“Try to Be As Brave”: Cross-Continental Comparisons of Great War Poetry
Robert Means

In the Summer 2018 issue of *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Robert Means compares poetry from British Great War authors with poetry about the war featured in the *Relief Society Magazine*, a Utah-based publication. The poems Means discusses in his article are reproduced below in their entirety.

**H. B. K. Allpass**

Afterwards

“My King and Country needed me,” to fight
The Prussian’s tyranny.
I went and fought, till our assembled might
With a wan triumph had dispersed in flight
At least the initial P.

I came back. In a crowded basement now
I scratch, a junior clerk.
Each day my tried experience must bow
Before the callow boy, whose shameless brow
Usurps my oldtime work.

I had not cared – but that my toil was vain,
But that still raged the strong:
I had not cared – did any good remain.
But now I scratch, and wait for War again,
Nor shall I need to wait long.¹

**Anonymous**

Armistice Hymn

Hail to the warriors peacefully sleeping.
Nameless or known in the cross-covered plains;
Bow we with those who sit quietly weeping,
Bearing their loss for the world’s richer gains.

We will be keeping the tryst ye decreed us,
Ye who lie under the wave and the sod;
Watchful we stand, guarding all that has freed us,
Resting our deeds in the judgment of God.²

Only a Volunteer

Why didn’t I wait for the banquet?
Why didn’t I wait to be cheered?
For the drafted men “get the credit”
While I—merely volunteered!

And nobody gave me a banquet
And nobody said a kind word.
The grind of the wheels of the engine
Was all the goodbye that I heard.
Then off to the camp I was mustered
To be trained for the next half year,
And then in the shuffle forgotten—
I was only a volunteer.

And maybe some day in the future
When my little boys sits on my knee
And asks what I did in the conflict
And his little eyes look up to me—
I will have to look back, as in blushing,
To the eyes that so trustingly peer,
And tell him I missed being drafted—
I was only “a volunteer.”³

**Note Returned to a Utah Girl from Army Front**

I want to thank you for the socks you knit,
But sorry to say they do not fit.
Wear one for a scarf and one for a mitt,
Where in the world did you learn to knit?⁴

**Harold Begbie**

Fall In

What will you lack, sonny, what will you lack
When the girls line up the street,
Shouting their love to the lads come back
From the foe they rushed to beat?
Will you send a strangled cheer to the sky
And grin till your cheeks are red?
But what will you lack when your mate goes by
With a girl who cuts you dead?
Where will you look, sonny, where will you look
When your children yet to be
Clamour to learn of the part you took
In the War that kept men free?
Will you say it was naught to you if France
Stood up to her foe or bunked?
But where will you look when they give the glance
That tells you they know you funk'd?

How will you fare, sonny, how will you fare,
In the far-off winter night,
When you sit by the fire in an old man’s chair
And your neighbours talk of the fight?
Will you slink away, as it were from a blow,
Your old head shamed and bent?
Or say—I was not with the first to go,
But I went, thank God, I went?

Why do they call, sonny, why do they call
For men who are brave and strong?
Is it naught to you if your country fall,
And Right is smashed by Wrong?
Is it football still and the picture show,
The pub and the betting odds,
When your brothers stand to the tyrant’s blow
And England’s call is God’s?"""

VERA BRITTAIN

The Lament of the Demobilised

"Four years," some say consolingly. "Oh well,
What’s that? You’re young. And then it must have been
A very fine experience for you!"
And they forget
How others stayed behind and just got on—
Got on better since we were away.
And we came home and found
They had achieved, and men revered their names,
But never mentioned ours;
And no one talked heroics now, and we
Must just go back and start again once more.
"You threw four years into the melting-pot—
Did you indeed?" these others cry. "Oh well,
The more fool you!"
And we’re beginning to agree with them."

RUPERT BROOKE

War Sonnet V: The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven."

LEAH BROWN

The Prayer of a Mother

’Twas the prayer of mother saved him,
The babe on mother’s knee,
From the care and toils of baby-land,
That only babies see.

’Twas the prayer of mother saved him,
The boy at death’s dark gate,
And brought him back to baby-land—
A mother’s prayer and faith.

Then ’twas the faith of mother
That bade him at her chair,
To kneel and ask protection
In humble, childlike prayer.

If a mother’s prayer may save him
While at the mother’s knee,
So has it now that power
On distant land or sea."

ROBERT GRAVES

The Patchwork Quilt

Here is this patchwork quilt I’ve made
Of patterned silks and old brocade,
Small faded rags in memory rich
Sewn each to each with feather stitch,
But if you stare aghast perhaps
At certain muddied khaki scraps
Or trophy-fragments of field grey,
Clotted and torn, a grim display
That never decked white sheets before,
Blame my dazed head, blame bloody war."


