

Scottish Poetry of the First World War

Teaching Notes for National Five and Higher English

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The aim of the Teaching Note is to give you an experience of the literary expression of the emotions and reactions generated by the events of the First World War, commonly called ‘The war to end all wars’, the first conflict to involve all the nations of the world. Although in Scottish schools it has in the past been common practice to consider almost exclusively the writings of English poets who were involved in the conflict, writers of other nations underwent the same experiences, and wrote of these experiences in their own terms. You may indeed have encountered Erich Maria Remarque’s German memoir, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Here we shall consider Scottish writings in preference to the traditionally accepted English canon, which will show that all experiences were similar regardless of nationality, and allow us to evaluate the merit of the hitherto relatively unconsidered Scottish writing.

While working through the Teaching Note, you should bear in mind that of the 500,000 Scots who volunteered for service in the British army, some 125,000 were killed in action or died on active service, comprising one-sixth of the total British and Empire casualty lost. The Scots’ long battle traditions made them willing volunteers. This fact was noted by Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, in a letter of 19 August 1914 which was widely publicised in the Scottish press: ‘I feel certain that Scotsmen have only to know that the country urgently needs their services to offer them with the same splendid patriotism as they have always shown in the past.’

By the end of August 1914, 20,000 had enlisted at the Glasgow Gallowgate recruiting office, 1,500 in Coatbridge, 900 in Clydebanks, 940 in Dumbarton, 750 in Alloa. In Edinburgh the entire Watsonians Rugby XV enlisted together, and, following what was apparently a long tradition at similarly festive occasions (Robert Fergusson’s poem ‘Leith Races’ depicts a recruiting booth set up to capture the interest of the gamblers on the course), a recruiting booth set up at the Heart of Midlothian–Hibernian derby match did well. Many of these groups were kept together while serving, in what came to be known as ‘pals’ battalions.

The patriotic fervour which greeted the outbreak of war derived at least partly from the belief that the Allies were fighting for good, right and civilisation against the barbaric German forces, and it was believed that the war would be a walkover, won by Christmas. In fact, many of the early volunteers were enlisted for six months or for the duration of the war, whichever proved to be the longer.

The poems in the Note have been rather arbitrarily allocated to five separate sections, although each section does have a theme. One of the tasks of the Note is for students to give a title or rubric to each of the sections, once they have established the unifying theme.

RANGE:

- National 5 English, Higher English

KEY TEXTS:

Poetry Collections

- *From the Line: Scottish War Poetry 1914–1945* (ASLS, 2014)
- *In Flanders Fields: Scottish Poetry and Prose of the First World War* (Mainstream, 1991)

SECTION 1

It is noticeable that the poetry produced around the outbreak of war and in the early weeks was highly idealistic and patriotic, as epitomised by the frequently anthologised 'The Soldier, by Rupert Brooke, which eulogises England and the English. 'In Memoriam' by Pittendreich MacGillivray (1856–1938), on p. 75 of *In Flanders Field*, appears to celebrate the heroic death in war of a soldier, but with a significant twist.

Examine the form of the poem, and look at the way it is laid out on the page. Why do you think it has been presented in this way? Does it surprise you that the subject of the poem is female? What point is MacGillivray making about the nature of death in war? Do you find this convincing?

This poem attempts to offer comfort to the bereaved relatives by celebrating the glorious nature of death in battle and the heroic status of the war dead – as it was put in classical times '*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*' (*sweet and seemly it is to die for one's country*). If you have access to newspaper reports of the period, you will find this sentiment is very much of its time, and you will also be familiar with the numerous local war memorials erected to 'The Glorious Dead'.

A rather different style is seen in 'Hey, Jock, are ye glad ye listed?' by Neil Munro (1864–1930), which will be found on p. 61 of *From the Line*.

The question of the title is not answered, but the response is obvious. Look in detail at the references to the activities of peacetime which are compared to the soldiers' present situation. What is the poet's intention in making these comparisons? How does he deal with the fact that the soldier's sole *raison d'être* is to kill other soldiers? What is the effect of the use of Scots in this poem?

If you were to take these poems as representative of the Scottish attitude at the beginning of the war, how would you describe that attitude? How is the fact of death and killing expressed and responded to? Which of the two poems cited 'speaks' to you more clearly? Does the use of Scots language rather than formal English create a significant difference for you?

SECTION 2

Read the following poems and see if you can detect a different tone from those in Section 1. The first is by Ewart Alan Mackintosh (1893–1917), who served and was killed in France, and will be found on p. 49 of *From the Line*.

