



## Sassoon, Siegfried (1886-1967)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Siegfried Sassoon in 1916.

The grueling, seemingly endless years of World War I brought a quick education in devastation and futility to hundreds of thousands of young British men, including those who grew up in privilege. One of these was the gay "war poet," Siegfried Sassoon.

Brought up in the leisured life of a country gentleman, Sassoon enlisted in the military just as the war was beginning. His poetry reflects the evolution of his attitudes towards war, beginning with a vision of combat as an exploit reflecting glory and nobility, and ending with muddy, bloody realism and bitter recrimination towards those who profited from the destruction of young soldiers.

Sassoon came of age during a sort of golden period of Western homosexual intelligentsia, and his friends and lovers were some of the best-known writers, artists, and thinkers of the period.

Born on September 8, 1886 in Weirleigh, England, in the county of Kent, Siegfried Louvain (some give his middle name as Loraine, or Lorraine) Sassoon was the son of a Sephardic Jewish father and a Catholic mother. His parents divorced when young Siegfried was five, and his father died of tuberculosis within a few years. While still a teenager, Sassoon experienced his first crush on another boy, a fellow student at his grammar school.

He studied both law and history at Clare College, Cambridge, but did not receive a degree. He did, however, meet other gay students at Cambridge, and would later count among his friends such writers associated with Cambridge as his older contemporary E. M. Forster and his younger contemporary J. R. Ackerley. At Cambridge, he also discovered the work of Edward Carpenter, a gay socialist poet and author who denounced fear and hatred of homosexuals.

Sassoon also began to write poetry while still a student at Cambridge. Between 1906 and 1912, he published nine small volumes of poems.

After leaving Cambridge, Sassoon became friends with such literary and artistic homosexuals as the future civil servant and art patron Edward Marsh, literary critic Edmund Gosse, poet Rupert Brooke, and Oscar Wilde's friend Robert Ross.

When he was twenty-eight, Sassoon enlisted in the military. Britain was soon at war, and Sassoon, as a member of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, was sent abroad to fight. He approached the war with high-minded youthful ideals until dead bodies began to pile up around him. His brother died in the battle of Gallipoli, and a comrade to whom he had a romantic attachment was killed soon after.

Sassoon's first impulse was to avenge the deaths of his loved ones by throwing himself recklessly into the fight. He volunteered for dangerous, even suicidal, missions, earning himself the admiring nickname "Mad Jack" from his fellow soldiers. Even while fighting so bravely, however, Sassoon was fast becoming disillusioned with the war. While hospitalized for a wound received in battle, he met pacifists like Bertrand

Russell and John Middleton Murray, and began to develop a more negative view of warfare.

During his early army days, Sassoon had written poems extolling the nobility of the young soldiers, but his later war poetry is filled with the ugly realities of the brutality and pointlessness of armed conflict. This later work retains an almost romantic affection for the average soldier, who does his duty bravely, even when he does not understand why.

However, with a cool and savage irony, Sassoon condemns the corrupt old men of government, military, and business, who reap the profits of war while sending young men off to die. In "Base Details," he writes:

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,  
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,  
And speed glum heroes up the line to death...

And when the war is done and youth stone dead,  
I'd toddle safely home and die--in bed.

Sassoon's friends, among them protofeminist author Robert Graves, sensed that his anti-war sentiments could get him into trouble and arranged for him to be hospitalized for shell shock. Always a loyal comrade, however, Sassoon could not stay away from the front while others fought, and, after a short time, he returned to battle. In July 1918, he was sent back to England with a head wound, and he remained there in convalescence until the war ended.

After the war, Sassoon continued to write poetry and develop an active social life. He became friends with such luminaries of the time as T.E. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, and Noël Coward, the Sitwells, and members of the Bloomsbury group. He also embarked on what was perhaps his first consummated sexual relationship with William Park ("Gabriel") Atkin, a British painter and illustrator.

Sassoon's war poetry brought him some fame. For several years he served as literary editor of London's socialist newspaper the *Daily Herald*. He soon began the lengthy process of writing his six-volume, fictionalized autobiography, which chronicled the devastating effects of war on a naïve young English gentleman.

The first volume, *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man* was published in 1928; the second, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, in 1930. The autobiography was completed in 1945 with the publication of *Siegfried's Journey*. The autobiography is a major achievement. The first volume, in particular, is significant as an elegy for the life of rural England that ended catastrophically with World War I.

During the 1920s and early 1930s, he engaged in several affairs, notably a romance with the future Nazi Prince Philip of Hesse, and a longer relationship with poet and decorator Stephen Tennant. These were tempestuous relationships in which Sassoon often felt himself the victim of rejection and cruelty.

In December 1933, he married Hester Gatty, a woman twenty years younger than himself, and in 1936, the couple had a son, George. By many accounts, Sassoon treated Gatty as badly as he had been treated by many of his male lovers, and by 1945, they were divorced, though Gatty returned to nurse Sassoon later in his life when he became ill.

The rest of Sassoon's life passed in quiet conventionality. He converted to Catholicism during the 1950s, and died on September 1, 1967, at Heytesbury House in Wiltshire, England. He was buried at St. Andrew's Church in Mells, Somerset, England.

Although his war poetry continues to find readers, Sassoon today is remembered primarily for his autobiography.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.