

Jessie Pope and Wilfred Owen

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OF THE two British Museum drafts of Wilfred Owen's 'gas poem', 'Dulce et Decorum Est', one has the 'dedication' 'To Jessie Pope, etc.' (the 'etc.' presumably meaning 'and all like her'), which is cancelled in favour of 'To a certain Poetess'; and of the two drafts which were owned by Harold Owen,¹ one has the former phrase, though without the 'etc.', between round brackets, and the other has the latter phrase between square brackets, but there is no cancellation. Nowhere else in any of the poet's manuscripts and letters is the lady named or referred to, and there is no evidence that she ever knew anything about him. As for the 'dedication' itself, editors and anthologists have either not quoted it or have relegated it to a note. But why? On whose authority?

We can assume that Jessie Pope was the 'friend' of the poem who had been telling with 'high' — though perhaps not with 'noble' — 'zest' to 'children' — or 'small boys' — 'ardent for some desperate glory', what she apparently accepted as an old truth but Owen believed to be an old lie. And since the poem was not written until October 1917 — not August, as used to be thought — we can also assume that she had been doing this during the war itself and in places where her words were seen not only by the 'children' but by Owen too.

It could hardly have been any of her quatrains in *Chuckles*, an animal-picture book for very young children published in 1917, that aroused Owen's indignation; for few of these had any reference to the war. In any case, however much war might have been glorified even in some of these versicles, the small boys who read them would have to live longer than the war was likely

¹ I am most grateful to Mrs Cecil Beevor for giving me permission to quote from Jessie Pope's poems, and to Mr Beevor, the late Harold Owen, and Miss Marilyn Lawes, Librarian of *Punch*, for their assistance to me in my research.

to last before they could confidently run to the recruiting offices to tell plausible lies about their ages:

When soldiers go to war, you'll find
The doggies won't be left behind.
Quick march! The brave procession comes,
While rub-a-dub-a, play the drums.

But by then Jessie Pope had established her reputation as the country's best known 'war poetess', with her three books, *Jessie Pope's War Poems* and *More War Poems*, both published in 1915, and *Simple Rhymes for Stirring Times*, published in 1916. By 1917 'a certain Poetess' could not have been anyone else.

The first two of these books contained all her war poems that had appeared in the *Daily Mail* and the few that had been in *Punch*. The publishers obviously thought that they were answering a widespread demand to have the poems in a more lasting form. 'Since the war began,' they said in their preface to the first book, 'Miss Pope has been publishing these poems, and has received from all parts of the world letters in their praise'. The praise came from troops no less than from civilians, and the publishers printed a copy of a letter from a soldier to the *Daily Mail* asking if the poem 'No!', which had appeared in the paper on 3 November 1914, could be sent to his wife: 'The verses were much admired by us all out here' and would be 'such a "buck up" for her'. Each stanza of the poem ended with the line 'Are we down-hearted? No!'.

We should not scoff too readily. For the Rupert Brooke of 'The Dead' and 'The Soldier' was the main poet throughout the war, not merely in the earlier years; and it was the subject-matter of those sonnets which was the main inspiration for the great numbers of poets, male and female, civilian and serving, who aspired to, and often reached, publication in the press and in book-form. On 22 January 1918, the *Daily Mail* reported that of the 'great chorus of soldier poets' which had succeeded Rupert Brooke 'The Editor of the *Poetry Review*, Mr. Galloway Kyle, has heard from at least a thousand, and of these about two hundred and fifty have sent readable verses'. The same paper regularly printed patriotic poems and mentioned or reviewed books of war poems, most of them written by people now unknown. Who, for example, were V. M. Dondney and Mary

Rowles Jarvis, to choose only two from so many? Or who was Captain Eliot Crawshay-Williams, whose *Songs on Service* had been dedicated to Lloyd George? And who was 'Touchstone', the author of scores of poems published by the paper during every year of the war?

There's nobody that's more inclined
 To peace than me and Bert and Bill,
 But till we get the proper kind,
 Well, we are game to stick it still.
 Let those who haven't done their bits
 Come here with rifles in their hands
 And have a cosy talk to Fritz
 The only way he understands!

