

Ivor Gurney and the Re-Discovery of Talent

Gone out the level sheets of mists, and see, the west row
Of elms are black on the meadow edge. Day's wind is blowing.
(“Early Spring Dawn”)

Jacqueline Banerjee

It is now almost received opinion that T. S. Eliot outlived his own revolution,¹ and that the line of traditional English verse, referred to off-handedly by Eric Homberger as “the patchwork of Hardy-Housman-Thomas-Graves”² has continued unbroken (largely by-passing the modernists) right up through the century to John Betjeman and Philip Larkin. To adapt a line from “After a Journey” by Hardy, “Where [it] will next be, there’s no knowing,” since neither of the two best-selling poets, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, seems to fit neatly into the pattern. Hughes’ natural world is violent and unnerving, as far from the general tenor of Hardy’s as might be; Heaney, being Irish, has preoccupations and strengths which resist absorption into the mainstream. It could be that George Macbeth’s more recent work, written since 1979 when he moved to Norfolk (home once to John Skelton), makes him a possible torch-bearer, but there are other candidates too, and it is no truism to say that only time will tell. For time, and the settling down of earlier twentieth century English verse into recognizable contours, is only just beginning to tell us some of the talents which we overlooked in the past.

The re-discovery of such talents is in many ways more rewarding than speculation about the future, and the proper sphere of academic research as against journalistic reviewing. The work of these writers comes to us whole, the personality behind it shaped by the full lifetime’s experience, and that experience in turn firmly set in the social and historical background. Manuscripts are now available, in some cases copyright and other restrictions (for instance, on the consultation of army records) have been lifted with the lapse of years. Where there is much to be learnt, there is also much to be undertaken: careful editors must sift through piles of biographical information, decide whether to rescue poems or even whole volumes of unpublished verse from oblivion, and bring their full critical apparatus to bear on published texts which have been taken from misread (or perhaps revised?) manuscripts or have been simply printed and punctuated carelessly. They may have to undo the work of earlier editors who ‘smoothed out’ texts in their anxiety to reach a larger readership.

In 1982, P. J. Kavanagh, himself a poet, performed all these services for the neglected Gloucestershire and First World War poet, Ivor Gurney.

Kavanagh’s edition of Gurney’s *Collected Poems* is both painstaking and comprehensive.³ It supersedes two previous selections, and complements the biography by Michael Hurd, entitled *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney*, which was first published in 1978.⁴ And it affords substantial evidence that here is a writer—like Edward Thomas, whose “gradual progress towards the centre of the 20th-century poetic stage”⁵ has been such a feature of recent criticism—who both belongs to and strengthens the central tradition of English poetry as it appears in our age.

Ivor Gurney was born in Gloucester in 1890. His father was a tailor but he was taken in hand by his godfather, a clergyman who encouraged him to develop his abilities and contributed towards his education. He eventually won an Open Scholarship to the Royal College of Music, where he showed great potential but also a strong individuality which made him difficult to teach. Setting poetry to music during his college years inspired him to begin writing poetry himself, and after volunteering for the army at the beginning of World War 1 and being sent to France, he soon produced enough poems for a volume. *Severn and Somme* was published by Rupert Brooke's publishers, Sidgwick and Jackson, in 1917, and reprinted exactly a year later. Meanwhile his music was also being performed, and when he was invalided out of the army with the after-effects of gassing, and 'deferred shell-shock,' he seemed set fair for a brilliant future. Unlike Brooke, Charles Sorley, Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas and Isaac Rosenberg (the list could go on and on), this talented young man had gone through the ordeals of the trenches and survived.

