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# Siegfried Sassoon

Complete Works

DELPHI POETS SERIES

D E L P H I   P O E T S   S E R I E S

**Siegfried Sassoon**

(1886-1967)



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*Siegfried Sassoon*

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Version 1

DELPHI POETS SERIES

**Siegfried Sassoon**



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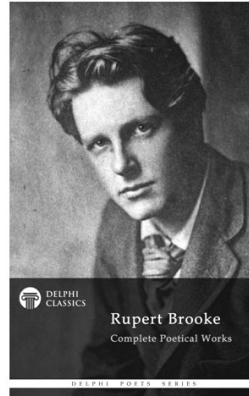
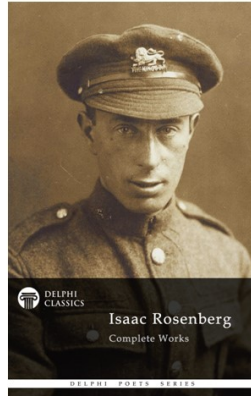
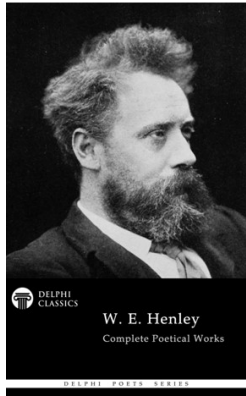
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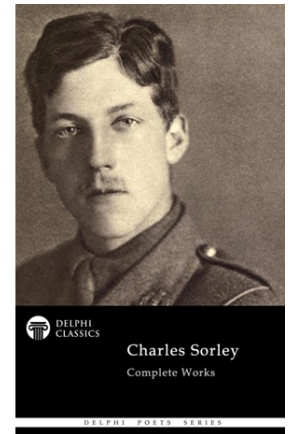
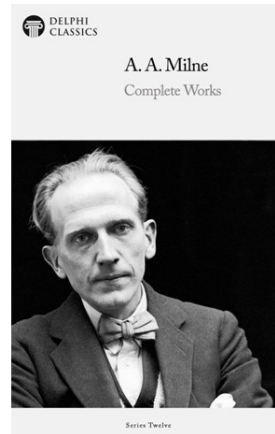
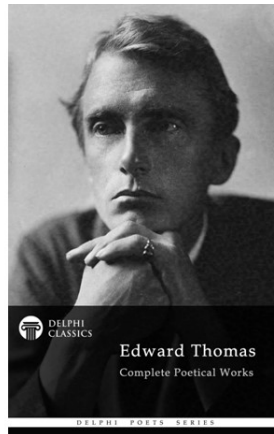
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## The Life and Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon

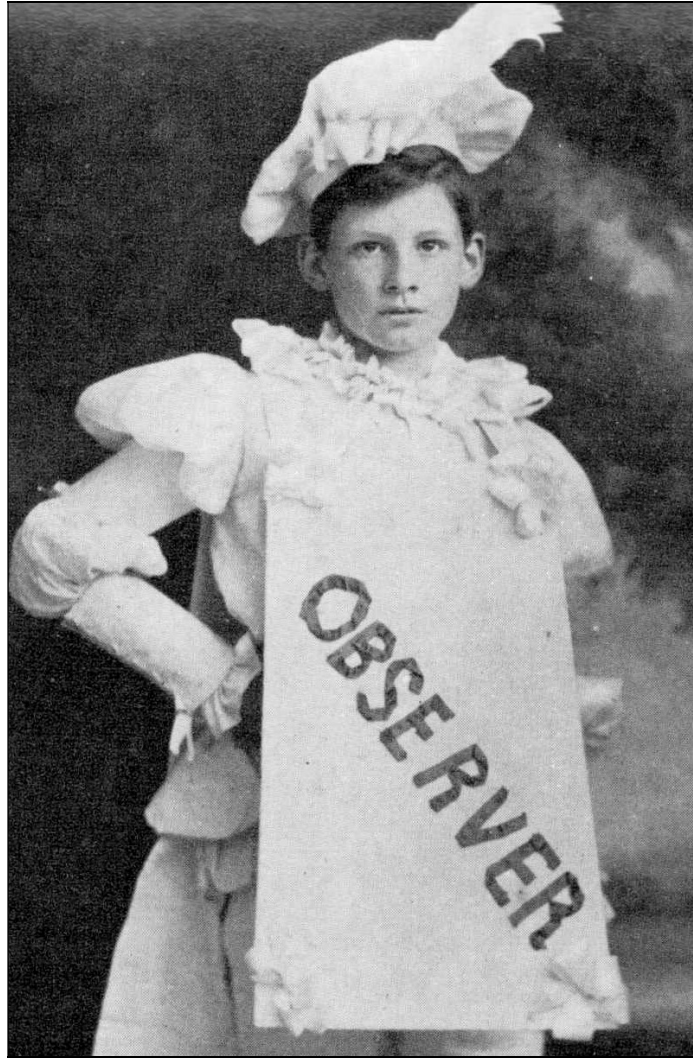


*Matfield, a small village in the Tunbridge Wells Borough of Kent — Siegfried Sassoon's birthplace*