**WILLIAM NOEL HODGSON**

*Before Action*

By all the glories of the day,
And the cool evening’s benison:
By the last sunset touch that lay
Upon the hills when day was done:
By beauty lavishly outpoured,
And blessings carelessly received,
By all the days that I have lived,
Make me a soldier, Lord.

By all of all men’s hopes and fears,
And all the wonders poets sing,
The laughter of unclouded years,
And every sad and lovely thing:
By the romantic ages stored
With high endeavour that was his,
By all his mad catastrophes,
Make me a man, O Lord.

I, that on my familiar hill
Saw with uncomprehending eyes
A hundred of Thy sunsets spill
Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice,
Ere the sun swings his noonday sword
Must say good-bye to all of this:—
By all delights that I shall miss,
Help me to die, O Lord.¹⁰

**RUDYARD KIPLING**

*Epitaphs of the War*

*Ex-Clerk*

Pity not! The Army gave
Freedom to a timid slave:
In which Freedom did he find
Strength of body, will, and mind:
By which strength he came to prove
Mirth, Companionship, and Love:
For which Love to Death he went:
In which Death he lies content.¹¹

**ANNIE G. LAURITZEN**

*A Prayer for the Nations*

Great God of the hosts of Israel,
Look down in much mercy I pray,
Relieve thou the war-ridden nations,
O, lead them back into thy way.

O, soften their hearts by the power
Of thy Holy Spirit divine,
Bring them back from the death traps of error,
By a Father’s deep love that is thine.

Lead them back from the wild desolation;
From horrors of war set earth free;
Bid men turn back from following Satan,
And teach them to come unto thee.

O, soften their hearts by the Spirit,
No more thy blest precepts to spurn;
That celestial joys thy may inherit;
When to heaven and thee they return.¹²

**JOHN McCRAE**

*In Flanders Fields*

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

**MRS. PARLEY NELSON**

*(SARAH AHLSTROM NELSON)*

*Letters*

If you have a soldier laddie
In the ranks, on land or sea,
Fighting for the Starry Banner
And the cause of liberty,
Let the messages you send him
Carry words of hope and cheer;
Try to do your part as nobly
As the lad you hold so dear.

If you have a soldier brother,
Friend or dear one “over there,”
Sit not down to useless grieving.

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¹⁰ Rudyard Kipling, "Epitaphs of the War: Ex-Clerk" from *Epitaphs of the War* (1914).


¹² John McCrae, "In Flanders Fields" from *In Flanders Fields* (1915).
This is no time for despair;  
Gird you soul with strength and courage,  
Send him words of hope and cheer,  
Try to be as brave a soldier  
As the one you hold so dear.\(^\text{13}\)

\textit{Thanksgiving Memories}\(^\text{14}\)

Thanksgiving time! Again I live  
Thanksgivings long since fled!  
When you were just a little tad,  
With ringlets round your head.  
Again I see your childish form  
As kneeling by my chair,  
With folded hands, you softly lisped  
A child’s Thanksgiving prayer:

“I thank thee, Lord, for mama dear,  
And for my daddy, too,  
I’m thankful that I have a home  
And for my sister Lou.  
I’m thankful for my nice new skates  
And for my rubber boots,  
I’m thankful for my jack knife and  
My real air gun what shoots,  
For these and other blessings, Lord,  
I’m thankful that I have a home,  
And as I lay me down to sleep  
Please, Lord, take care of me.”

The busy years slipped quickly by,  
You grew to man’s estate,  
Your country called and you went forth  
To meet a soldier’s fate.  
And now you sleep in Flander’s field,  
Where countless flowers grow,  
With valiant comrades lying near,  
'Neath crosses row on row.  
You gave your life in freedom’s cause,  
And though my tears still fall,  
I’m thankful that you stood for right,  
I’m glad you heard the call.  
I lift my heart in thanks to God  
Who sent a son so true;  
And though in foreign land you sleep,  
I know He cares for you.\(^\text{15}\)

\textit{To the Departed Year 1918}\(^\text{16}\)

Your birth was heralded 'mid clouds of gloom,  
So dark, we scarce dared think of happiness;  
Famine and Death stalked broadcast o’er the earth  
But Right prevailed against the power of Might!

O, glorious year, you brought the Victory.\(^\text{15}\)

\textbf{MRS. MAUD C. OLIVER}\(^\text{17}\)

\textit{Lines to Sister Rowena M. Whipple, In memory of the death of her Soldier Son, on July 20, 1918}\(^\text{18}\)

They are bringing all that’s earthly  
Of your soldier boy who died  
Far away from home and mother,  
Only strangers at his side.  
It is hard to thus behold him,  
Stricken in the prime of life,  
But you have this consolation:  
He is free from all earth-strife.

