ and treat those two imposters just the same" are carved on the wall of the players' entrance to the Wimbledon tennis courts. During World War 1 Kipling's 18 year old son was killed in action, and Kipling's later poems are much darker and less hopeful.

A.E. HOUSMAN (1859-1936)

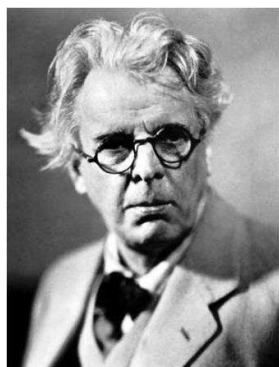
Alfred Edward Housman wrote poetry and studied classics in his spare time whilst working as a poorly paid clerk in London. Eventually he became Greek and Latin Professor at London University and one of the greatest classical scholars of his time. His first collection of poems, "A Shropshire Lad" was published at his own expense when he was 37. These poems were written as a result of his feelings when his beloved friend Moses Jackson



moved to India and got married. Housman's clear and simple poems are about country people, the beauties of nature and the shortness of life, lost youth, and above all, death. In his lifetime he published just one other book, "Last Poems" (1922). His poems were very successful and sold extremely well.

After his death in 1936 a final collection of his poems was published. Many of these poems were about his love for Moses Jackson, and Housman had not allowed them to be published earlier because he had always kept secret the gay side of his life.

W.B.YEATS (1865-1939)



William Butler Yeats was an Irish poet and playwright, winner of the 1923 Nobel Prize for Literature, and one of the most influential writers of the 20th Century. His first poems were published when he was 24 and in 1893 he published "The Celtic Twilight", a collection of poems about Irish legends and myths. He became increasingly involved in Irish politics and believed in the power of poetry and plays to bring a sense of unity to Ireland. He was a great craftsman, and his poetry draws upon a rich vein of mystic melancholy, Irish mythology and wide-ranging reading in literature, history and philosophy. He is a writer whose reputation has grown stronger in recent years.

His best-known poem is called "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (Innisfree is in the north-west of Ireland)

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
and a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,
and live alone in the bee-loud glade.
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
dropping from the veils of the morning to where the Cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
and evening full of the Linnet's wings.
I will arise and go now, for always night and day,
I hear lake waters lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core

RUPERT BROOKE (1887-1915)

Rupert Brooke's romantic poems, his extreme good looks and his early death at the age of 27 in World War One contributed to his fame and idealised image. After leaving Cambridge University, where he became friends with many of those in the 'Bloomsbury Group', Brooke studied in Germany and travelled in Italy. In 1909 he moved to the village of Grantchester, near Cambridge, which he celebrated in his poem, "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester" (1912). His first collection of poems was published in 1911. In 1913, he left England to travel in North America, New Zealand and the Pacific islands. He returned home shortly before the outbreak of World War One, joined the Royal Naval Division and took part in the disastrous Antwerp expedition in October 1914. In February 1915, he set sail for the Dardanelles. On board ship he developed septicaemia from a mosquito bite. He died on 23 April 1915 on a hospital ship off the Greek island of Skyros and was buried in an olive grove on the island. Rupert Brooke caught the optimism of the opening months of the war with his wartime poems, published after his death, which expressed an idealism about war that contrasts strongly with poetry published later in the conflict. His most famous poem, from his War Sonnets contains the lines:



If I should die, think only this of me:
 That there's some corner of a foreign field
 That is for ever England. There shall be
 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
 A body of England's, breathing English air,
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home



SIEGFRIED SASSOON (1886-1967)

Siegfried Sassoon was one of the most famous of England's war poets. Unlike Rupert Brooke's idealised portrait of the war, Sassoon wrote satirical and biting poems about the conduct of the war. In France in 1915, he displayed great bravery and was given the nickname 'Mad Jack' for his near-suicidal exploits. He was awarded the Military Cross for outstanding bravery, but he threw the medal away in protest against the war.

He was wounded in 1917 and while in hospital he met fellow-poet, Wilfred Owen, whom he encouraged to write anti-war poetry. Both men returned to the front where Owen was killed in 1918. Sassoon was again wounded, and spent the remainder of the war in England. Many of his war

poems were published in "The Old Huntsman" (1917) and "The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon" (1919).

After the war Sassoon travelled extensively and then wrote the near-autobiographical novel "Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man" (1928). It was an immediate success, and was followed by other novels, which contrasted the beauties of country life with the senseless brutality of war. He continued to write both prose and poetry. In 1957, he was received into the Catholic church. He died in September 1967, aged 80. His poem "Attack" contains the following lines:

.....
 With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
 Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
 Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
 They leave their trenches, going over the top,
 While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
 And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
 Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

WILFRED OWEN (1893-1918)

Wilfred Owen's poems illustrate his anger at the cruelty and waste of war, which he experienced during service on the Western Front in 1917. After experiencing heavy fighting, he was diagnosed with shellshock, and brought back to a war hospital in Edinburgh where he met the poet Siegfried Sassoon. Reading Sassoon's poems and discussing his work with Sassoon revolutionised Owen's style and his conception of poetry. He returned to France in August 1918 and in October was awarded the Military Cross for bravery. Just one week before the end of the war he was killed while leading his men across a canal in Belgium. He was 25 years old. The news of his death reached his parents on 11 November, 1918 - the very day the end of the war was announced. Edited by Sassoon and published in 1920,



Owen's single volume of poetry contains some of the most poignant English poetry of World War One, including "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Dulce et Decorum Est", which ends with these lines:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud (*)
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest (*)
 To children ardent (*) for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
 Pro patria mori.