*Weirleigh, the birthplace and childhood home of Sassoon. The house is said to be haunted by the ghost of the poet's mother.*



*Sassoon at the Press Bazaar, aged 11, 1898*

## Brief Introduction: Siegfried Sassoon

One of the leading poets of the First World War, Siegfried Sassoon was born to a Jewish father and an Anglo-Catholic mother, growing up in the neo-gothic mansion of Weirleigh in Matfield, Kent. His father, Alfred Ezra Sassoon (1861–1895), was a member of the wealthy Baghdadi Jewish Sassoon merchant family. His mother, Theresa, belonged to the Thornycroft family, who were noted sculptors responsible for many of the most famous statues in London. There was no German ancestry in the family — his mother simply named him Siegfried due to her love of Wagner’s operas. The family was sometimes called the “Rothschilds of the East” due to their fortune being made in India. Siegfried was the second of three sons, the others being Michael and Hamo. When he was four years old his parents separated. During his father’s weekly visits to the boys, Theresa would lock herself in the drawing-room. In 1895 his father died of tuberculosis, when the poet was aged nine.

Sassoon was educated at the New Beacon School, Sevenoaks, Kent; at Marlborough College, Wiltshire; and at Clare College, Cambridge, where from 1905 to 1907 he read history. He left Cambridge without a degree and spent the years after 1907 hunting, playing cricket and writing verse, some of which he published privately. Although his father had been disinherited from the Sassoon fortune for marrying outside of the Jewish faith, Siegfried had a small private income, allowing him to live modestly without having to earn a living. In later years, he was left a large legacy by an aunt, Rachel Beer, enabling him to buy the great estate of Heytesbury House in Wiltshire.

His first published poetry was *The Daffodil Murderer* in 1913, composed as a parody of John Masefield’s *The Everlasting Mercy*. Robert Graves, in *Good-Bye to All That*, describes the poem as a “parody of Masefield which, midway through, had forgotten to be a parody and turned into rather good Masefield.”

The following year, Sassoon joined the Army just as the threat of a new European war was recognised. He was stationed with the Sussex Yeomanry on 4 August 1914, the day that Britain declared war on Germany. He broke his arm badly in a riding accident and was put out of action before leaving England, spending the spring of 1915 convalescing. Sassoon was commissioned into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (Special Reserve), Royal Welch Fusiliers, as a second lieutenant on 29 May 1915. On 1 November, his younger brother Hamo was killed in the Gallipoli Campaign, dying on board the ship Kildonan Castle after having had his leg amputated. In the same month, Siegfried was sent to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers, in France, where he met Robert Graves and they became close friends. Sharing a love of poetry, they often read and discussed each other’s work. Though this had little influence on Graves’ poetry, his views on what may be called “gritty realism” profoundly affected Sassoon’s concept of what constituted poetry.

In the trenches Sassoon was horrified by the grim realities of war and the tone of his writing dramatically changed: where his early poems exhibit a Romantic and naïve sweetness, his war poetry shifts to an increasingly discordant tone, conveying the harrowing truths of the trenches to an audience hitherto lulled by patriotic propaganda. Details such as rotting corpses, mangled limbs, filth, cowardice and suicide are all trademarks of his verses at the time and the philosophy of “no truth unfitting” had a significant effect on his movement towards Modernist poetry.