Look at the poet's use of the near-refrain 'Lads, you're wanted ...' throughout the poem. How does the repetition of these words illustrate an increasingly bitterly felt realism about the war? Identify the various groups of people against whom the poet appears most vindictive. Why should he feel like this? The layout of the poem on the page here makes clear the contrasts in diction, tone, attitude and emotion between the first six stanzas and the last five. Pick out and comment on particular words and phrases which make this contrast most clear.

One of the two women writers we shall be looking at, Mary Symon (1863–1938), writes in the persona of a young volunteer in 'A Recruit for The Gordons', p. 129 of *In Flanders Fields*.

In this poem, there are a number of changes of tone, as the speaker slowly acknowledges what 'listing' actually means. The first three stanzas are full of excitement and the desire to use his strength in the fight. However, by the time he is dressed in his uniform, and is reminded of the Gordon Highlanders' long history of battle by the motto 'Bydand' (Standing Fast), he is experiencing a different emotion, and realising how different his life is going to be now from what he has been used to. Another aspect of the tradition is brought to mind as he remembers his grandfather fighting at Waterloo, a century before, in a totally different kind of warfare. Look at the last two stanzas. Can you comment on the way the poet very economically compares and contrasts his life as it could have been with what he has chosen? In what way do the final two lines of the poem echo the final message of Mackintosh's poem?

Both Mackintosh and Symon have written in a tight four-line stanza form, although Symon's rhyme scheme is a strict *abab* whereas Mackintosh has used a more flexible *xaxa*. You will have noticed the difference in language, also – Mackintosh writes in English, while Symon adopts her native north-eastern Scots dialect.

Symon also adopts the now rather old-fashioned but then conventional method of indicating the pronunciation of words by using the apostrophe to show unpronounced letters. In what way do these differences in language and diction highlight the differences between the English-educated Mackintosh and the village-school-educated persona of Symon's poem? What similarities can you find in the poets' treatment of what enlisting actually means?

Wilfred Owen's 'The Send-Off' offers an actual picture of the entrainment of the soldiers going off to fight. A very similar send-off is described by Ewart Alan Mackintosh in 'Cha Till MacCruimein', on p. 46 of *From the Line*.

You will notice that the first two stanzas are each divided into two parts. What is the purpose of this division? Why do you think the poet has developed from a piper piping a pibroch in stanza 1 through a woman singing in stanza 2 to MacCrimmon himself piping in stanza 3? What is the deeper significance of the ghostly marchers in the third stanza? What does the refrain 'MacCrimmon comes no more' add to the tone of the poem?

The poem was composed in Bedford, the training camp in the south of England where the Scottish soldiers were trained and prepared for the battles to come, and subtitled 'Departure of the 4th Camerons'. Why do you think Mackintosh has used a Gaelic title for the poem? What does the title have to do with what he is thinking about?

Now that you have looked at the calls to service and their answer in a number of different poems, can you establish the clear difference in tone between the poems of Section 1 and those of Section 2? Give each section a title to establish this difference.

SECTION 3

Once the men reached the battlefield itself, the realities of war hit them. Some poets were clearly so shocked and horrified by what they saw that they could find no adequate expression in ordinary language, and the heightened imagery of their work can prove a barrier to some readers. Read the following very different poems on warfare as it was experienced and analyse your reaction to the techniques and devices used to establish what kind of writing has the greatest impact on you as a reader long distanced from the events.

'Up the Line to Poelkapelle' by W. D. Cocker (1882–1970), on p. 38 of *In Flanders Fields*, has a very jaunty rhythm which you should realise as you read is distinctly at odds with the event described.

Why do you think Cocker uses this disjunctive style, and the colloquial language, and is it more effective than a more stately rhythm and formal diction?

The rhyme scheme in the poem is simple and straightforward – xaxxbxb with monosyllabic rhymes on the even-numbered lines, culminating in the dismissive 'jot' of the final line of each stanza. How does the poet's use of rhyme and the diction he employs in the non-rhyming lines heighten the effect of the scene he is describing?

Why does Cocker employ a refrain in the final two lines of each stanza, and why is 'Long, long way to Tipperary –' always in italics and in brackets?

Although some horrible sights are all too visible while on the way to the front line, the terrible reality cannot be imagined until one is in the thick of it. While Siegfried Sassoon stresses the horror and gruesomeness of the battlefield in 'Counter-Attack', Ewart Alan Mackintosh in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade Brought up to Date', on p. 85 of *In Flanders Fields*, describes the often farcical mismanagement of the battle in a parody of Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'.