And you know that his dear body  
Rest not on a foreign shore,  
But beside your other children  
Who have only gone before.  
Wrap the Stars and Stripes around him,  
Emblem of the true and brave,  
And with loving hands consign him  
To a soldier’s honored grave.\(^\text{16}\)

\textbf{WILFRED OWEN}\(^\text{19}\)

\textit{Dulce et Decorum Est}\(^\text{20}\)

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.—  
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. 17

VERONA BANKS PETERSON

Enlist Now

“Enlist now! Help your country!”
Comes the cry all o’er the land.
Enlist now! Help the needy!”
Come join our valiant band.
For the Lord has “White Cross Sisters”
For those wounded in life’s fight.

They need your help, or you need theirs
To make life’s burden light.
The aid in want, in dire distress,
They feed the mind, help souls progress.
Enlist now! Join this order of the Army of the Lord!
Help spread the Gospel message to the homes that need His word.

Help clothe the needy children of the armies of the poor.
Help drive the demon “Ignorance” away from every door
Where children dwell. In Zion or abroad throughout the world,
May we find recruiting stations,
May we see our flag unfurled!
The Relief Society needs you!

Can’t you hear your conscience call?
There is work for every sister,
Come, enroll now, one and all,
Be a member of this order of the Army of the Lord.
Learn yourself the Gospel message,
Help the Lord to spread His word! 18

JESSIE POPE

The Call

Who’s for the trench 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? 19

Socks

Shining pins that dart and click
In the fireside’s sheltered peace
Check the thoughts that cluster thick —
20 plain and then decrease.

He was brave—well, so was I—
Keen and merry, but his lip
Quivered when he said good-bye—
Purl the seam-stitch, purl and slip.

Never used to living rough,
Lots of things he’d got to learn;
Wonder if he’s warm enough—
Knit 2, catch 2, knit 1, turn.

Hark! The paper-boys again!
Wish that shout could be suppressed;
Keeps one always on the strain—
Knit off 9, and slip the rest.

Wonder if he’s fighting now,
What he’s done an’ where he’s been;
He’ll come out on top, somehow—
Slip 1, knit 2, purl 14.20

I. LULA GREENE RICHARDS

The Home Coming

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Hark! the sound of returning steps we hear,
And in it the ring of victory’s cheer.
Our soldiers, our heroes, are coming home
From battle front, over the ocean’s foam.
In the cause of liberty, truth and right
    They bravely enlisted, and won the fight;
But—Lord, Thou gavest them the power divine—
    The honor, the triumph, the praise are Thine,
And humbly and gratefully they return
    To loved ones, still praying, whose hearts still yearn.
They have given answer to freedom’s call,
    And they come—they come—but they come not all!

Now, oh, Thou Beloved! Who was lifted up
And drank to the dregs that bitter cup—
Thou art the great Comforter, be Thou near
    The lonely bereft ones to soothe and cheer.
Make easy the yoke, and their burdens light—
    Theirs have but followed with Thee in the fight,
As oft to the faithful Thou didst appear,
    Let these feel the joy of their loved ones near.
Cut short Thy work, and may all who must wait
    Feel that even now they participate,
And draw from the measureless source above
    The glory of Faith and the strength of Love.21

ISAAC ROSENBERG

Break of Day in the Trenches

The darkness crumbles away
It is the same old druid Time as ever,
Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet’s poppy
To stick behind my ear.
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies,
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver—what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in man’s veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe,
Just a little white with the dust.22

SIEGFRIED SASSOON

Glory of Women

You love us when we’re heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war’s disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we’re killed.
You can’t believe that British troops “retire”
When hell’s last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses-blind with blood.
O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.23

The Hero

“Jack fell as he’d have wished,” the Mother said,
And folded up the letter that she’d read.
“The Colonel writes so nicely.” Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. “We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers.” Then her face was bowed.
Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
He’d told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he’d been so brave,
His glorious boy.
He thought how “Jack,” cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he’d tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.24

The Redeemer

Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mire was deep;
It was past twelve on a mid-winter night,
When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep;
There, with much work to do before the light.
We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might
Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang,
And droning shells burst with a hollow bang;
We were soaked, chilled and wretched, every one;
Darkness; the distant wink of a huge gun.
I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;  
A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,  
And lit the face of what had been a form  
Floundering in mirk. He stood before me there;  
I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare,  
And leaning forward from His burdening task,  
Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine  
Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask  
Of mortal pain in Hell’s unholy shine.

No thorny crown, only a woollen cap  
He wore—an English soldier, white and strong,  
Who loved his time like any simple chap,  
Good days of work and sport and homely song;  
Now he has learned that nights are very long,  
And dawn a watching of the windowed sky.  
But to the end, unjudging, he’ll endure  
Horror and pain, not uncontent to die  
That Lancaster on Lune may stand secure.