While serving on the Western Front, Sassoon performed exceptionally brave actions, including the single-handed capture of a German trench. Armed with grenades, he scattered sixty enemy soldiers. Reportedly, instead of signalling for reinforcements, he sat down in the German trench and began reading a book of poems that he had brought with him. When he went back he did not even report his actions. Sassoon's bravery was so inspiring that soldiers of his company declared they only felt confident when accompanied by the poet. He often went out on night raids and bombing patrols, demonstrating ruthless efficiency as a company commander. Deepening depression at the horror and misery the soldiers were forced to endure caused a manic courage in Sassoon and he was nicknamed "Mad Jack" by his men for his near-suicidal exploits. On 27 July 1916 he was awarded the Military Cross; the citation stated:

2nd Lt. Siegfried Lorraine [sic] Sassoon, 3rd (attd. 1st) Bn., R. W. Fus. For conspicuous gallantry during a raid on the enemy's trenches. He remained for 1½ hours under rifle and bomb fire collecting and bringing in our wounded. Owing to his courage and determination all the killed and wounded were brought in.

In spite of his decorations, in 1917 Sassoon decided to make a stand against the conduct of the war. One of the reasons for his violent anti-war feeling was the death of a close friend, David Cuthbert Thomas, who appears as "Dick Tiltwood" in the Sherston trilogy. Sassoon spent many years coming to grips with this loss. At the end of a spell of convalescent leave, he refused to return to duty; encouraged by pacifist friends such as Bertrand Russell and Lady Ottoline Morrell, he sent a letter to his commanding officer titled *Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration*. Forwarded to the press and read aloud in the House of Commons by a sympathetic Member of Parliament, the letter was seen by some as treasonous. Instead of court-martialing Sassoon, the Under-Secretary of State for War, Ian Macpherson, declared him unfit for service and had him sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh, where he officially was treated for neurasthenia (shell shock). At the end of 1917, Sassoon was posted to Limerick, Ireland, where in the New Barracks he helped train recruits. He wrote that it was a period of respite, enabling him to indulge in his love of hunting.

At Craiglockhart, Sassoon met the fellow poet Wilfred Owen. Both were especially drawn to each other, leading some recent historians to suggest they had a homosexual relationship. Sassoon urged Owen to persevere in his ambition to write better poetry. A manuscript copy of Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth* contains Sassoon's handwritten amendments and survives as testimony to the extent of his influence. Sassoon became to Owen "Keats and Christ and Elijah", according to a surviving letter, demonstrating the depth of Owen's admiration for Sassoon. Both men returned to active service in France, but Owen was killed in 1918, a week before Armistice. Sassoon was promoted to lieutenant and, having spent some time in Palestine, eventually returned to France on 13 July 1918.

Sassoon was reportedly wounded by friendly fire when he received a shot to the head by a fellow British soldier, who had mistaken him for a German, near Arras. As a result of this injury, Sassoon spent the remainder of the war in Britain. By this time, he had been promoted to acting captain. He relinquished his commission on health grounds on 12 March 1919, but retained the rank of captain. After the war, Sassoon was instrumental in bringing Owen's work to the attention of a wider audience.

Having lived for a period at Oxford, where he spent more time visiting literary friends than studying, Sassoon dabbled briefly in the politics of the Labour movement. In November 1918, he travelled to Blackburn to support the Labour

candidate in the general election, Philip Snowden, who had been a pacifist during the war. Though a self-confessed political novice, Sassoon delivered campaign speeches for Snowden, later writing that he “felt grateful for Snowden’s anti-war attitude in parliament, and had been angered by the abuse thrown at him. All my political sympathies were with him.” Though his commitment to politics waned after this, he remained a supporter of the Labour Party and in 1929 rejoiced when they had gained seats in the General Election.

In 1919 Sassoon took up a post as literary editor of the socialist *Daily Herald*. During this period, he was responsible for employing several eminent names as reviewers, including E. M. Forster and Charlotte Mew, while commissioning original material from writers like Arnold Bennett and Osbert Sitwell. While at Oxford he was introduced to the young composer William Walton, to whom he became a friend and patron. Walton later dedicated his *Portsmouth Point Overture* to Sassoon in recognition of his financial assistance and moral support.

Sassoon then embarked on a lecture tour of America, as well as travelling in Europe and throughout Britain. He acquired a car, a gift from the publisher Frankie Schuster, and became renowned among his friends for his lack of driving skill, but this did not prevent him making full use of the mobility it gave him. In 1921 Sassoon went to Rome, where he met the Kaiser’s nephew, Prince Philipp of Hesse. The two became lovers for a while, later taking a holiday together in Munich. They had become estranged by the mid-1920’s, due in part to geographical distance and Sassoon’s increasing discomfort over Philipp’s growing interest in right-wing politics.

