General Information

Source: NBC Learn  Resource Type: Video Mini-Documentary
Creator: Todd Johnson  Copyright: NBCUniversal Media, LLC.
Event Date: 03/18/1893  Copyright Date: 2014
Air/Publish Date: 06/04/2014  Clip Length 00:03:42

Description

Wilfred Owen was an English soldier and one of the most influential poets from World War I. After meeting Siegfried Sassoon at the Craiglockhart War Hospital, he was inspired to write about his wartime experience. This story is produced by NBC Learn in partnership with Pearson.

Keywords

Poetry, World War I, WWI, Wilfred Owen, Poet, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, Shell Shock, Siegfried Sassoon, Craiglockhart War Hospital, "Dulce Et Decorum Est", "Anthem for Doomed Youth", Westminster Abbey, Craiglockhart, Craiglockhart Hydropathic, Edinburgh, Warfare, War

Citation

MLA
Transcript

Wilfred Owen, a Poet in the Trenches

TODD JOHNSON reporting:

16-nations sent troops to the First World War. More than 8 million died. More than 21 million were wounded - including millions who suffered from "shell-shock," known today as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Treatment for shell shock was experimental - no one fully understood what caused such intense trauma. British Army 2nd Lieutenant Wilfred Owen understood. An English tutor before the war, Owen has been proud to enlist and, in January, 1917, join Britain's French and Russian Allies in fighting the German Imperial Army in France.

His excitement turned to horror at the Western Front. Combat was vicious. Both sides had new and terrible weapons- Tanks. Bomber planes. Machine guns. Poison gas. Thousands could be killed in minutes. One million lost in the Battle of Verdun. Another million killed in the Battle of the Somme - 60,000 British troops the first day. Four months into his tour, a shell barrage blew Owen into the air, then trapped him in a hole for days, alone except for the blasted pieces of a fellow soldier's body.

Owen joined the shell-shocked at the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland -- "Dottyville" as it was called by one of Owen's fellow patients, Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon, an author and poet, encouraged Owen to "write out" his traumatic experiences, as therapy - and write them out as poetry. The verses Owen wrote would be among the most powerful descriptions of the First World War - and the horror of all warfare -- ever written. He used alliteration - repeated letter sounds - to report the unholy noise of combat- "the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle." Unconventional punctuation conveyed the panic of a gas attack - "GAS! Gas! Quick, boys! An ecstasy of fumbling, fitting the clumsy helmets just in time" - and the ghastly last moments of a soldier who didn't fit his mask in time. "He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning."

Owen titled his famous "gas poem" after an ancient Latin saying that means "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country." Owen had answered this call to battle himself, but now he called it "the old lie." The act of killing deadened moral feeling, man's sense of self as human and humane.

"The true Poets must be truthful," he wrote, and protest the war as a senseless waste. His disillusion mirrored that of many of his generation. Believing his anti-war protests would have more power coming
from an active officer, Owen returned to the front in France in the fall of 1918. He was killed in action, at
the age of 25, on November 4 -- seven days before Armistice ended the Great War.
Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and 14 other World War I poets are memorialized in Westminster
Abbey, under a stone inscribed with Owen's words- "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry
is in the pity."