Other names we of course know well: Alfred Noyes, Lt A. P. Herbert and that Captain Robert Graves who, in May 1918, was hailed as 'one of the most accomplished of the soldier poets' and as 'one who constantly seems to break new ground'.

But it was Rupert Brooke who had spoken for the nation once and for all, the same Rupert Brooke who is still, in the popular mind, the first and only poet of the war. On 1 May 1915 a photograph of him was printed in the *Daily Mail* over a tribute to one who could be summed up best as 'An Englishman'. On 5 November 1917 Maude Annesley, in an article headed 'Do We Hate Enough?' which warned that 'patriotism only will win this war', quoted the octave of 'The Soldier' and asked 'How many of the hundreds who have quoted these lines understand what they mean?'. A correspondent soon gave the appropriate reply: hatred was 'a righteous and virile sentiment'. And early in 1918 a reviewer, writing of how Rupert Brooke 'sang of England, and the world knew that the soul of his country was in this war', prophesied that his voice, though then silent, was 'never to die'. Those who opposed the war were as hopelessly outnumbered as they were officially and journalistically pilloried. Nobleness had been and still was walking in our ways again; it was not, for us, wild Winter. The *Daily Mail* proclaimed 'The Soldier'; it neither knew nor would have approved of Owen's '1914'.

Jessie Pope (1868-1941) was, like 'Touchstone', an acknowledged and prolific legislator of the popular will, expressing the conscience of the mother in the *Daily Mail* of 25 April 1917 who,

having already lost her son but now asserting the pride she would feel if her husband were fit enough to be at the front, 'spoke as thousands of mothers, wives and sweethearts have done'.

Her first war poem, 'Play The Game', which urged the Englishman to abandon football for the gun, was published in the *Daily Mail* on 11 September 1914. Her challenge had been issued: men were either already playing the only game then worth playing or they should take it up:

Football's a sport, and a rare sport too,
 Don't make it a source of shame,
 Today there are worthier things to do,
 Englishmen, play the game!
 A truce to the League, a truce to the Cup,
 Get to work with a *gun*.
 When our country's at war we must all back up —
 It's the only thing to be done!

No glory was greater than that of those who were active in the game, no contemptuous hatred was too great for the arrogant, Hunnish foe; no love could compare with that for England, 'Our little land of shine and rain, Our land of grey and green'.

Such was the sentimental and provocative theme of almost sixty poems which she contributed to the *Daily Mail* during the next ten months. England stood in peril, and it was unthinkable that the 'lads' of her own day were less patriotic and brave than the men who had 'fought and bled' to make that England 'Merrie'. Germany might be a Goliath, but David 'stood up to the bully, and rolled him in the dust'. St George could still slay the Dragon. Those Englishmen who had abandoned their summer sport for the new all-the-year-round game would show their skill on tour:

They'll take the Kaiser's middle wicket
 And smash it by clean British Cricket.

Above all, we were not fighting for ourselves alone but for 'The Children who come after' and for 'Our Empire of tomorrow'.

But there were those who were not playing the game — in a different sense — and Jessie Pope turned the point of her thin nib at them in verses which, for all their doggerel lightness, could not have displeased Owen. So 'If the Cap Fits' denounced the

profiteers from the high price of bread, the exploiters of 'shivering children' in the queues. 'Second Sight' — in which she used one of her favourite devices — had its political victim:

I thought I saw a Zeppelin
 Careering through the sky.
 I looked again and saw it was
 A slice of humble pie
 Which a war lord, that we wot of, was eating on the sly.

'A Little Child' called for funds for the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children, a cause no war should allow her countrymen to forget; and 'The Shells (With humble apologies to Edgar Allan Poe)' warned the factory-owner not to let the soldier down: 'For the love of every Tommy, send him shells!' And how sad it was for the members of the Stock Exchange that their building was closed and they had to transact their business outside!

