

“The Song of Mud”: Landscape, Memory and Poetry of the First World War (1914-18)

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Robert Graves’s poem “A Dead Boche” explores a world beyond “blood and fame” culminating in the helpless outburst: “War’s Hell!”¹ Graves vindicates his realization against the backdrop of the “Mametz Wood”. The village of Mametz was captured on 2nd July 1916, on the second day of the Battle of Somme. In early July, the 38th Welsh Division launched an attack through the mutilated landscape of the woods incurring heavy casualties on both sides. It was this corpse ridden landscape that Robert Graves discovered upon his arrival in the wood following the momentary end of the hostilities. In his autobiographical work *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Graves describes the transformed landscape while delivering his routine duties on the battlefield: “Going and coming, by the only possible route, I passed by the bloated and stinking corpse of a German with his back propped against a tree. He had a green face, spectacles, close-shaven hair; black blood was dripping from the nose and beard.”²

The Great War as the first major technological conflict inflicted heavy casualties, unmatched in the history of Britain. However, much beyond the loss of thousands of human lives, most readers remain oblivious to the other silent victim of the war: the surrounding landscape, that recurs as an omniscient backdrop to the carnage and bloodbath unleashed by the violent war. Bereft of a voice, the war ravaged landscape speaks volumes through the cadaverous farmlands, ghastly scorched trees and murky swamps intermingling human blood with the mud of the battle field. As Tait Keller rightly observes in “Destruction of the Ecosystem”:

History books typically regard the environment as the backdrop for battle or as collateral damage, if they consider the natural world at all. Such is the paradox of the environment in times of war: nature is both omnipresent and invisible. Yet only by taking the environment into account can we fully understand the trauma of the Great War and how this conflict shaped the most basic levels of human existence for years afterwards.³

The environment bore the brunt of the first major technological warfare. The images of the battle scarred landscapes in British war poetry testify to this observation, especially the destroyed landscapes adorned with barbed wires, pits, craters and trenches impregnated with casualties. Besides the poets, British war painters like Paul Nash, Charles Nevinson, John Nash, William Orpen and Muirhead Bone among several others also recurrently captured the war torn landscapes in their works. Occasionally, some of the celebrated war poems seem to correspond with the portrayal of violence on canvas.

Paul Nash's painting entitled "Mud" captures the horrific reality of the devastated landscape, especially the long stretches of wastelands on the war front. Ironically, the world of mud often served as "liquid graves" for the dead combatants in the Great War. Echoing Nash's work of art, Mary Borden's poem "The Song of Mud", portrays "the invincible, inexhaustible mud of the war zone" as "obscene", "filthy" and "putrid"; which also serves as "the vast liquid grave" of the armies, with combatants being gradually subsumed in the muddy world of the war ridden landscape:

Slowly, inch by inch, they have gone down into it,
 Into its darkness, its thickness, its silence.
 Slowly, irresistibly, it drew them down, sucked them down,
 And they were drowned in thick, bitter, heaving mud.⁴

On similar lines, Nash’s “Mud” (1918), “We are Making a New World” (1918) and the “Caterpillar’s Crater” (1917), also find a verbal expression in Mary Borden’s “The Song of the Mud” as it contrasts the life giving nature of the mud with its destructive capacity in the trenches. The “pale yellow glistening mud that covers the hills like satin” is also the “frothing, squirting, spurting, liquid mud that gurgles along the road beds.”⁵ Borden’s “The Hill”, much in tune with Nash’s “Hill 60”, narrates a graphic description of the war-ridden “monstrous landscape” with its “naked” fierceness, over which “crawled things of iron”⁶ to destroy humankind. The “faded grass” “shattered wood” and “naked tree” in Carola Oman’s “The Menin Road, March 1919”⁷ literally articulates Nash’s “The Menin Road”. Describing the war devastated landscape in his painting, Nash wrote: “Evil and the incarnate fiend alone can be master of this war, and no glimmer of God’s hand is seen anywhere. Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man...”.⁸

Akin to Mary Borden’s and Carola Oman’s experience as a nurse, portrayals of devastated landscapes recur in the poetry of soldier poets and other forms of verse of the First World War. But why do images of the landscape tend to dominate poetry of the Great War? What purposes do such portrayals serve in verse? This analysis specifically intends to explore the various socio-cultural factors that contributed to the artistic pre-occupation with landscapes in war poetry. In order to probe the reasons behind such a poetic preoccupation, it is important to re-trace the British literary sensibility on the threshold of the twentieth century, especially in the years leading to the First World War that definitely contributed to recurrent evocations in verse.

