

World War 1 Poems

All of these are anthologised in *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (ed. George Walter), but were found with Google on various poetry websites.

Prelude

A Shropshire Lad 35: On the idle hill of summer

By A. E. Housman

On the idle hill of summer,
 Sleepy with the flow of streams,
Far I hear the steady drummer
 Drumming like a noise in dreams.

Far and near and low and louder
 On the roads of earth go by,
Dear to friends and food for powder,
 Soldiers marching, all to die.

East and west on fields forgotten
 Bleach the bones of comrades slain,
Lovely lads and dead and rotten;
 None that go return again.

Far the calling bugles hollo,
 High the screaming fife replies,
Gay the files of scarlet follow:
 Woman bore me, I will rise.

Peace

By Rupert Brooke

Now, God be thanked who has matched us with his hour,
 And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping!
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
 To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary;
 Leave the sick hearts that honor could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
 And all the little emptiness of love!

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,
Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there,
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

The Horrors in the Field

Dulce et Decorum Est

By Wilfred Owen

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.

Notes: Latin phrase is from the Roman poet Horace: "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

A Dead Boche

By Robert Graves

TO you who'd read my songs of War
 And only hear of blood and fame,
I'll say (you've heard it said before)
 "War's Hell!" and if you doubt the same,
Today I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust of blood:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
 In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
 With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

In Flanders Fields

By John McCrae

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.

The Deserter

By Gilbert Frankau

'I'm sorry I done it, Major.'
We bandaged the livid face;
And led him out, ere the wan sun rose,
To die his death of ignorance.

The bolt-heads locked to the cartridges;
The rifles stead to rest,
As cold stock nestled at colder cheek
And foresight lined on the breast.

'Fire' called the Sergeant-Major.
The muzzles flamed as he spoke:
And the shameless soul of a nameless man
Went up in cordite-smoke.

Women and the War: Home Front

War Girls

By Jessie Pope

There's the girl who clips your ticket for the train,
 And the girl who speeds the lift from floor to floor,
There's the girl who does a milk-round in the rain,
 And the girl who calls for orders at your door.
 Strong, sensible, and fit,
 They're out to show their grit,
And tackle jobs with energy and knack.
 No longer caged and penned up,
 They're going to keep their end up
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back.

There's the motor girl who drives a heavy van,
 There's the butcher girl who brings your joint of meat,
There's the girl who cries 'All fares, please!' like a man,
 And the girl who whistles taxis up the street.
 Beneath each uniform
 Beats a heart that's soft and warm,
Though of canny mother-wit they show no lack;
 But a solemn statement this is,
 They've no time for love and kisses
Till the khaki soldier-boys come marching back.

Easter Monday (In Memoriam E.T.)

By Eleanor Farjeon

In the last letter that I had from France
You thanked me for the silver Easter egg
Which I had hidden in the box of apples
You liked to munch beyond all other fruit.
You found the egg the Monday before Easter,
And said, 'I will praise Easter Monday now –
It was such a lovely morning'. Then you spoke
Of the coming battle and said, 'This is the eve.
Good-bye. And may I have a letter soon.'

That Easter Monday was a day for praise,
It was such a lovely morning. In our garden
We sowed our earliest seeds, and in the orchard
The apple-bud was ripe. It was the eve.
There are three letters that you will not get.
April 9th, 1917

Socks

By Jessie Pope

Shining pins that dart and click
In the fireside's sheltered peace
Check the thoughts the 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, 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.

The Superfluous Woman

By Vera Brittain

Ghosts crying down the vistas of the years,
Recalling words
Whose echoes long have died,
And kind moss grown
Over the sharp and blood-bespattered stones
Which cut our feet upon the ancient ways.

But who will look for my coming?

Long busy days where many meet and part;
Crowded aside
Remembered hours of hope;
And city streets
Grown dark and hot with eager multitudes
Hurrying homeward whither respite waits.

But who will seek me at nightfall?

Light fading where the chimneys cut the sky;
Footsteps that pass,
Nor tarry at my door.
And far away,
Behind the row of crosses, shadows black
Stretch out long arms before the smouldering sun.

But who will give me my children?

A War Film

By Teresa Hooley

I saw,
With a catch of breath and the heart's uplifting,
Sorrow and pride,
The 'week's great draw'-
The Mons Retreat;
The 'Old Contemptibles' who fought, and died,
The horror, the anguish and the glory.

As in a dream,
Still hearing machine-guns rattle and shells scream,
I came out into the street.

When the day was done,
My little son
Wondered at bath-time why I kissed him so,
Naked upon my knee
How could he know
The sudden terror that assaulted me?...
The body I had borne
Nine moons beneath my heart,
A part of me...
If, someday
It should be taken away
To War. Tortured, Torn.
Slain.
Rotting in o Man's Land, out in the rain –
My little son...

How should he know
Why I kissed and kissed and kissed him, crooning his name?
He thought that I was daft.
He thought it was a game,
And laughed and laughed.

Women and the horrors of the Field Hospitals

In A Soldiers' Hospital 1: Pluck

By Eva Dobell

Crippled for life at seventeen,
His great eyes seems to question why:
with both legs smashed it might have been
Better in that grim trench to die
Than drag maimed years out helplessly.

A child - so wasted and so white,
He told a lie to get his way,
To march, a man with men, and fight
While other boys are still at play.
A gallant lie your heart will say.

