

SIEGFRIED SASSOON

Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth;
What silly beggars they are to blunder in
And scorch their wings with glory . . .

'Repression of War Experience' (1917)

Siegfried Sassoon Scorched Glory

A Critical Study

Paul Moeyes



© Paul Moeyes 1997

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1997 978-0-333-63285-7

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.



First published 1997 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-1-349-39412-8

ISBN 978-0-230-37456-0 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230374560

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and
made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97



Published in the United States of America by
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,
Scholarly and Reference Division
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 978-0-312-17277-0

Ter herinnering aan mijn ouders

CONTENTS

<i>List of Plates</i>		viii
<i>Preface</i>		ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>		xii
PART I	UNLEARNED ILLUSIONS	1
Prologue	Family Ties	3
Chapter 1	Young Nimrod	13
Chapter 2	An Officer and Temporary Rebel	29
Chapter 3	Georgian Poet	68
Chapter 4	Satirical Intent	93
Chapter 5	Through the Wicket Gate	111
PART II	BACKWARD STEPS	141
Chapter 6	Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man	143
Chapter 7	Memoirs of an Infantry Officer	168
Chapter 8	Sherston's Progress	185
Chapter 9	The Past Revisited: the Autobiographies	198
PART III	HOMECOMING	223
Chapter 10	God's Treasure	225
Epilogue	A Stranger on Earth	252
<i>Notes</i>		268
<i>Index</i>		289

LIST OF PLATES

1. Weirleigh, near Matfield in Kent, Sassoon's childhood home (*C. D. Wheeler*).
2. Heytesbury House from Keynes, *The Gates of Memory* (by permission of Oxford University Press).
3. Alfred Sassoon and his three sons, Siegfried, Michael and Hamo (*The Hulton Getty Picture Collection*).
4. Theresa Sassoon (by permission of Stanley Jackson and Heinemann, 1989).
5. Sassoon in 1915 in officer's uniform by Beresford (*The Hulton Getty Picture Collection*).
6. Second Lieutenant Robert Graves (by kind permission of Richard Perceval Graves).
7. Robert Nichols from Robert Nichols, *Ardour and Endurance* (*Chatto and Windus*).
8. W. H. R. Rivers (*The Royal Society, London*).
9. Craiglockhart War Hospital (*Napier University, Edinburgh*).
10. G. F. Watts's 'Love and Death' (*The Tate Gallery*).
11. Sassoon and W. B. Yeats, March 1922.
12. Ralph Hodgson (*Associated Press*).
13. Sassoon and his wife Hester from Rosamund Lehmann's album.
14. Sassoon and his son George at Heytesbury from Felicitas Corrigan, *Siegfried Sassoon* (*Gollancz, 1978*).
15. Sassoon in old age (*The Hulton Getty Picture Collection*).

PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to present a general survey and critical examination of the published writings of Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967). Sassoon's work has elicited little critical attention: Dame Felicitas Corrigan's *Siegfried Sassoon: Poet's Pilgrimage* (1973) is an account of his conversion rather than a critical evaluation of his life and work, which leaves Michael Thorpe's *Siegfried Sassoon* (1966) as the only full-scale critical work entirely devoted to Sassoon's writings. A new critical study of Sassoon's work needs no further justification, then, but it might be useful to explain in which respects this study differs from its predecessor. Thorpe's *Siegfried Sassoon* remains an extremely valuable book and this study makes no claims for superseding it, but Thorpe was forced to decide against following a literary-biographical approach since at the time of writing it Sassoon was still alive, and he was reluctant to supply Thorpe with any information. Neither could the critic draw upon relevant biographical sources, for they were only published after Sassoon's death in 1967: Corrigan's *Siegfried Sassoon: Poet's Pilgrimage* (1973), three volumes of diaries (1981, 1983, 1985), and one volume of letters to Max Beerbohm (1986), all edited by Sassoon's literary executor Sir Rupert Hart-Davis.

In this study I have made liberal use of these autobiographical writings. It might be argued that a largely biographical approach is unsuitable for a work of literary criticism, but I believe that an author who referred to his poetry as his "real biography", and whose seven prose works consist of three autobiographies, three semi-autobiographies, and one biography, at least *invites* a biographical approach, if not making it downright necessary. William Empson once wrote that "in the teasing work of scholarship, a man must all the time be trying to imagine another man's mind; as soon as that stops, he is off the rails".¹ Siegfried Sassoon seems to me to be a prime example of an author whose complete *oeuvre* is best understood in the framework of his own life, and throughout this study I have therefore attempted to "stay on the rails", convinced as I am that both Sassoon's mental development and his authorial aims need to be taken into consideration in order to arrive at a fair critical judgment of his literary work.