(*) "Cud" is normally the regurgitated grass that cows chew. It is usually green and bubbling. Here a similar looking material was coming out of the soldier's mouth

(*) "High zest" - means great enthusiasm

(*) "ardent" - keen and enthusiastic

"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" - This is a famous phrase from a Latin Ode by the Roman poet, Horace. It means "it is sweet and right to die for your country". These words were frequently quoted at the start of the first World War.



T.S.ELIOT (1888-1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot is the most important English poet of the 20th Century. He was born in St Louis, USA but moved to England in 1915 and eventually became an English citizen. In 1917 he published "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", a masterpiece of the modernist movement. Then in 1922 published "The Waste Land", a long poem which caught the mood of despair and confusion felt in the years between the two World Wars. This poem is a mixture of references to modern life and great literature of the past, written in a style that combines everyday phrases with scholarly language. It is hard to understand, but is one of the great works of the 20th Century.

During his career wrote seven verse plays including the much praised "Murder in the Cathedral" (1935) - the story of Henry II and the martyr Thomas Beckett; he wrote light-hearted verse like "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" (1939) - which was adapted into a world-wide hit musical called "Cats"; as well as some of the best-known poems in the English language.

His masterpiece is "Four Quartets" (published 1943) - four long poems each first published separately. Each poem has the title of an actual geographical location: "Burnt Norton" (1936), "East Coker" (1940), "The Dry Salvages" (1941) and "Little Gidding" (1942). Each poem has five sections and each begins with thoughts on the geographical location of its title, and then deals with the nature of time and its relation to the human condition. Each poem is associated with one of the four classical elements: air, earth, water, and fire.

The poems draw deeply on Christian theology, thought, traditions and history. They are extremely difficult to understand (even for people whose first-language is English) but they are certainly among the all-time greatest works of English poetry. T.S.Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.

A famous quote from his poem "The Hollow Men" says:

This is the way the world ends:
 Not with a bang but a whimper



W.H.AUDEN (1907-1973)

Wystan Hugh Auden was an English poet who later became an American citizen. His poems are regarded as among the best of the 20th Century and deal with such subjects as love, moral and political issues, and his deep commitment to the Christian religion. He believed that the poetry of his day was tired and unimaginative, and he set out to make poetry relevant to the 20th Century by writing about everyday modern objects and using simple, direct language.

His early poems, written in the 1920s and 1930s, were mostly left-wing, political and influenced by his experiences as a volunteer ambulance-driver in the Spanish Civil War. Although he was aware from an early age that he was homosexual, when he was 29 he married Erika Mann, the daughter of the German novelist, Thomas Mann, so that she could escape Nazi Germany. His poems in the 1940s explored religious and ethical themes, and from the 1950s onwards many of his poems looked at the ways in which words revealed and concealed emotions. With his life-long gay partner, Chester Kalman, he took a particular interest in writing opera librettos, a form ideally suited to direct expression of strong feelings.

His most famous poem “Stop all the clocks” was originally written as a satire on the death of a politician, but was then re-written more seriously to be set to music. This later version has become a great favourite in England, often recited (inappropriately!) at funerals.

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

DYLAN THOMAS (1914-1953)

Dylan Thomas is the most famous Welsh writer of the 20th Century and one of Britain’s best modern poets. Much of his writing depicts life in Wales and, although written in English, captures the musical quality of the Welsh language. His greatest success came with “Under Milk Wood”, a play written for radio, a prose work filled with poetic cadences and images of life in a small Welsh coastal town.

He was a great lyricist and a superb craftsman. His images were carefully ordered in a patterned sequence, and his major theme was the continuing process of life and death, men and women



locked in cycles of growth, love, birth, death, and new life again. His poetry is also full of images from the Bible, Welsh folklore and preaching, and he often delights in creating new words and combinations of words in the style pioneered by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Dylan Thomas lived a wild, almost Byronic life, his drinking was legendary, and he died of alcoholic poisoning at the age of 39. His best known poem was written at the time of his father's death and contains the lines

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light

PHILIP LARKIN (1922-1985)

Philip Larkin is one of the most popular and widely read of modern poets, best known for three books of verse: "The Less Deceived" (1955), "The Whitsun Weddings" (1964) and "High Windows" (1974). Larkin used traditional forms and disliked modern poetry. His poems are direct, using everyday language and are therefore easily understood. Some of them tend to be gloomy and death-obsessed, but they are often lightened with ironic understatement, and descriptions of everyday experiences which echo day-to-day events in the lives of his readers.



His popularity derives from the fact that he appears to be "ordinary" and speaks to his readers in "ordinary" words. To achieve this, of course, requires much underlying skill and craftsmanship. He was a solitary man, and the death of his mother in 1977 affected him so deeply that it ended his own writing career.

In 1984 he was offered the honorary position of Poet Laureate (the highest honour for any British poet) but he refused because he felt he could no longer produce good poetry. A typical example of his poetry and his use of ordinary (but non-poetical!) words is the poem "This be the Verse"

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sippy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.