As for her own sex, there was plenty for them to do if they were not already nurses, and she would give them some examples, but, again, in her own manner, a manner which, because it was not solemn, ran the risk of being misunderstood by her more sophisticated readers. Her call might stir women to action, but it might only amuse them. The advice given in 'The Knitting Song' was obvious enough, and there was no need to have ever heard of Thomas Hood:

Click — click — click!
 How they (needles) dart and flick,
 Flashing in the firelight to and fro!
 Now for purl and plain,
 Round and round again,
 Knitting love and luck in every row.

If making woollies was beyond them, however, the women could exercise self-control at table, or they could — as the *Daily Mail* was trying to persuade the whole nation to — swat the flies that were spreading diseases, and what better weapon to do it with than a copy of your favourite newspaper? They could carry their own shopping and so free the errand-boy for the trenches:

Fetch and carry! Show your grit!
 Lady shoppers, do your bit!

They could support the *Daily Mail*'s campaign for thrift. And they could warn the women of Stuttgart to obey the military proclamation not 'to cast amorous glances at the British prisoners':

The gods have come among you, I admit,
 To make your jealous *Herren* fume and fuss.
 Unkempt, unshaven, rather short of kit,
 The prisoners attract you even thus.
 But, *Fraus* and *Fraüleins*, what's the use of it?
 Their hearts, please understand, belong to us!

'I used,' Owen told his mother in a letter dated 27 December 1914 — and he was not then playing the game himself — 'to have the *Daily Mail* (Continental) given me'. Knowing him as we do, however, we cannot imagine that he was provoked to any action by most of Jessie Pope's contributions, whether they were patriotic, frivolous or satirical. There were, nevertheless, parts of some of the poems which — if he saw them — must have nagged at his civilian separation from the awful thing that was inevitably tempting him in its direction. The second stanza of 'Play the Game', for instance, foreran his own grimmer poetry:

Stark and stiff 'neath a stranger's sky
 A few hundred miles away,
 War-worn, khaki-clad figures lie,
 Their faces rigid and grey,
 Stagger and drop where the bullets swarm,
 Where the shrapnel is bursting loud,
 Die, to keep England safe and warm —
 For a vigorous football crowd?

And, though he probably did not know about her work for the blinded at St Dunstan's, did he not at least wonder whether such a writer was really on the side of Rose whose 'beau ideal'

Must have one member in a sling
 Or, preferably, missing?

Did he not wonder of what the 'blue of a hospital suit' was really 'eloquent'? Or was the obvious meaning the only one?

The belligerent patriotism was there, all the same, the glorification of enrolment, the appeal to young men to join up and fight and, therefore, to 'Stagger and drop where the bullets swarm'; and by the time he wrote that letter to his mother there had been one poem in the *Daily Mail*, 26 November 1914, which might

have remained in his memory and, even, after so long an interval, been the chief prompter of 'Dulce et Decorum Est':

THE CALL

Who's for the trench —
 Are you, my laddie?
 Who'll follow the French —
 Will you, my laddie?
 Who's fretting to begin,
 Who's going to win?
 And who wants to save his skin —
 Do you, my laddie?

Who's for the khaki suit —
 Are you, my laddie?
 Who longs to charge and shoot —
 Do you, my laddie?
 Who's keen on getting fit,
 Who means to show his grit,
 And who'd rather wait a bit —
 Would you, my laddie?

Who'll earn the Empire's thanks —
 Will you, my laddie?
 Who'll swell the victor's ranks —
 Will you, my laddie?
 When that procession comes,
 Banners and rolling drums —
 Who'll stand and bite his thumbs —
 Will you, my laddie?

After 6 July 1915, Jessie Pope transferred her persistent muse, still as 'apt and racy' as *The Times* reviewer had found it, to the *Daily Express*, and in 1916 *Simple Rhymes for Stirring Times* was published, all but four of its thirty-three poems having already been printed in that paper. The war was still 'the Game', and the distinction was still drawn between those 'lads' who were playing it and those who were not. By now, however, to be playing it, with all its increased dangers, was even more heroic:

Who knows it won't be a picnic — not much —
 Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?
 Who would much rather come back with a crutch,
 Than lie low and be out of the fun?
 Come along, lads — but you'll come on all right —
 For there's only one course to pursue,

Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
And she's looking and calling for you.

