

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh**  
***Wilfred Owen's Edinburgh Enlightenment***

**Neil McLennan**  
**Senior Lecturer, University of Aberdeen**

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at Edinburgh Napier University, Craiglockhart Campus

Report by Jeremy Watson

On 26 June 1917, a young British army officer called Wilfred Owen arrived in Edinburgh to seek medical treatment for shell shock suffered on the World War One front line.

Just over 100 years later, historian Neil McLennan took to the stage at the site of the former Craiglockhart War Hospital, where 24-year-old Owen was treated, to commemorate the centenary of his arrival and the birth of his reputation as one of the greatest of the "Great War" poets. The war hospital is now part of the Edinburgh Napier University campus and Mr McLennan, a senior educator and historian, was there to explain why he felt that Edinburgh played a much bigger part than realised in the soldier-poet's metamorphosis into a literary giant of his era.

It was here at Craiglockhart that 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Owen, of the Manchester Regiment, first encountered the older 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Siegfried Sassoon, of the Welsh Fusiliers. Owen arrived in Edinburgh after twice going through casualty clearing stations on the battlefield, followed by a general hospital. On the second occasion in convalescence, he was blown up by enemy shelling and was diagnosed with shell shock, bad enough for him to be sent to one of the six hospitals dealing with its treatment in Britain. He was sent to Edinburgh, where he met both Sassoon and his friend Robert Graves, the war poet who saved Sassoon from treason charges.

That Owen and Sassoon were undergoing treatment at all was recognition that shell shock did affect officers as well as the rank and file, Mr McLennan said. Previously, it had been considered a "weakness of character" suffered only by the lower ranks. That it was being suffered by officers elevated it to a different level. Craiglockhart War Hospital also had the advantage of being staffed by forward-thinking military doctors of the calibre of William Halse Rivers Rivers, who treated Sassoon, and local physician Arthur J. Brock, the champion of the "work cure", who encouraged Owen to translate his war-time experiences into poetry. Brock believed in treating the mind, body and spirit of the "whole" patient.

Owen met Sassoon – there were 170 patients at the hospital – in August 1917, a meeting recorded in one of Owen's letters to his mother in which he declared "at last I have an event worth writing about." Although Owen came under the tutelage of Sassoon, Mr McLennan insisted it was not simply a one-way process. Although Sassoon offered advice and criticism, they shared ideas, which came through in some of Sassoon's poems. But, Mr McLennan insisted, Brock's treatment plan was perhaps as important in Owen's development as his relationship with Sassoon. As well as morning walks and hikes in the Pentland Hills, Brock encouraged the young officer to take a temporary post teaching English at Tynecastle High School – where Mr McLennan was many years later head of history – in the Gorgie area of Edinburgh in September 1917. It was the vague First World War commemorative plaques at the school that piqued Mr McLennan's quest to find out more about Owen and the school's Great War history. The poet left Edinburgh for the last time, deemed fit to return to the front line, before Christmas

1917, after being given a send-off present of cigarettes and Scotch by grateful staff and students at Tynecastle. He was killed a week before the end of the war, in November 1918.

So who were his main influences during his time in Edinburgh, Mr McLennan asked? No doubt, Sassoon. Owen, son of a railway worker, certainly looked up to the more privileged Sassoon and the quality of his poetry. But Edinburgh, with its rich literary history, enlightened population and its open spaces was also crucial as being the bridge between his early war and his post-war fame. Owen's best poetry came out of a combination of Sassoon's influence and his treatment in Edinburgh, Mr McLennan insisted. Edinburgh certainly took him to its heart and that continues to this day, thanks to the work of the committee Mr McLennan chairs. A day set aside to mark Owen's arrival in the city 100 years ago in June this year was attended by the Lord Provost, the Edinburgh Makar, pipers and other musicians, who took part in a commemorative walk down Princes Street. On that day, Owen out-tweeted Harry Potter in the Edinburgh area, the JK Rowling creation whose 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of publication was also being celebrated on 26 June 2017.

