

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest 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 hoots
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys! -- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime. --
Dim, through the misty panes 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, choking, drowning.

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 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.

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born on March 18, 1893. He was on the Continent teaching until he visited a hospital for the wounded and then decided, in September, 1915, to return to England and enlist. "I came out in order to help these boys-- directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first" (October, 1918).

Owen was injured in March 1917 and sent home; he was fit for duty in August, 1918, and returned to the front. November 4, just seven days before the Armistice, he was caught in a German machine gun attack and killed. He was twenty-five when he died.

If you are interested in learning more about Wilfred Owen, his life and poetry, visit The Wilfred Owen Association @ <http://www.1914-18.co.uk/woa/>

You may also be interested in listening to Britten's War Requiem. First performed in 1942, Britten alternated selections of Owen's poetry with the Latin Requiem Mass in honor of his friends who died perished in WWI.