You will have noticed here that the diction is much more colloquial than is usual in Mackintosh's poetry, and that there are distinct echoes of

the writing of Siegfried Sassoon. What advantage does this give to the experience of the poem?

To what extent is it essential to know the original (and the history behind the original) to appreciate the parody? Read the poem here on its own, and then find the original (easily found on the internet). What extra dimension does an understanding of the parody give to the context and tone of the poem? This poem makes demands on the reader in different ways. Mackintosh expects his readers to know Tennyson's poem and to appreciate the parody, respond to the use of direct speech creating very specific characterisation among the six hundred, the initial grumpy inactivity followed by a sense of confusion and panic. This was written by a man who had actually experienced what he was describing. There is a clear sense of a personality being portrayed.

Having been through this kind of experience, it is not surprising that many men broke under the strain. Certainly, those who managed to survive the battle often returned in a pretty poor condition, as is seen in 'From the Line' by Roderick Watson Kerr (1893–1960), found on p. 16 of *From the Line*.

Read the poem 'From the Line' and discuss in groups the points raised in the following questions:

1. What different types of movement are conveyed by the words 'tottering, doddering' in line 2? What would you normally associate these words with?
2. Comment on the use of 'bad wine' as the reason for this movement.
3. Why do you think the poet has made 'Of others, or their own' the first line of the second stanza when it clearly belongs semantically with the first stanza?
4. In what way is the third stanza a reiteration of the first two stanzas? (Look at words like 'aimless', 'muddy', and general repetition of ideas.)
5. In what way do the rhymes of the fourth stanza – 'flesh' – 'fresh'; 'flowers' – 'hours'; 'drag on' – 'dawn' heighten the horror of the contrasts?
6. Can you understand how rain can be seen as 'a fiend of pain' even when death is all around?
7. These first four stanzas are in the form of detailed questions. What is the purpose of the first line of the fifth stanza, which is a single line question?
8. Why are 'War and Necessity' and 'War's Magnificent Nobility!' written like this in stanza 5?
9. What, in the poet's view, is the difference between those who have 'seen the things [he's] sung' and those who haven't?

Once these points have been discussed by groups you can begin to pull the ideas together to establish an agreed reading of the poem.

If you have read Wilfred Owen's '*Dulce et decorum est*', which is probably the best known of all the war poems of the period, you could examine the similarities to be found in terms of description, word choice and message. What differences are there? You may find that the Owen poem is richer in imagery, and works to a rather different climax.

Is the heightened emotional effect obtained by Owen an advantage to getting the message across, or do you find that the grotesque nature of the description creates a barrier? In that case, do you find Kerr's distinctly sparer approach more accessible?

SECTION 4

Death in battle was, as you have seen from the introduction, statistically more likely for Scottish than for English soldiers, but whatever the nationality, the reality of death was the same, and very often provoked the most poetic expressions from poets, as can be seen in ‘When you see millions of the mouthless dead’ on p. 78 of *From the Line*, by Charles Hamilton Sorley (1895–1915), who was killed during the Battle of Loos in October 1915.

What is the form of this poem? Compare it to the first poem we studied, MacGillivray’s ‘In Memoriam’. What difference in tone and attitude do you detect in Sorley’s poem compared to the other?

1. Why does Sorley use adjective like ‘mouthless’, ‘deaf’ and ‘blind’ to describe the dead?
2. What effect do the words ‘millions’, ‘pale battalions’, ‘all the o’ercrowded mass’ have on the reader?
3. Why does the poet advise adding ‘Yet many a better one has died before’? What has happened to these soldiers on the battlefield?

Increasingly, any idea of being on the side of good and right against evil and barbarism faded as soldiers realised that they were all in the same bloodbath and all suffering the same kind and scale of casualties. It was primarily the soldier-poets who pointed to the universality of experience, linking all soldiers in a common horror and a common grave. J. D. Cocker’s ‘The Sniper’, on p. 18 of *From the Line*, clearly illustrates this realisation.

What effect does the double perspective have on the reader? How does Cocker expect us to respond to the view from two hundred yards away? Comment on the effect of ‘By Jove, I got him!’ in the context. In what sense are the names of the last two lines interchangeable? Who has really ‘got him’, in Cocker’s view?

