

OUT IN THE DARK

Poetry of the First World War

in context and with basic notes

Edited by David Roberts



This war engendered an intensity of emotion and a poetic outpouring which included the finest war poetry ever written. The changing feelings - from early excitement and patriotism or doubt, through bewilderment, grief, compassion, anger and bitter regret - are all here in this compelling and informative collection.

Saxon Books



DULCE ET DECORUM EST,¹

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares² we turned our backs
 And towards our distant rest³ began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots⁴
 Of tired, outstripped⁵ Five-Nines⁶ that dropped behind.

Gas!⁷ Gas! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets⁸ just in time;
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime⁹ . . .
 Dim, through the misty panes¹⁰ and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering,¹¹ choking, drowning.

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 Pro patria m

8 October 1

1 *DULCE ET DECORUM EST* (Latin: "It is sweet and honorable") (from the words of Horace). The words were used during World War. They mean "it is a wonderful and honorable thing to die for one's country." 2 sent up to burn with a flare. 3 a casualty. 4 a few days, or longer. 5 the soldiers have struggled. 6 them as they struggle. 7 shells. 8 poison gas. 9 The filling of the lungs. 10 early name for gas mask. 11 glass in the eyepiece. 12 candle or gurgling like a man. 13 of the choking man, etc. 14 normally the regular. 15 issuing from the soldier. 16 the rightness of the idea.

GREAT

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If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud¹²
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest¹³
 To children ardent¹⁴ for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
 Pro patria mori.¹⁵

8 October 1917 - March, 1918

1 *DULCE ET DECORUM EST* - the first words of a Latin saying (taken from an ode by Horace). The words were widely understood and often quoted at the start of the First World War. They mean "It is sweet and right." The full saying ends the poem: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* - it is sweet and right to die for your country. In other words, it is a wonderful and great honour to fight and die for your country 2 rockets which were sent up to burn with a brilliant glare to light up men and other targets in the area between the front lines 3 a camp away from the front line where exhausted soldiers might rest for a few days, or longer 4 the noise made by the shells rushing through the air 5 outpaced, the soldiers have struggled beyond the reach of these shells which are now falling behind them as they struggle away from the scene of battle 6 *Five-Nines* - 5.9 calibre explosive shells 7 poison gas. From the symptoms it would appear to be chlorine or phosgene gas. The filling of the lungs with fluid had the same effects as when a person drowned 8 the early name for gas masks 9 a white chalky substance which can burn live tissue 10 the glass in the eyepieces of the gas masks 11 Owen probably meant flickering out like a candle or gurgling like water draining down a gutter, referring to the sounds in the throat of the choking man, or it might be a sound partly like stuttering and partly like gurgling 12 normally the regurgitated grass that cows chew; here a similar looking material was issuing from the soldier's mouth 13 *high zest* - idealistic enthusiasm, keenly believing in the rightness of the idea 14 keen 15 see note 1

GREATER LOVE₁

Red lips are not so red
 As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
 Kindness of wooed² and wooer³
 Seems shame to their love pure.
 O Love, your eyes lose lure⁴
 When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

Your slender attitude
 Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,
 Rolling and rolling there
 Where God seems not to care;
 Till the fierce Love they bear
 Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude.⁵