The women, also, must continue to play their part and — for there were many more widows among them — to remember that there was always one supreme consolation:

The war has hit her badly, and she's lonely and bereft,
But the woman still remembers that she's got her country left.

We may be tempted to hear mockery in such lines — perhaps even bitterness — and yet we cannot but be impressed by Jessie Pope's demand that women should share the suffering that war inevitably involved. Certainly she scoffed at Mariana, who, having spread 'a *négligé* of charm (The very thing for air-raided wear) Beside her pillow', waited for the alarm and another night of excitement, and, after 'A quiet night', sighed 'It cometh not'. Heartbreak House was not for Jessie Pope.

Nor did she forget those who were still betraying the troops:

What twines and twists without a check
Red Tape,
A halter for Britannia's neck?
Red Tape.
No wonder our Colonials laugh,
We've made ourselves a mark for chaff,
But now the time has come to strafe
Red Tape.

Nor did she falter in her laureate role, ending her third book with 'The King':

Shoulder to shoulder serve him,
Britons, your tribute bring;
Now then, all out — with a leather-lunged shout —
'The King'!

The few war poems that were, unknown to Owen, to be published in *Hits and Misses* (1920), played only one new variation on the old theme — or themes —, an 'admission', written in 1918, that it was no longer quite such a thrill to lose a son, a brother, a lover or a husband. For there was 'A Despot' under whose heel most women now lived:

He is young, but his manners are blunt,
He walks with an indolent gait,
Though he's never 'been out' he's a link with the Front,
And he carries our fate.

He scares every feminine breast,
 He brings — is it sorrow or joy?
 And he is — as no doubt before this you'll have guessed —
 The telegraph boy.

Most of the poems in *Hits and Misses*, however, had nothing to do with the war. That had ended at last, and she had no battle-cries for the peace. She had done her bit for the preservation of John of Gaunt's sceptred isle, she had expressed her unadulterated patriotism and attacked those who would, and did, adulterate it. As a woman she must have understood what another woman had said about patriotism being not enough, but she could not have understood what Owen meant by dismissing so old and simple a truth as 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' as an old lie.

The war over, then, she was free once more to resume the subject-matter that her consistent manner best conveyed and that had made her popular and praised as a writer of light verse. She became again the poetess of curling-pins, the jealousy in the female heart that Dick aroused with the loving attention he gave to his car, the gratitude the lady felt when Mr Smith stood up in the tram so that she might sit down.

So it had been in *Paper Pellets* (1907) and *Airy Nothings, Humorous Verse* (1909), both of which contained her poems for *Punch* and other magazines. Both books were acclaimed as proof that the writing of clever comic verse was not a wholly male achievement. Golf — she was herself a keen and active sports-woman, just as she was a keen and active leg-puller — flirtation, the battle of the sexes, literary parody — 'To bath or not to bath — ah, there's the rub' — with this material she tickled the socialite fancy and created a readership that would be ready for another topic later on.

And there was another readership being prepared for this new topic. For the 'laddies' and 'lads' of 1914, 1915 and 1916 were the 'small boys' who, with the small girls, had been her audience for the verses which she wrote as captions to the pictures in many pre-war children's books. Very young children were, indeed, her other main public throughout her life, and she provided the texts, usually in verse, for a large number of illustrated books whose characters were, of course, animals and birds: Bunnies, Bobbity Flop, Cat Scouts, Flip and Fuzzy, Toddlers,

the Tracy Tubbses and many more. One cannot help wondering if Owen ever saw any of these when he was a small boy.

It seems that we shall never know. 'Wilfred,' Harold Owen said, 'never mentioned her to me or yet to my mother . . . I am quite sure Wilfred never met Jessie Pope. After he was killed I failed to find any trace of her through my mother.' And Mrs Cecil Beevor, Jessie Pope's niece, cannot remember any mention of Wilfred Owen by her aunt.

Owen nevertheless did read the *Daily Mail*, not only in 1914, but, as later letters show, in 1917 and 1918 also, when the paper's determination that the war should continue appalled him: 'My heart has been warmed by the curses I have heard levelled at the *Daily Mail*' (15 October 1918). He saw *Punch* too, receiving copies from his mother, and what he read there appalled him no less: 'Thank you indeed for the *Punch*. Parts were very good; though much was dastardly' (20 October 1918).

