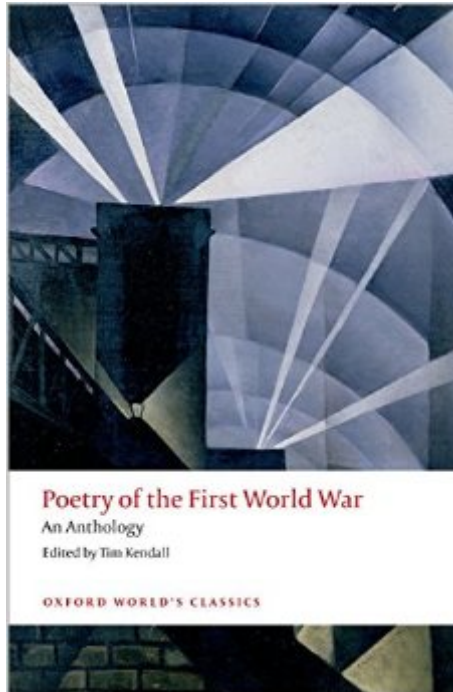


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# Poetry Of The First World War: An Anthology (Oxford World's Classics)



## Synopsis

The First World War produced an extraordinary flowering of poetic talent. Its poets mark the conflict in ways that are both intensely personal and as enduring as any monument. Their lines have come to express the feelings of a nation about the horrors and consequences of war. This new anthology provides a definitive record of the achievements of the Great War poets and offers a fresh assessment of the work on the centenary of the Great War's outbreak. Focusing on the poets themselves, the book is organized by writer, not theme or chronology. It offers generous selections from the celebrated soldier-poets, including Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke, whilst also incorporating less well-known writing by civilian and women poets. It also includes two previously unpublished poems by Ivor Gurney. A general introduction charts the history of the war poets' reception and challenges prevailing myths about the war poets' progress from idealism to bitterness. The work of each poet is prefaced with a biographical account that sets the poems in their historical context. Although the War has now passed out of living memory, its haunting of our language and culture has not been exorcised. Its poetry survives because it continues to speak to and about us.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When I was teaching, one of my favorite assignments each year was when we got to *World War 1 Trenches*. Each year we would dig *trenches* and my students would sit in them and write what I called *trench poems*. We would do the assignment after studying

the poetry of World War 1. I have long believed that some of the richest and most overlooked poetry of the last century came out of The Great War. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that I loved Poetry of the First World War compiled and edited by Tim Kendall. The poems in this anthology are intensely personal. Often you feel as if you are with them in the mud, barbed wire, fogs of chemicals, and rotting corpses. The anthology is a definitive work and contains all the great poets of the time, including Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke and Ivor Gurney. This is a great gift and should be on the shelves of anyone who considers themselves a poetry lover or history buff.

You call them Doughboys, Tommies, Fritz, Boche, Huns, Heinies, and poilus. Among them was Ivor Gurney who enlisted successfully, despite his poor eyesight, as a private with the Gloucesters to swap his nervous exhaustion for healthy fatigue on the battlefield. And we still remember Jack Kipling, the only son of Rudyard Kipling, who died on Loos battlefield in 1915. It was his father who pulled strings to have his son Jack commissioned. Jack was acutely short-sighted and unfit for military service, but Rudyard's patriotic fervor won over. On page 29 of this anthology, one reads Rudyard's "My Boy Jack:" When d'you think that he'll come back? Certainly, this is not a piece on effusions of a mortuary mason. After all, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (it is sweet and fitting(!) to die for one's country). A fuller annotation on each writer of poetry could have made the anthology much more readable. This is a good companion to Lorrie Goldsohn's "American War Poetry: An Anthology" (2006).

The 100th anniversary of the beginning of World War 1 is officially July 28, the day Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and attacked, in retribution for the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand and Archduchess Sophie in Sarajevo by a Serbian teenager. By the time the war ended, more than 70 million military personnel had been involved; more than nine million combatants were dead; and the German, Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian ruling families were swept from power. It seems odd to associate poetry with war, but it is a fact that no war is more connected to poetry than World War I. And for that we mostly have the English to thank. From 1914 to 1918, poetry went to war. But it went to war in all its possible permutations "jingoistic nationalism; nostalgia for a world being fought for even as it passed away; the cynical response of the men in the trenches to their incompetent generals; the mourning of civilians; pacifism and opposition to the war; and the reflection of what it all meant, or didn't mean, years after the war was over. The poets we usually associate with World War I are those who died in the conflict "Rupert Brooke