In his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell devotes an entire chapter entitled “Arcadian Recourses” to trace the link between the pastoral world and the war. In the section “The British Model World” Fussell defends the connection:

If the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral. Since war takes place outdoors and always within nature, its symbolic status is that of the ultimate anti-pastoral. In Northrop Frye's terms, it belongs to the demonic world, and no one engages in it or contemplates it without implicitly or explicitly bringing to bear the contrasting "model world" by which its demonism is measured. When H.M. Tomlinson asks, "What has the rathe primrose to do with old rags and bones on barbed wire?" We must answer, "Everything".⁹

Fussell moves on to assert that the notion of pastoral had a decisive role to play in fostering a deep sense of national identity among the British soldier-poets of the Great War. Yet beyond the rich pastoral tradition in verse, there were a host of other cultural factors that contributed to glorification of "rural England" landscapes in diverse forms of art, especially in the years immediately preceding the war. As historian Alun Howkins argues in "The Discovery of Rural England", "a strain emerged within English politics and ideas in the 1880s and 1900s which linked the rural to a general crisis in urban society".¹⁰ The latter part of the nineteenth century had already started witnessing a steady decline in England's manufacturing aspirations along with a marked simultaneous rise of its imperialist ambitions. In tune with contemporary observations there was wide spread alarm at the social degeneration that accompanied the shift in focus on urbanism, industrialism and colonialism. In fact, London as the epicentre of the large expanding colonial empire was frequently described as a place of "idleness and corruption". In search of a plausible paradigm for imperial England, historians like Edward Gibbon linked it with considerable dismay and concern to the "racial degeneration" that had afflicted the city life of ancient Rome. In fact, in the decade leading to the First World War, there was an element

of desperation in the air: “If London destroyed men and women in three generations and there were no replacements in the rural areas the race was doomed.”¹¹ This proliferating anxiety of an impending industrial, urban and racial catastrophe in turn contributed to a desperate search for alternatives. One redemptive option rigorously advocated by the state lay in the resurrection and glorification of the idea of rural England. In the years leading to the First World War, all political parties: Liberal, Labour and Conservative, all actively mooted plans to boost the lure of the rural England. In sharp contrast to the urban life, “the country and country people came to be seen as the essence of England, uncontaminated by racial degeneration and the false values of cosmopolitan urban life.”¹² In tune with the greater cultural anxiety Rudyard Kipling’s “The Islanders, 1902” records how the urban recruits for the Boer War were thought to be lacking the commensurate vitality for military service:

Yet ye were saved by a remnant (and your land’s long
suffering star)
When your strong men cheered in their millions while
your striplings went to the war.
Sons of the sheltered city—unmade, unhandled, unmet—
Ye pushed them raw to the battle as ye picked them raw
from the street.¹³

However, beyond the political and economic ramifications, there was a growing pressure to re-write and celebrate the cultural history of England and discover a “new Englishness”. The “recent past” with its focus on industrialism, urbanism and imperialism was described by a historian like G.K. Chesterton in *Short History of England* as “un-English”, and the overall cult of so called progress was blamed for hoodwinking the “ordinary Englishman”, “out of his possessions” including “his original rural life”.¹⁴

There was desperation in the air to stem the omniscient “decay

of national life” and return to natural rural roots of the country. As Howkins further observes in *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside Since 1900*: “This revaluation took many forms, ranging from the rediscovery of British traditional music and folklore to garden cities; from schemes for peasant proprietorship to the invention of a vernacular style in architecture. All were concerned with making the link between national identity and rural Britain.”¹⁵

The roots of obsession with landscapes and the natural world in then contemporary verse and subsequently in the years of the war were inevitably linked to this overall cultural milieu in which there was a renewed interest and celebration of the rural England. The popularity of Edward Hudson’s *Country Life and Georgian* anthologies of verse further testify and confirm the mood of the hour. It also doesn’t come as much of a surprise that a poet like Wilfred Owen was “reading Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus”¹⁶ in December 1917 at the Front. It is further interesting to note that even social or class differences did not stand as a hindrance to this nascent cult of celebration of rural England. On the contrary, it acted as a binding factor of social cohesion and unity. As Howkins points out:

First the external point of reference in most war poems (where there is one) is Southern England or some ideal of the rural. Sassoon, Blunden and Thomas all follow this... this vision seems to have spread downwards. Many, if not most, soldiers seem to have had good relationships with their immediate superiors. Both Lyn Macdonald’s book on Passchendaele and Martin Middlebrook’s on the Somme... stress the ‘love’ felt by ordinary soldiers for many of their officers. This created in the trenches, if not when out of the line, a *classlessness* based upon a shared experience of suffering very like the pre-war metaphors of a united agricultural community working together in the face of adversity.¹⁷

Love for rural England, though inherent, was quite often an outcome of prolonged exile from home—as during the war, or as a reaction to the growing industrial nature of the state. Even for the soldiers in the trenches, the “English idea of domesticity was inseparable from the image of a well-kept gardening allotment”.¹⁸ Evocation of the rural landscapes from memory in verse served various purposes for the male war poets writing from the trenches. First and foremost, it served the twin purpose of both “gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them”.¹⁹

Memories of rural landscapes also had another key purpose to serve. In his work *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery & National Identity in England & the United States*, Stephen Daniels asserts that, “protective images of landscape have played a role in cultural resistance to outside aggression”.²⁰ “National identities”, continues Daniels, “are co-ordinated, often largely defined, by ‘legends and landscapes’, by stories of golden ages... promised home-lands with hallowed sites and scenery”.²¹ Daniels’ notion of “hallowed sites and scenery” was perhaps echoed by Edward Thomas, when writing from the Front to his friend Gordon Bottomley, Thomas asked him: “must I see only Huns on these beautiful hills eastwards?”²² In his war poetry, Thomas “examines and cherishes those aspects of the country he had enlisted to defend”.²³ In a rare and unparalleled use of the pastoral, in his poem “Lob”, Thomas not only conjures up a true feeling of rural history but simultaneously conveys three important messages. First, by celebrating the creative energies of Lob he glorifies the “naturalised” man; secondly, Lob stands as a representative of the rural country which is quintessentially England for the poet and thirdly, as symbol of rural England he is eternal. The obvious implication is the poetic expectancy that England will overcome this crisis of the war and move on: “He is English as this gate, these flowers, this mire. / And when at eight years old Lob-lie-by-the -fire / Came in my books, this was the man I saw.”²⁴

For poets like Edward Thomas or Ivor Gurney or Edmund

Blunden, the fight was “not so much for the nation as for the land”, but it was also for “a territory with a culture and a way of life” that “was disappearing, even before the war.”²⁵ Through his pre-war compilations of verse like *The Harbingers and Pastorals*, Blunden commemorated the last vestiges of traditional strongholds of the Kent countryside. Naturally, for all these various reasons, evocation of rural landscapes in war verse, especially ones written during the early years of the war are replete with images of nationalist fervour and Englishness. In his sonnet “The Soldier”, Brooke affirms the notion of pastoral “England” as an integral part of a combatant’s national identity. Written early during the war, the octave of the sonnet evokes the idyllic beauty of rural England with its rich bucolic surroundings. The patriotic notion of the state is here distinguished for the rich storehouse of “her flowers to love”, the “rivers” and the eternal assurance of peace “under an English heaven”.²⁶ Brooke’s poem, as Howkins points out, is a direct extension of the then contemporary resurging faith in rural England: “He had been a ruralist, a reviver of the Tudor in the Marlowe Society at Cambridge, a seeker after country life in a caravan, and a socialist in Blatchford’s mould. Yet it was in his Englishness that he found some kind of justification for his life and actions.”²⁷ Similarly, Gurney’s “Strange Service” perceives the landscape of the Cotswolds “as an embodiment of the order and harmony” that has direct bearing on his war poetry.²⁸ Addressing the personified motherland in the poem, he asserts: “Little did I dream, England, that you bore me/Under the Cotswold hills beside the water meadows, /To do you dreadful service, here, beyond your borders/And your enfolding seas . . .”²⁹