Jessie Pope — it is all too obvious — was essentially a 'light' poet. She contributed, for example, no less than 170 poems to *Punch* between 1902 and 1922. Her last, 'Noise', published on 4 October 1922, may well make the disturbing point about her:

I like noise.
 The whoop of a boy, the thud of a hoof,
 The rattle of rain on a galvanized roof,
 The hubbub of traffic, the roar of a train,
 The throb of machinery numbing the brain,
 The switching of wires in an overhead tram,
 The rush of the wind, a door on the slam,
 The boom of the thunder, the crash of the waves,
 The din of a river that races and raves,
 The crack of a rifle, the clank of a pail,
 The strident tattoo of a swift-slapping sail —
 From any old sound that the silence destroys
 Arises a gamut of soul-stirring joys.
 I like noise.

Here is a mixture indeed; and here, surely, is no little variation on Rupert Brooke's 'The Great Lover'. The whoop of a boy is a fine noise, no doubt, and so is the crash of the waves. Or are these *sounds*, not noises? And was Jessie Pope fond of the sort of throbbing that numbs the brain? Had she forgotten what the crack of a rifle once meant? The memorably significant word in

the poem is, after all, 'destroys'. Yet the reputation of the piece — it has been anthologized several times — is otherwise, and, presumably would continue to be if she were alive today and included in her list the noise of greasers' motor-bikes, and aeroplanes taking off from London airport.

Did she deceive Wilfred Owen, therefore? Did she deceive her editors and her millions of readers? Or was there no deception? Is there no ambiguity? Why did Owen cancel or suspend the 'dedication' to his poem? Perhaps he came to know her better and to see a tongue in a cheek. Perhaps he realized how clever she was after all. Or perhaps he realized what *The Times* had meant when it said that each of her poems hit 'a different point on the head', and that it was unfair to generalize. Perhaps he decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

We should probably do the same. She has no place in the history of literature, for all her undoubted skill as a writer of light, topical, satirical verse and parody. The type of broadsheet 'simple rhymes' which she contributed to the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, being the voice of the masses, does have a mass appeal, however, and can have a good or a bad influence. She has her place in the whole story of 1914-18, therefore. As does 'Touchstone'.

She has her mysterious place in the whole story of Wilfred Owen too, and we at least know enough about her now to see that she is some sort of symbol, an *alter ego* perhaps, another and easier personification of his — and perhaps her own — ambivalent attitude to the war. She may even have been what Byron was to Keats, a 'flash' rival. Owen, of course, has his place in the history of literature. He is the most famous and esteemed of all the English-speaking poets of the war, for all sorts of reasons, right and wrong. But, like those of the Keats whom he so much admired, his poems are too often taken as his last word, whereas his letters, like Keats's, reveal another young man, one who might well have enjoyed Jessie Pope's jokes, one who certainly enjoyed being a soldier. For in the very temple of the horrors and the melancholy there were delights, there was delight. So Jessie Pope could know the enemy at home as well as the enemy abroad, know the pride and the fun as well as the shame and the agony, write lovingly for the small boys who had to be killed, and repeat an old lie and tell the truth.

Whether Wilfred Owen did come to distinguish between her poems and the papers he contemned, or whether there is a totally different reason for the cancellation or bracketing of the variable 'dedications' to 'Dulce et Decorum Est', it is unlikely that he was able to smile wryly over the *Daily Mail* for 14 October 1918. If he did see it, he knew that they were no longer as far apart as they had been. For on that day the paper was wondering if those who had died and were yet to die so gloriously might not, after all, prove to have been killed in vain. In a reprinting of an American article it supported the doubt that 'the thing' was really going to be 'seen through'. And the article was headed, with uncanny near-accuracy, 'The Great War of 1938'.

On 22 November 1918 the paper published in 'Roll of Honour' the following entry: 'The Army. Officers Killed. Owen 2nd Lt. W. E. S. Manch'. And all he too had wanted to do — and perhaps Jessie Pope with him — was 'to warn'.