The deaths within a short space of time of three of his closest friends — Edmund Gosse, Thomas Hardy and Frankie Schuster — came as setbacks to Sassoon’s personal happiness in this period. He decided to take a new direction in his work, branching into prose, with *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, the anonymously published first volume of a fictionalised autobiography, which was almost immediately accepted as a classic, bringing its author new fame as a prose writer. The memoir is noted for its mild-mannered central character, who is content to do little more than be an idle country gentleman, playing cricket, riding and hunting foxes. The novel is often humorous, revealing a side of Sassoon that had rarely been seen in his work during the war years. The book went on to win the 1928 James Tait Black Award for fiction. Sassoon followed it with *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and *Sherston’s Progress* (1936). In later years, he revisited his youth and early manhood with three volumes of genuine autobiography, which were also highly acclaimed.

In 1927 Sassoon and the aristocrat Stephen Tennant fell passionately in love, beginning a relationship that lasted nearly six years. Tennant, however, had recurrent tuberculosis, and the strain which that illness put on their relationship had started to show by the early 1930’s. In May 1933, Tennant, while receiving treatment at a sanatorium in Kent, abruptly broke off the relationship, informing Sassoon via a letter written by his physician that he never wanted to see him again. Sassoon was left devastated. When he met his future wife Hester Gatty a few months later, he was still reeling from his break-up with Tennant. Sensing a sympathetic nature, Sassoon confided in Hester about their relationship and, at her suggestion, wrote a letter to Tennant, putting the past to rest. While he and Tennant exchanged letters, telephone calls and infrequent visits in the years to come, they never resumed their previous relationship.

In December 1933, Sassoon married Hester (daughter of Sir Stephen Gatty), who was twenty years younger than him and soon afterwards they moved to Heytesbury

House in Wiltshire. The marriage led to the birth of a son, something the poet had desired for a long time. George Sassoon (1936-2006) would become a scientist, linguist and author, and was adored by his father, who wrote several poems addressed to him. Siegfried's marriage broke down after the Second World War, with Sassoon apparently unable to find a compromise between the solitude he enjoyed and the companionship he needed. Separated from his wife in 1945, he lived in seclusion at Heytesbury, but he maintained contact with a circle that included E. M. Forster and J. R. Ackerley. One of his closer friends was the cricketer Dennis Silk, who later became headmaster of Radley College. He also formed a close friendship with Vivien Hancock, then headmistress of Greenways School at Ashton Gifford House, Wiltshire, where his son George was a pupil. The relationship provoked Hester to make strong accusations against Hancock, who responded with the threat of legal action.

Sassoon was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 1951 New Year Honours. During this period, after a lifetime of grappling with questions of faith, Sassoon converted to Catholicism. His motivation has been the subject of much speculation. Intellectual exploration, aesthetic appeal, spiritual seeking and the influence of figures like Ronald Knox were likely factors for Sassoon's decision to convert. He died from stomach cancer on 1 September 1967, one week before his 81<sup>st</sup> birthday. The poet is buried at Saint Andrew's Church, Mells, Somerset, not far from the grave of Father Ronald Knox, whom he greatly admired. On 11 November 1985, Sassoon was among 16 Great War poets commemorated on a slate stone unveiled in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner.

Sassoon is best remembered for his vivid and compassionate poems about the Great War, which won him public and critical acclaim. Avoiding the sentimentality and jingoism of many contemporary war poets, he portrayed the horror and brutality of trench warfare, while satirising generals, politicians and churchmen for their incompetence and blind support of the conflict. The seminal collection *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* offers some of his finest war poems. The later collection *The War Poems* included 64 poems of the war, mostly written while Sassoon was in hospital recovering from his injuries. Public reaction to his poetry was fierce. Some readers complained that the poet displayed little patriotism, while others found his realistic depiction to be too extreme. Even pacifist friends complained about the violence and graphic detail in his verses. Nonetheless, the British public bought the books, as his best poems captured the true atmosphere of trench warfare and the weariness of British soldiers for a war that seemed never to end. These poems are characterised by their unflinching honesty and fierce denouncement of the political errors and patriotic rhetoric that perpetuated the conflict. Visceral depictions of the trenches exposed the stark realities of the front lines, challenging the romanticised notions of heroism that were prevalent at the time. Employing satire and direct language to express his anti-war sentiments, Sassoon's poetry was stark and often angry, representing a powerful voice for a generation disillusioned by war.

Following his conversion to Catholicism in 1957, his religious poems are usually considered as markedly inferior to the poetry he wrote as a young man. Still, *Sequences* (published shortly before his conversion) was praised by several noted critics, offering some of the most "impressive religious poetry of the twentieth century".