He faced me, reeling in his weariness,  
Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.  
I say that He was Christ, who wrought to bless  
All groping things with freedom bright as air,  
And with His mercy washed and made them fair.  
Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,  
While we began to struggle along the ditch;  
And someone flung his burden in the muck,  
Mumbling: “O Christ Almighty, now I’m stuck!”

Suicide in the Trenches

I knew a simple soldier boy  
Who grinned at life in empty joy,  
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,  
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain.  
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you’ll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.

They

The Bishop tells us: “When the boys come back  
“They will not be the same; for they’ll have fought  
In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
on Anti-Christ; their comrades’ blood has bought  
New right to breed an honourable race,  
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.”

“We’re none of us the same!” the boys reply.  
“For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;  
Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;  
And Bert’s gone syphilitic: you’ll not find  
A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some change.”  
And the Bishop said: “The ways of God are strange!”

CHARLES SORLEY

When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead

When you see millions of the mouthless dead  
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,  
Say not soft things as other men have said,  
That you’ll remember. For you need not so.  
Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know  
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?  
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.  
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.  
Say only this, “They are dead.” Then add thereto,  
“Yet many a better one has died before.”  
Then, scanning all the over-crowded mass, should you  
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,  
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.  
Great death has made all his for evermore.

To Germany

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,  
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.  
But gropers both through fields of thought confined  
We stumble and we do not understand.  
You only saw your future bigly planned,  
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,  
And in each other’s dearest ways we stand,  
And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.

When it is peace, then we may view again  
With new-won eyes each other’s truer form  
And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm  
We’ll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,  
When it is peace. But until peace, the storm  
The darkness and the thunder and the rain.

JOSEPH HUNT STANFORD

To a Lark.  
Heard singing near support line during artillery service,  
February, 1918.

How can you sing? ’Tis true the skies are blue,
And in the air there comes a breath of spring;
But hurtling death shrieks o’er the head of you—
Beneath—around you—till it seems your wing
Must surely brush the flying shot and shell
That screams across the fields you love so well.

How can you sing? The sun is warm, I know,
Beyond what is this February’s dew;
And song’s your business, whereso’er you go,
’Tis nothing more that we expect from you.
But—here’s my point—by what astounding chance
Came you to sing in this grim part of France?

Is there a message in the song you sing
Which, could it be rightly understood,
Would cheer us in the faith that everything—
E’en war—works only for some final good?
Or do you sing because you have no choice—
You’re just a bird that must report its voice?

About that “final good” you will agree
(Should hopes of that your own free soul inspire)
That there’s but little here to make us see
An eye to eye with you as you desire.
The good to us seems altogether void,
While with this bloody work we are employed.

Look at the fields beneath you, do they please?
Can you see aught but desolation there?
Look at the blackened stumps that once were trees—
Your wildest fancy cannot make them fair!
Look in the hearts of men, then tell me true
If you’re so sanguine after that review.

I hear your song. I, too, have often heard
That song called Pippas—“God is in his heaven,
So all’s right with the world”; but every word
Seems mockery when all that world is given
To mad ambition, treachery, and strife,
And shameful sacrifice of human life.

Still, keep on singing! To at least one ear
Your song is sweet, whate’er its meaning be;
It makes this devastation seem less drear,
It wakes the music long asleep in me.
For mine, and song’s sweet sake, then, sing away—
I’ll try and scale the blue with you today.30

’Midst laughter, kissing and songs.
It must’ve been great to say goodbye
To mother and sweethearts dear.
But I joined the colors and no one knew,
I went as a VOLUNTEER.

They paid the highest tribute
To those who were forced to go,
And share the burdens of Uncle Sam
In the hour of strife and woe.
They gave them banquets and suppers
And said they went without fear,
But never a thought did they give to the man
Who went as a VOLUNTEER.

Oft times I’ve talked with my bunkie
And heard him speak of his home
Of his wife and kiddies no left alone
While he with the Regulars roam.
He signs as he thinks of his love ones
And brushes away a tear,
Yet he’s proud of the day he enlisted
As only a VOLUNTEER.

Again I try to figure out,
When the guns have ceased to roar,
How much of the glory will go to those
Who were forced to enter the war.
No doubt they’ll come back with glory
’Midst many a shout and cheer,
But after all I’m satisfied,
I was only a VOLUNTEER.

One thing I know is certain
We’ll all fight side by side,
And show the world we’re Yankees,
Whatever might betide.
And when I tell the story
To those who care to hear,
I’ll tell them all I went and came
As only a VOLUNTEER.31

BERTRAM DOW TITUS

Only a Volunteer

It must’ve been great to be drafted
And hear the cheers of the throngs,
And march away from home and friends
4 “Note Returned to a Utah Girl from Army Front,” *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1918.
5 Harold Begbie, “Fall In,” *Never Such Innocence*, 71.
23 Siegfried Sassoon, “Glory of Women,” *Siegfried Sassoon, the War Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 100.