But unfortunately, it was not as simple as that. Even before he went to France, there had been signs of instability in his character: his nickname at school was 'Batty Gurney,' and a breakdown at college had been severe enough to necessitate a period of recovery at home in Gloucestershire. Drawing legitimate inferences from Hurd, the reviewer Samuel Hynes has argued that the discipline of army life actually served to postpone his eventual lapse into paranoid schizophrenia;⁶ however, it seems much more likely, as Jon Silkin has suggested, that "his trench experience aggravated his condition beyond control."⁷ Certainly, the aftermath of dreadful memories could not have helped his case. To some extent, then, Gurney was a victim of the war just like his fallen contemporaries. He was unable to settle down at the Royal College, to which he returned briefly after the war, so that he failed his fellowship examination in 1921. Nor was he able to keep any of the jobs he tried his hand at. Eventually he became so disturbed that in 1922 he was committed to a mental asylum in his home town of Gloucester. Nearly all his later poems, including a verse-autobiography, and musical compositions, were written at the City of London Mental Hospital, to which he was moved soon afterwards. He died at the hospital in 1937, of tuberculosis.

Several factors worked together to delay his recognition. Although *Severn and Somme* was well received and ran to two editions, it was not the kind of angry anti-war propaganda which Siegfried Sassoon was aiming at the "smug-faced crowds" back home ("Suicide in the Trenches"), nor was it suffused with pity like Owen's work. Nor did Gurney's observation of particular details lead, as Rosenberg's did, to an exploration of cosmic significances. His title juxtaposes home (the River Severn flows through Gloucestershire) and battlefield (the River Somme in North France, where Gurney served as an ordinary soldier with a Gloucestershire regiment, was the background of fierce fighting from July to October 1916, in which literally hundreds of thousands of men died on both sides). The basic theme of Gurney's work is simply the contrast between the two areas of experience. Looking back, he saw his motives for writing as quite prosaic—not to inform, or engage sympathy, or produce literary masterpieces, but

Out of the heart's sickness the spirit wrote

For delight, or to escape hunger, or of war's worst anger,

When the guns died to silence and men would gather sense
Somehow together, and find that this was life indeed,
And praise another's nobleness, or to Cotswold get hence.

("War Books")

This was the kind of poetry of personal experience which would appeal to others at the time, who shared that experience, but which had little to say to those who came after. Gurney himself recognized this, writing in his preface to the volume,

I fear that those who buy the book (or even borrow), to get information about the Gloucesters, will be disappointed. Most of the book is concerned with a person named Myself, and the rest with my county, Gloucester.⁸

His next volume of poetry (*War's Embers*, 1919) was more coolly received, and in the same year, apparently without regard to its literary merits, his publishers rejected a new typescript of poems.

One might point out here that since Gurney did, in fact, survive the war, there was no urgent rush by family, friends, admirers—and publishers—to see that all the work of this gifted young man was immortalized in print, as there was in the case of the dead soldier-poets. Brooke, the earliest of the war poets to die, saw hardly any action, but his *1914 and Other Poems* appeared in the year of his death, 1915, and had reached its twenty-first impression by 1917, the year *Severn and Somme* was published. The first edition of Owen's *Selected Poems* came out in 1920, and even Rosenberg (who was also a private rather than an officer, and is generally considered to have been rather neglected at the time) had an edition out by 1922. Gurney himself felt the neglect keenly.⁹ Not that he lacked literary 'connections': John Haines, another Gloucester poet, did in fact prepare a selection of his work, but it took so long that the project was abandoned with the outbreak of a new war.

It was not until fifteen years after Gurney's death that *The Poems of Ivor Gurney*, edited by Edmund Blunden, finally appeared from Hutchinson. Hynes, who obviously had not read the book, speculated later that Blunden must have chosen only the poems which suited his own, rather old-fashioned taste. But this is what Kavanagh has to say about it:

Blunden's memoir, tentative, understanding, respectful, is a small masterpiece of its kind. But his selection of seventy-eight poems is eccentric. He has chosen on the whole the wilder, stranger, later poems, omitting most of the more approachable ones and the simpler lyrics.¹⁰

It is ironic that by passing over the lighter pieces, which must indeed have been more to his personal liking, and relying on the more 'original' and 'powerful' poems to appeal to more recent critical predilections, Blunden delayed Gurney's recognition still further. For the reviewers were not fooled: Gurney is not a modernist. And since his true strengths had been poorly represented in it, the book either went unnoticed or received lukewarm reviews. Even the generally appreciative reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* could find only "the occasional fine lyric" in it.¹¹ Here is a good example of how literary fashions can put pressures on editors and publishers that adversely affect the writers' reputations, sometimes for many years.

