

Writers and war: reflecting or shaping our perceptions?

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[Shirley Dent](#), [Jonathan Ali](#), [John Greening](#) and [Jane Potter](#) introduced a discussion on how literature shapes our perceptions of war, chaired by [Rania Hafez](#)



Dulce et Decorum est Pro patria mori. Whether schooled in the classics or not, this is the one line of Latin that most of us can probably recall from our school days and our introduction to war poetry through Wilfred Owen's visceral and haunting lyrics. Next to Owen's young soldiers bent double like old hags towing a gas-ravaged corpse we may have been asked to compare Rupert Brooke's The Soldier, read by the Dean of St Paul's at Easter 1915. The poem's gold-tinted, almost giddy, expostulation to the concealed dust in some corner of a foreign field that is forever England seems as jingoistic and sentimental as Owen's lines are tormented and disillusioned.



It is the later poets of the First World War – notably Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen – who set the timbre and tone for not just the poetry that came out of the trenches but for a genre of poetry, literature and art that deals with the subject of war. Following the trenches, gone is the sentimental glorification of sacrifice for country, replaced with the savagery and senselessness of war. If the First World War was ‘the war to end all wars’ First World War poetry is ‘the poetry to define all wars’.



But is this right? Should our perception and understanding of the great conflicts of the twentieth century and beyond be shaped by a handful of poets who came from a very particular social milieu and who had very particular experiences and perspectives? Recently the poet Ian McMillan has asked “It is easy to assume that the powerful words of this young man from Shropshire captured the true experience of the war. But is that assumption right? Or has our focus on poems like Owen’s distorted our view of the war?” McMillan points to a plethora of poetry written from the trenches which shared Brooke’s more jingoistic vision, sometimes expressed through explicit anti-German feeling, as well as to poets such as Padre Woodbine Willie who wrote about everyday concerns such as where the next rum ration was coming from. There are also female poets from the period who wrote about the war and its impact on them individually and on the society they lived in such as Charlotte Mew.



Some background readings and viewing

[Has poetry distorted our view of World War One?](#) BBC iWonder series

[Reframing First World War poetry](#) , by Santanu Das, British Library

[We talk of the 'sacrifice' of the First World War, but we have lost our sense of what that word means](#) , by Daniel Hannan, The Telegraph 19 April 2014

Watch video of the speaker and audience comments below. Thanks to Dan Clayton the [documentary filmmaker](#) from Leeds for this.

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