In sharp contrast to the male poets, during the years of the First World War landscapes served as an apt metaphor, a sad reminder of the caged existence of women during the early twentieth century. In this context, rural landscapes mirrored the deep sense of void and isolation that engulfed the female psyche during the calamity of the war. Such a rendering in verse served as an elegy to women’s

existence in the war-time. In her poem “Picnic: July 1917”, Rose Macaulay, ventilates her frustration as regards the ‘guarding walls’ of the surrounding hills which symbolise the entrapment of hapless victims: “We are ringed all round by guarding walls, / So high, they shut the view. / Not all the guns that shatter the world / Can quite break through.”³⁰ Similar images of entrapment, also recur in H.D.’s verse. However, in this context it is important to bear in mind that if landscapes reminded women of social entrapment and political isolation, it also opened up new opportunities for exploration of the rural world during the years of the war. The circumstances of the war, for the first time directly planted women in the “maternal hills”, to bring about a rare inversion of the earlier male-centered vision of the world in real life. While pre-war idyllic visions of the artists’ pastoral world were being desecrated following the onset of the violent war, *The Landswoman* magazine on the other hand was busy in exploiting erstwhile male bucolic celebrations to lure more women for land work.³¹ Thus indirectly, the Great War paved the way for neo-politicisation of earlier landscape painters like George Stubbs and Jean Francois Millet, as their works proved to be politically expedient in attracting more female recruits for required land work. Articles like “The Poet and the Land Lass” (carried by *The Landswoman*, July 1918), citing verse extracts from Wordsworth’s “Solitary Reaper” and other literary works, were aimed at concretising such dreams on a wide scale due to sheer necessity and shortage of man-power during the war. Alice Meynell’s ecstatic celebration of “The Shepherdess”, immaculately portrays this alternate vision of the rural landscape during the war: ‘She walks—the lady of my delight— / A Shepherdess of Sheep— / Her flocks are thoughts, she keeps them white... She roams maternal hills and bright / Dark valleys safe and deep...’³² The experience of the land girls, no doubt opened up new vistas of pastoral experience for women, even though it may have been for a short span of time during the war.

Evocation of landscape serves as a recurrent motif in the poetry of the First World War. As this analysis tries to explore, multiple socio-cultural factors had resulted in such an artistic preoccupation. A close scrutiny of the significant contemporary developments in the decades leading to the war traces the socio-cultural roots that effectively contributed to the exploration of landscapes in diverse forms in war poetry. It also underscores the persistent evocations of landscape in the artistic commemoration of the memory of the Great War.

NOTES

- 1 Robert Graves, "A Dead Boche", *World War One British Poets: Brooke, Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg and Others*, Ed. Candace Ward, Mineola, (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), 44.
- 2 Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, (London: Penguin, 1960, 1st published Jonathan Cape 1929), 175.
- 3 Tait Keller, "Destruction of the Ecosystem",
https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/destruction_of_the_ecosystem
- 4 Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*, (London: Heinemann, 1929), 179
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57329/at-the-somme-the-song-of-the-mud>
- 5 Mary Borden,
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57329/at-the-somme-the-song-of-the-mud>
- 6 Borden, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57329/at-the-somme-the-song-of-the-mud>
- 7 Carola Oman, *The Menin Road and Other Poems*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1919), 12-13.
- 8 Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, (London & Indiana: Penguin Books & Indiana University press, 1981), 138-139.
- 9 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 231
- 10 Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England' in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, ed. Robert Colls & Philip Dodd (London: Crook Helm. 1986), p. 63.
- 11 Howkins, 67.
- 12 Howkins, 69.

- 13 Rudyard Kipling, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* made by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 129.
- 14 G.K. Chesterton, *Short History of England*, (London: Chatto, 1917), 131.
- 15 Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside Since 1900*, London & New York: Routledge, 2003, 25.
- 16 *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 520.
- 17 Howkins, 81.
- 18 *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 234.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 235.
- 20 Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery & National Identity in England & the United States*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 7.
- 21 *Fields of Vision*, 5.
- 22 *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley*, ed. R. George Thomas, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 283.
- 23 Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas*, (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 92.
- 24 Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, with a foreword by Walter de la Mare, (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), 55.
- 25 Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 88.
- 26 *The Poems of Rupert Brooke* edited and introduced by Timothy Rogers, (Mohndruck: Transworld Publishers Ltd, 1987), 133.
- 27 Howkins, ‘The Discovery of Rural England’, 79.
- 28 *Ivor Gurney: Rewards of Wonder, Poems of Cotswold, France*, London edited by George Walter, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000), 14.
- 29 *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, Chosen, edited and introduced by P.J. Kavanagh, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 31.
- 30 Macaulay, *Augustan Books of Poetry*, Second Series, No. 6. Ed Humbert Wolfe, (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), 11-12.
- 31 Paintings of artists like Stubbs (Hay Carting, The Haymakers) and Millet (The Gleaners) were used to lure more women for landwork. (July-Oct 1918, *The Landswoman*)
- 32 As cited in *The Landswoman*, Vol. 1, No. 11, 1918, 233.

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