One special problem was the number of misreadings in the typescripts on which Blunden's texts were based. These accentuated their oddness, and seemed to confirm that they were the

products of an unbalanced mind. Kavanagh, who had access to the original manuscripts, gives the example of an 'if' transposed to an 'of,' 'thereat' typed out as 'threat'.¹² In such cases perfectly normal constructions came out as idiosyncracies or even pure nonsense. Thus even when the selection was improved and enlarged by Leonard Clark, and put out in a new edition by Chatto & Windus in 1973, an influential critic like Bernard Bergonzi could feel justified in seeing in the later poems "evidence of their author's mental disorder."¹³ But it no longer seems necessary (as it seemed in the '70s) to debate whether Gurney was "a good minor poet who happened to be mad" or the "ruins of a major poet."¹⁴ It is now quite obvious, with this much fuller and carefully checked collection, that like John Clare (whose work had needed to be re-discovered earlier in the century, and whom Gurney himself admired) here is an important poet who continued to write, and to write remarkably well, during his long years in the asylum.

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What is there, then, in the 304 poems printed here, representing a third of Gurney's actual poetic output, to ensure their place in the tradition of English verse?

One can begin by pointing out the debts which Gurney owes to some of his predecessors in that tradition—particularly Hopkins, Housman and Thomas—and the way in which he turns these debts to his own individual use.

Here, for instance, are lines which could almost have come from Hopkins—a poet whom Gurney was one of the very first to admire:

Nothing between Bredon and Dursley has
Any day yesterday's precise unpraisèd grace.

The syntax strained for effect, the distinctive sound and stress patterns of the second line, these are like enough; out of context, only the nostalgic naming of places in the first line points to a different, Gloucestershire poet. And there too, readers could be excused for thinking first, not of Gurney, but of Housman, who came from nearby Shropshire and whose stanzas on "Bredon Hill" are among his best-loved. In fact some other poems by Gurney, such as the often-anthologized "To His Love" in *War's Embers*, have more than a hint of Housman's characteristic mix of wistfulness and ballad-like musicality in them. Who, however, would mistake this next line for Housman: "What things I have missed today, I know very well"? The cadence and turn of phrase here is pure Thomas (compare it with "This corner of the farmyard I like most" in Thomas' "Tall Nettles"). The echoes are obvious enough. To add that all three Gurney lines quoted above come from the same short poem is, therefore, to invite the suspicion that Gurney was writing some kind of pastiche. Nothing could be further from the truth. Here is the poem in full.

Yesterday Lost

What things I have missed today, I know very well,
But the seeing of them each new time is a miracle.
Nothing between Bredon and Dursley has
Any day yesterday's precise unpraisèd grace.
The changed light, or curve changed mistily,
Coppice, now bold cut, yesterday's mystery.
A sense of mornings, once seen, for ever gone,
Its own for ever: alive, dead, and my possession.

It is a slight work, yet taken as a whole it bears the mark of an authentic, individual poetic vision and voice. A sense of urgency (the poet knows that what he has "missed" or failed to praise one day cannot be seen again with the physical eye—the play of light and weather continually alters the loved scene so that the "grace" it held then has "for ever gone") is balanced by a sense of wonder: after all, this continual change is what makes each new sight of the scene unique, "Its own for ever," and the seeing of it a "miracle." Andrew Motion has talked of Gurney's "breathless, breathtaking rush"¹⁵ and Kavanagh comments that he "hurls himself headlong";¹⁶ neither has done justice to Gurney's ability, in so many poems, to put on the brakes, to achieve equilibrium. Kavanagh talks of Gurney's "magnificent, poem-saving, last lines"¹⁷ as if their power is merely a matter of phrasing, but what they generally accomplish is a vivid steadying or freezing or enlarging of the poet's illumination. "Yesterday Lost" works economically with just a few features of the natural scene (the "Coppice, now bold cut," for instance) to turn regret for lost possibilities into a triumphant sense of recovery. The final compensation is that what the poet cannot actually see again, the "dead" scene now closed to all change, his heart holds always (it is his "possession").