Today, Sassoon's work remains relevant due to its unflinching portrayal of the psychological and physical demands of war. His influence is broadly felt in the work

of his close friends Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves, who similarly explored the realities of modern combat. Sassoon's legacy lies in his commitment to truth-telling, offering a timeless portrait of the enduring cost of war on both individuals and society at large.





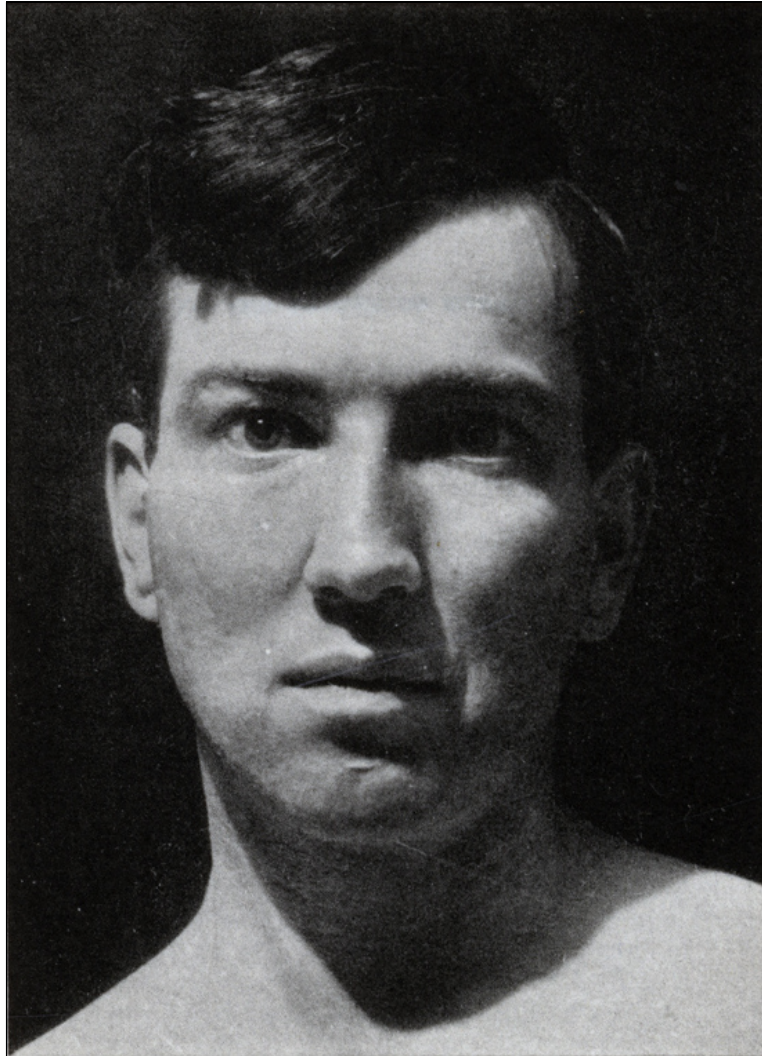
*Sassoon (centre front) with his brother Hamo and other students on the morning after a college May Ball at Cambridge University in 1906*



*John Masefield, 1916 — the satirical target of Sassoon's first published poem, Masefield (1878-1967) served as Poet Laureate from 1930 until his death in 1967.*



*Sassoon photographed by George Charles Beresford, 1915*



*The work of the poet Robert Graves (1895-1985) had a profound influence on Sassoon's war poetry.*



*Wilfred Owen, 1918*





*Craiglockhart War Hospital — in 1917 Sassoon was sent to this hospital near Edinburgh, where he was officially treated for shell shock.*



*Sassoon, c. 1920*





*Portrait photo of Philipp, Prince and Landgrave of Hesse (1896-1980) — Sassoon and Philipp were lovers in the early 1920's.*



*Sassoon and his long-time lover, the socialite Stephen Tennant*



*Hester Sassoon (née Gatty), c. 1923*



*Ronald Knox (1888-1957) was a Catholic priest and theologian. Educated at Eton and Balliol College, Oxford, where he earned a high reputation as a classicist, Knox was ordained as a priest of the Church of England in 1912.*



*Sassoon by John Piggins, c 1951*

# **The Daffodil Murderer (1913)**

**BEING THE CHANTREY PRIZE POEM**

*By Saul Kain*

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The Daffodil Murderer

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The  
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Murderer

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By  
Saul Kain

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'As I may best I will my woe endure,  
Nor make no countenance of heaviness.'

CHAUCER

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