So broke with pain, he shrinks in dread
To see the 'dresser' drawing near;
and winds the clothes about his head
That none may see his heart-sick fear.
His shaking, strangled sobs you hear.

But when the dreaded moment's there
He'll face us all, a soldier yet,
Watch his bared wounds with unmoved air,
(Though tell-tale lashes still are wet),
And smoke his Woodbine cigarette.



<https://allpoetry.com/In-A-Soldiers'-Hospital-1:-Pluck>

In A Soldiers' Hospital II: Gramophone Tunes

By Eva Dobell

Through the long ward the gramophone
Grinds out its nasal melodies:
"Where did you get that girl?" it shrills.
The patients listen at their ease,
Through clouds of strong tobacco smoke:
The gramophone can always please.

The Welsh boy has it by his bed,
(He's lame – one leg blown away -
He'll lie propped up with pillows there,
And wind the handle half the day.
His neighbour, with the shattered arm,
Picks out the records he must play.

Jock with his crutches beats the time;
The gunner, with his head close-bound,
Listen with puzzled, patient smile:
(Shell shocked-he cannot hear a sound).
The others join in from their beds,
And send the chorus rolling round.

Somehow for me these common tunes
Can never sound the same again:
They've magic now to thrill my heart
And bring before me, clear and plain,
Man that is master of his flesh,
And has the laugh of death and pain.

Hospital Sanctuary

By Vera Brittain

When you have lost your all in a world's upheaval,
Suffered and prayed, and found your prayers were vain,
When love is dead, and hope has no renewal -
These need you still; come back to them again.

When the sad days bring you the loss of all ambition,
And pride is gone that gave you strength to bear,
When dreams are shattered, and broken is all decision -
Turn you to these, dependent on your care.

They too have fathomed the depths of human anguish,
Seen all that counted flung like chaff away;
The dim abodes of pain wherein they languish
Offer that peace for which at last you pray.

Home Leave

Strange Hells

By Ivor Gurney

There are strange hells within the minds war made
Not so often, not so humiliating afraid
As one would have expected – the racket and fear guns made.
One hell the Gloucester soldiers they quite put out;
Their first bombardment, when in combined black shout
Of fury, guns aligned, they ducked low their heads
And sang with diaphragms fixed beyond all dreads,
That tin and stretched-wire tinkle, that blither of tune;
“Après la guerre fini” till hell all had come down,
Twelve-inch, six-inch, and eighteen pounders hammering hell’s thunders.
Where are they now on state-doles, or showing shop patterns
Or walking town to town sore in borrowed tatterns
Or begged. Some civic routine one never learns.
The heart burns – but has to keep out of the face how heart burns.

(1917)

‘Blighters’

By Siegfried Sassoon

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
“We’re sure the Kaiser loves the dear old Tanks!”

I’d like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or “Home, sweet Home,”
And there’d be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

Home Service

By Geoffrey Faber

“At least it wasn’t your fault” I hear them console
When they come back, the few that will come back.
I feel those handshakes now. “Well, on the whole
You didn’t miss much. I wish I had your knack
Of stopping out. You still can call your soul
Your own, at any rate. What a priceless slack
You’ve had, old chap. It must have been top-hole.
How’s poetry? I bet you’ve written a stack.”

What shall I say? That it’s been damnable?
That all the time my soul was never my own?
That we’ve slaved hard at endless make-believe?
It isn’t only actual war that’s hell,
I’ll say. It’s spending youth and hope alone
Among pretences that have ceased to deceive.

When this Bloody War was Over

High Wood

By Philip Johnstone

Ladies and gentlemen, this is High Wood,
Called by the French, Bois des Fourneaux,
The famous spot which in Nineteen-Sixteen,
July, August and September was the scene
Of long and bitterly contested strife,
By reason of its High commanding site.
Observe the effect of shell-fire in the trees
Standing and fallen; here is wire; this trench
For months inhabited, twelve times changed hands;
(They soon fall in), used later as a grave.
It has been said on good authority
That in the fighting for this patch of wood
Were killed somewhere above eight thousand men,
Of whom the greater part were buried here,
This mound on which you stand being...

Madame, please,

You are requested kindly not to touch
Or take away the Company's property
As souvenirs; you'll find we have on sale
A large variety, all guaranteed.
As I was saying, all is as it was,
This is an unknown British officer,
The tunic having lately rotted off.
Please follow me - this way ...

the path, sir, please

The ground which was secured at great expense
The Company keeps absolutely untouched,
And in that dug-out (genuine) we provide
Refreshments at a reasonable rate.
You are requested not to leave about
Paper, or ginger-beer bottles, or orange-peel,
There are waste-paper-baskets at the gate.

(1918)

Picture-Show

By Siegfried Sassoon

AND still they come and go: and this is all I know—
That from the gloom I watch an endless picture-show,
Where wild or listless faces flicker on their way,
With glad or grievous hearts I'll never understand
Because Time spins so fast, and they've no time to stay
Beyond the moment's gesture of a lifted hand.

And still, between the shadow and the blinding flame,
The brave despair of men flings onward, ever the same
As in those doom-lit years that wait them, and have been...
And life is just the picture dancing on a screen.

If Ye Forget

By Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy

Let me forget – Let me forget,
I am weary of remembrance,
And my brow is ever wet,
With the tears of my remembrance,
With the tears and bloody sweat,
 Let me forget.

If ye forget – If ye forget,
Then your children must remember,
And their brow be ever wet,
With the tears of their remembrance,
With the tears and bloody sweat,
 If ye forget.