(1887-1915), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), and possibly Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918). These are the ones who usually show up in the high school and college English textbooks. But as Tim Kendall points out in *The Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*, the number of poets involved was far greater than the handful represented in the texts. They came from the upper classes, middle class and working class. Novelist Thomas Hardy, for example, wrote poems about the war from the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914 to the armistice in November 1918. So did Rudyard Kipling, who lost his son John at age 18 in the Battle of Loos. And it wasn't only poets who went to war; men in the trenches read poetry. In fact, Kendall says, the most commonly read book by soldiers in the trenches was A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, possibly because of the feelings the long poem evoked about the England being fought for. And after the war, it was largely the poets who framed Britain's understanding of what had happened and why. The anthology includes some wonderful poetry, and it's difficult to limit a choice of favorites to one or two or a handful. Here is one by Rosenberg, who grew up in Whitechapel in London's East End and was torn between being a painter or a poet until the war arrived:

*Break of Day in the Trenches*  
The darkness crumbles away.  
It is the same old druid Time as ever,  
Only a live thing leaps my hand,  
A queer sardonic rat,  
As I pull the parapet's poppy  
To stick behind my ear.  
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew  
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.  
Now you have touched this English hand  
You will do the same to a German  
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure  
To cross the sleeping green between.  
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass  
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,  
Less chanced than you for life,  
Bonds to the whims of murder,  
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,  
The torn fields of France.  
What do you see in our eyes  
At the shrieking iron and flame  
Hurled through still heavens?  
What quaver what heart aghast?  
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins  
Drop, and are ever dropping;  
But mine in my ear is safe  
Just a little white with the dust.  
And there Edward Thomas (1878-1917), considered something of a hack writer, Kendall says, until he developed a friendship with and received encouragement from Robert Frost. His first book of poetry was being prepared for publication when Thomas was killed at the Battle of Arras. This is his poem *The Private*:  
This ploughman dead in battle slept  
out of doors  
Many a frozen night, and merrily  
Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:  
"At Mrs Greenland's Hawthorn Bush," said he, "I slept." None knew which bush.  
Above the town,  
Beyond 'The Drover', a hundred spot the down  
In Wiltshire. And where now at last he sleeps  
More sound in France -that, too, he secret keeps.  
Two other favorites are Robert Service's *Only a Boche* and Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth*. Kendall, professor of English at Exeter University, is a poet, biographer and literary

critic, having publishing works on Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath, Paul Muldoon, war poetry, and 20th century British and Irish poetry. He also has a blog entitled War Poetry. In *The Poetry of World War I*, Kendall has created a remarkable anthology. The introductory essay alone is worth the price of the book. The poems included have been selected with care and insight (and are annotated), and each poet receives a succinct introduction. He also includes music-hall and trench songs such as *Mademoiselle from Armentieres*, because even the songs sung by soldiers had poetic influence. When I finished this deeply satisfying anthology, having read and reread many of the poems, I better understood why this war was so infused with poetry. These are poems that came from the mud, the blood, the lice, and the tedium of war in the trenches, a tedium interrupted by occasional shellings and horrific battles. And these poems came from the witnessing of friends and comrades dying, often painfully so, and even understanding that the deaths of enemy soldiers was in a way the death of themselves. This war changed everything, sweeping away what once was and what never could be restored. And poetry was there to express it and record it.

Excellent, comprehensive and well-annotated collection. There's enough here to guide the reader into delving further into the poetry and/or biography of any of the included poets. I wanted to reread some of the more familiar poems, such as "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," as well as others new to me, in this hundredth year since the beginning of the Great War. While acknowledging that nothing can fully convey the experience of war to anyone who wasn't there, I feel that these poets do so as near-completely as can be done with words. This for me is a satisfying anthology.

Exceed expectations. Best WW anthology I've seen and as poet, I have seen many. Well worth the investment for much pleasure.

Part of a "we will be better for having read this" choice by a small reading group. And we were. Vivid and moving descriptions, but little true poetry in the sense of the form of the language interacting with the thoughts conveyed.

Once I got to the poetry, every time I tapped next page I got the box to zoom an image. This formatting error did not allow for anything like a seamless, immersive reading experience.

Very moving poetry. Often beautiful but always gripping. My wife asked "why are you getting this?"

Because it touched my heart.

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