A special problem in a critical study of Sassoon's work is where to give which biographical background information. In his works he covers the same ground three times over: the period 1890-1920 is the subject, first of his poetry, then of the Sherston trilogy, and finally of his three autobiographies. It has been my policy to discuss issues and personalities where they seemed most relevant in the context of Sassoon's work. Thus it can happen that Sassoon's relationship with Wilfred Owen is discussed in Chapter 2, whereas his contacts with W.H.R. Rivers feature in Chapter 8, though in reality they took place simultaneously in the summer and autumn of 1917. The reason for this is that the subject of this book is Sassoon's literary work; the biographical details are primarily intended to contribute to a fuller understanding of his work.

A further aim of this study is to determine Sassoon's position as a Georgian writer, and to place the Georgian movement itself in the wider context of early twentieth-century developments in English Literature. Since I believe that Sassoon's views on art were largely those of his mother, I have included a brief discussion of the nineteenth-century art scene in Chapter 3. In this chapter I also trace the ongoing discussion about the artist's position in relation to his audience, which was a major issue among both nineteenth-century painters and twentieth-century Georgians, and which is about the only theoretical matter Sassoon was genuinely interested in.

Sassoon is but one of the Georgian writers to have been neglected by the critics: as yet there are no biographies of Lascelles Abercrombie, John Drinkwater, Gordon Bottomley, W.W. Gibson, Robert Nichols, Ralph Hodgson, John Freeman or Edward Shanks. That there is no biography of Sassoon remains all the more surprising in view of the fact that most other war poets – Brooke, Sorley, Owen, Gurney, Rosenberg, Blunden and Graves – have all been the subject of a biography (and in some cases even more than one). Sassoon remains the elusive character whose war record and poetry are discussed in books on Owen or Graves, and who features in many an index of an (auto-)biographical work of the 1920s and 30s as an 'attendant lord': a member of the entourage, a fellow guest at a dinner-party, or one of the writers mentioned as present at a ceremony. Siegfried Sassoon deserves a better fate, and it is my sincerest wish that this study will make a small contribution to a general reappraisal of a strange but impressive man whose true qualities as a writer have been too often overlooked.

I would like to thank all those who have helped me with this project since it was first begun in March 1987: in particular Mr George Sassoon, who gave me permission to quote extensively from his father's work and answered many of my questions, Professor Dominic Baker-Smith, my supervisor at Amsterdam University, and Dominic Hibberd, who corrected several errors in the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions from which both author and book have benefited considerably.

I am also greatly indebted to all those who, over the past few years, have supplied me with encouragement, advice, practical help and/or relevant material. In particular I would like to mention Charmian Hearne, my editor at Macmillan, Dr C. C. Barfoot, Mady Schuurink-Kohlbrugge, Theo Baart, Su Carlton, Hans Hollander and Mr Roel Leentvaar. Finally, special thanks to my elder brother Fred Moeyes, who helped me out when my o, so limited knowledge of computers and printers had made me cast a nostalgic eye at my other Brother, the typewriter.

P.M.
Amsterdam, April 1996

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used in the text for references to Sassoon's writings:

<i>D1</i>	– <i>Diaries 1914–1918</i>	Edited by Sir Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber and Faber, 1983)
<i>D2</i>	– <i>Diaries 1920–1922</i>	Edited by Sir Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber and Faber, 1981)
<i>D3</i>	– <i>Diaries 1923–1925</i>	Edited by Sir Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber and Faber, 1985)
<i>LC</i>	– <i>Letters to a Critic</i>	Edited by Michael Thorpe (Kent: Kent Editions, 1976)
<i>LMB</i>	– <i>Letters to Max Beerbohm</i>	Edited by Sir Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber and Faber, 1986)
<i>M</i>	– <i>Meredith</i>	(London: Arrow Books, 1959)
<i>MFH</i>	– <i>Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man</i>	(London: Faber and Faber, 1928)
<i>MIO</i>	– <i>Memoirs of an Infantry Officer</i>	(London: Faber and Faber, 1930)
<i>OC</i>	– <i>The Old Century</i>	(London: Faber and Faber, 1968)
<i>SJ</i>	– <i>Siegfried's Journey</i>	(London: Faber and Faber, 1945)
<i>SP</i>	– <i>Sherston's Progress</i>	(London: Faber and Faber, 1936)
<i>WY</i>	– <i>The Weald of Youth</i>	(London: Faber and Faber, 1986)