Despite all we know about him, researching Owen still presents challenges, Mr McLennan said. One is interpreting his letters. In Owen's letters to his mother he employed a code to let her know where he was on the Front. His use of the word "mistletoe" indicated that the second letter of each handwritten line that followed would indicate his location; e.g., the letters would spell out 'Somme'. Also, in the hospital magazine, Mr McLennan believes that he used pseudonyms, especially when the Editor was short of contributions. Mr McLennan believes that 'Mustard Seed' is really Wilfred Owen. Seeking out Owen's true sexuality is also difficult, Mr McLennan said. Many of his letters archived in the US were heavily redacted by his brother Harold after their mother's death, to perhaps disguise Owen's homosexuality or other issues in the letters. His time at Craiglockhart is also shrouded in mystery, as Dr Brock's diaries and Owen's medical records have been lost.

Nevertheless, new findings about his life continue to emerge. Owen, Sassoon and Graves were thought to have met together for the one and only time in Edinburgh, but it had never been established where. However, letters found in the archives of Southern Illinois University, after a long search by Mr McLennan, revealed that the meeting took place in the Club House of Baberton Golf Club, because Sassoon did not want to cancel his round. The boost Owen received from being endorsed by two established figures inspired him to write *Dulce et Decorum est* and *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, regarded as two of the most influential poems of the 20th Century.

Mr McLennan also revealed two new literature history finds. He noted that the British Library states that five poems were published in Owen's lifetime, the Wilfred Owen Association says there were six, but McLennan revealed that his position, having an overview of all the works and scholarly research to date, shows there were in fact six poems published in Owen's lifetime.

A last find, which again links Owen's enlightenment to Edinburgh, relates to his pararhyme style. Whilst his biographers suggest this could have been influenced by, and come about from, his travels in France in 1913, McLennan is able to place its origins a year earlier, when the family holidayed in Kelso. What is more, the spark of interest in this potential poetic style came about when Owen was reading a book about Edinburgh after Flodden.

Mr McLennan concluded that despite Scotland's influence on the works of the Great War poets, their presence here is under recognised. Westminster Abbey in London has a 'Poet's Corner' dedicated to their memory; there is strong case for Edinburgh having the same, a place to recognise Scottish War Poets and those who wrote words of warning about war from all combatant nations. Those who fought in the Great War are no longer here; it is up to us to commemorate them and keep their memories alive.

## **Q&A**

**Q:** If you had been a pupil at Tynecastle when Owen was there, what would you have asked him?

**A:** I would have asked who inspired him; who influenced him most. Was it Sassoon, or the tremendous work by Arthur Brock?

**Q:** Did the Germans know about shell shock?

**A:** The Germans were relatively well advanced in their thinking. They wanted their soldiers returned to the Front quickly. So were the French. The Americans were the most advanced, as they had military doctors with knowledge dating from the American Civil War, and also kept a keen interest in medical affairs during the First World War. In the UK, attitudes were coloured by a condition called “railway spine”, a precursor of whiplash, and the feeling that many of those claiming it were malingering.

**Q:** Might you have any comment on the botanic connection to Owen’s two code names?

**A:** Owen had an interest in botanics before, during and after Craiglockhart; indeed, he lectured on the topic ‘Do Plants Think?’ during his time at Craiglockhart. His doctor at Craiglockhart, Dr Brock, also had an interest in this area and was inspired by the work of Professor Patrick Geddes. The thinking was very much about connecting Man to the land around him. From that point of view, it is not surprising to see this connection.

**Q:** What was the process of discharging Owen from Craiglockhart?

**A:** The aim of the doctors was to get men fit for war again. Owen went before medical boards and the third board said he was fit to return to the front line.

**Q:** Extracts of Owen’s poems were published. Were they extracts from finished works?

**A:** They were finished at the time of publication, but it was a feature of Owen’s work that he often went back and redrafted, even after publication.

The Vote of Thanks was offered by Sir Andrew Cubie FRSE, Chair of the Edinburgh Napier University Campaign Board.

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