‘German Prisoners’ by Joseph Lee (1875–1949), on p. 34 of *From the Line*, shows a very similar realisation. The poem is a sonnet, constructed in Shakespearean form with three

quatrains and a final rhyming couplet. How does the movement of the poem echo the movement of the structure? Where is the *volta*, or change of direction of the thought? What does this tell you about the paramount emotion in the poem? How is the difference highlighted in the language used?

Charles Hamilton Sorley’s ‘To Germany’, on p. 121 of *In Flanders Fields*, is another sonnet which likens the German and British experiences.

What is the quality that Sorley stresses in his poem? The sonnet is Petrarchan in form, composed of an octave (two quatrains) and sestet (two tercets), tightly rhyming *abababab cddcdc*. The *volta*, or change of direction of thought, comes at the end of the octave, which here begins the thought of peace in the future. In what way is the ignorance of the soldier made into a positive force especially in the sestet? What is the overall tone of the sonnet?

The sonnet was traditionally used for love poetry, and as such would appear to be supremely inappropriate as a form for war poetry. It is also a very tightly-structured form, with a defined number of lines and a strict rhyme scheme, which is usually at odds with the chaotic and terrible scenes and thoughts being described. Why do you think so many poets found the sonnet form attractive at this period and for these subjects? Take a group of sonnets from this unit and compare and contrast them to show the huge variety within a defined form.

SECTION 5

For those who died on the battlefield there were, as Owen so appositely remarked in 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', 'no passing bells', 'nor any voice of mourning save ... /the shrill demented choirs of wailing shells'. However, there was a sense of loss, both on the battlefield and back at home, and this desire to mourn while all the while being terrified for one's own life caused ambivalent feelings in the soldier-poets. Siegfried Sassoon's 'Lamentations' shows this ambivalence through a biting irony.

I found him in the guard-room at the Base.
From the blind darkness I had heard his crying
And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face
A sergeant watched him;
It was no good trying
To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.
And, all because his brother had gone west,
Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief
Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked,
 while he was kneeling
Half-naked on the floor. In my belief
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

What is the persona that the poet has adopted in this poem? What words and phrases epitomise the persona's negative view of the mourning soldier? How does he create sympathy for the soldier while using such negative descriptions as 'howled and beat his chest', 'moaned, shouted, sobbed and choked'?

Ewart Alan Macintosh's 'In Memoriam', on p. 47 of *From the Line*, although addressed to one soldier by name, is clearly intended to be a much more widely applied memorial to the soldiers under his command.

This very emotional poem unexpectedly contrasts the feelings of the soldiers' natural fathers with their 'battlefield fathers', the officers who commanded them and often sent them to their deaths. What appears to be the attitude of the officer towards the bereaved father in the first two stanzas? What does he mean by 'You were only David's father,/But I had fifty sons' in stanza 3 in terms of relative responsibility and emotional ties?

What does the increasingly personal address in stanzas 4 and 5 tell you about the relationship between officer and men? How does the officer feel about his men? How do the men feel about their officer? What particular words and phrases bring out these feelings most strongly?

This is an extremely moving poem although written very simply. What gives it its emotional impact?

A similar lament can be found in Mary Symon's 'The Glen's Muster Roll' where the village schoolmaster reads over the Muster-Roll of his former pupils, who will have formed one of the many 'Pals' battalions'.

While the officer in the field had a very immediate sense of the loss of his men, the relatives left at home had simply their own love and imagination to draw on. Another writer in Scots, Violet Jacob (1863–1940) has written very movingly of the sense of bewilderment that the bereaved mother feels, in 'Glory', on p. 49 of *In Flanders Fields*.

1. What does the poet mean by 'a' yon glory that's about yer heid'? Is this sincere, or do you read it ironically?
2. What is the poet's purpose in describing the surroundings of home both for her persona and for the reader?
3. The poem is constructed using a good deal of sound symbolism, particularly in the third stanza. How effective is this, given the overall message of the poem?
4. How do you interpret the fifth stanza? Is this true feeling, do you think, or a desperate clinging to the teachings of church and state with regard to the war?
5. What is the effect of '... come ben, my bairn, come ben!' on the whole poem? To what extent does this line undermine what has been said elsewhere?

Thoughts of home and what home will mean when loved friends are no longer there to share the everyday pleasures would predictably figure largely in the minds of the soldiers abroad, as can be seen in 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' by John Buchan (1875–1940), on p. 9

of *From the Line*. This poem would be written both to echo Robert Browning's poem of the same title, but in a very different context, and to respond to a newspaper article warning that the returning soldiers will not be able to settle down in their former occupations.

Given that Buchan in his novels normally writes in a very English prose, why do you think this poem is so densely Scots?

What are the features of home life that his persona particularly looks forward to, and why are those features so important when compared to his present life?

Why do you think he only mentions Davie's death in the final three and a half lines, and why is this part of the poem printed in italics? What effect does this have on the reader's response to the poem? What would have been the effect had Davie's death been mentioned right at the beginning and the poem written as a memory of what they had done together before the war, which is what in fact it is?

The experiences of the war and the memories of those left behind clearly had a lasting effect on the men who fought, as can be seen in 'Pilgrimage' by J. B. Salmond (1891–1958), on p. 73 of *From the Line*.

The movement through the three stanzas of the poem is from 'Me an' Jean an' the bairn' through 'Me an' Jean' to finally 'Me'. What is the poet's intention in gradually stripping away his companions? What are the attitudes and emotions of the soldier, his wife and his child as they are described in the poem?

1. What is the little narrative concealed in the second stanza? And why is it there?
2. What emphasises the comradeship in the midst of the mud and panic of the third stanza?
3. What do you understand by 'deil tak' this dust i' my e'e'? Why do you think there is an exclamation mark after the final 'Me!'?

FURTHER THOUGHTS

You have now worked through what is by no means an exhaustive series of Scottish poems written mainly from the trenches during the First World War. If you are interested in pursuing the work of the poets studied, you will find a good selection of Scottish poets in *In Flanders Fields* edited by Trevor Royle, which also includes prose extracts written at the time, and of course in *From the Line: Scottish War Poetry 1914–1945*, edited by David Goldie and Roderick Watson, which also includes poetry from the Second World War.

Having read some poetry by Scottish writers who may be new to you in comparison with the more established English writers, you should be able now to formulate your response towards the work. Do you find that there is a specifically Scottish dimension to the experiences, or is the universality of the experience the overriding element? What contribution do you feel the writing in Scots language makes to the canon that we are establishing here? Do you find the Scots poems closer to you because of the language, or does the Scots vocabulary (where it is used) prove as great a barrier as some have found Wilfred Owen's imagery to be? Finally, has this Note convinced you that the Scots poets writing during the First World War were as great as those English poets whose works have been the staple of Scots classrooms for decades?

FROM THE LINE

Scottish War Poetry 1914–1945

Edited by David Goldie and Roderick Watson

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“The poems in this superb and revelatory
collection take one to the heart of war”

—*Scottish Review of Books*

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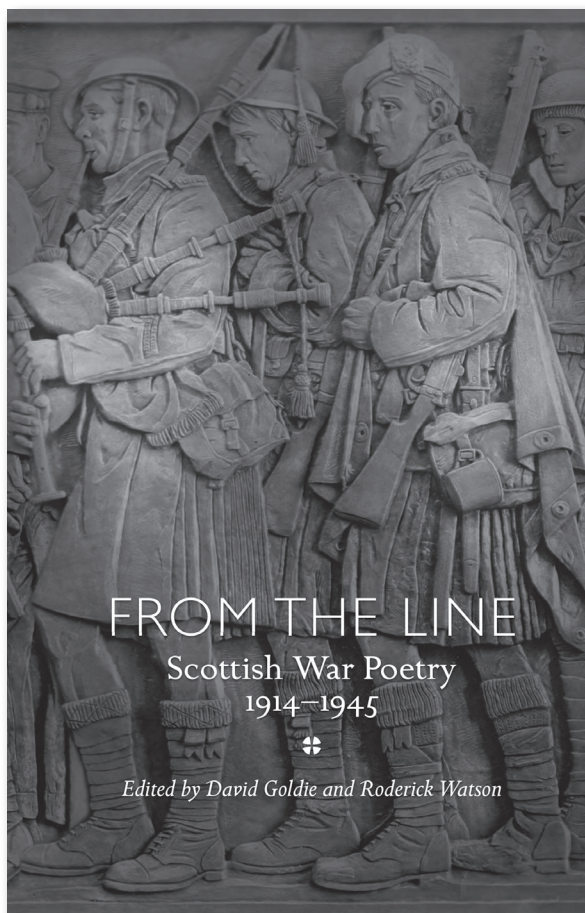
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FROM THE LINE

Scottish War Poetry

1914–1945

Edited by David Goldie and Roderick Watson

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