Gurney's finest poems are the denser ones in which his attention to detail and complexity of attitude have more play, and the influences of earlier poets are completely submerged. Some of them are war poems, like "The Silent One" about a Buckinghamshire comrade who "died in the wires" which he himself refused to crawl through—an accurate, precise, honest and moving poem which, unlike Sassoon's poetry, is not different in tone or general approach from the rest of his work. Many of them are poems about the countryside in which the Roman, Danish and Norman past are evoked to produce a sense of "the slow spirit [of England] going straight on" until there is also "something of one's own spirit outshown" ("Tewkesbury"). Other memorable poems, such as "George Chapman—The Iliad" or "Schubert," praise earlier writers or musicians whom he admired. And a few, like "Bach—Under Torment" or "Snow," are poems in which his terrible later anguish has somehow been articulated and shaped into moving verse: "My spirit and I wrestle, you may hear us breathing hard" ("Snow"). Hardly any of them are love poems in the obvious sense, since, sadly, romantic love seems hardly to have figured in Gurney's life. But in a profound sense they are all love poems, for Gurney's response to life was intense and deeply felt, and could be entirely selfless. One of his best war poems, for example, is "Canadians," in which his heart goes out to the company of fine young men whom

Fate had sent for suffering and dwelling obscenely

Vermin-eaten, fed beastly, in vile ditches meanly.

In poems like this, Gurney "*loved out all fear*," as he puts it emphatically in "Bach—Under Torment." But the "price of love," which he mentions in the same poem, was "huge." For with such sensitivity, it became harder and harder, and at last impossible, for Gurney to "gather sense/Somewhat together" and achieve the reassuring balance of poems like "Yesterday Lost."

Like Brooke and many other young poets of his time, Gurney is now generally seen as a Georgian poet who broke away from the Georgian movement under the pressure of his dreadful war experiences, and veered towards modernism. Admittedly, Georgian characteristics can be seen in his earlier poems. There are some precious or "aureate"¹⁸ words, some vapid references (such as that to the "skies and rushy sky-pools" of England in "Strange Service"), and some sen-

timental lines: "The elms with arms of love wrapped us in shade" ("After-Glow"). But there are plenty of discordant notes. "To My Love" is a rather well-known early poem in which conventionally elegiac stanzas about a dead friend suddenly throw up the shocking image of his mangled body—"that red wet/Thing I must somehow forget." "Pain" is another war-time poem in which the troubled, individual voice of the poet rings out clearly:

Till pain grinds down, or lethargy numbs her,
The amazed heart cries angrily out on God.

This is not to say, however, that Gurney was already developing into a modernist.¹⁹ The Victorians, and many earlier poets come to that, have exposed and dealt with the torments of the soul. Gurney's work is not "aesthetically radical," does not "contain striking technical innovation," does not depart from "chronological form" and most definitely does not tend towards a certain "dehumanization of art" (the qualities which Roger Fowler associates with modernism):²⁰ his greatest strength is that his continuing personal crisis is so often contained in the traditional disciplines of English verse, with only occasional—and often deliberately telling—strangenesses of words, phrases, tone and rhythm. "Pain," for instance, shows the "square-shaped/Utterance dear" ("Had I A Song") at which he aimed. It is a sonnet, complete with regularly rhyming and recognizably distinct octave and sestet. Now that he has at last been rescued after years of neglect, it would be a shame to shunt Gurney off into a group or movement, or even to try to stretch him between two, perhaps as part of the critical effort to align disparate trends.

Rightly read, Gurney resists labelling just as much as Hopkins or Graves do. What is there, though, and what he shares with other significant modern (not modernist) English poets, is a pervasive but far from provincial Englishness which belongs very much to our own times. Here is another poem, in which the immediate country scene is more lovingly particularized than in "Yesterday Lost," then imbued with a sense of its past, and related to the difficult present:

Brown Earth Look

The youth burning couch grass is as tired
As muscle has right to bear and keeps work on
The brown earth slopes from the potato field to the wired
Sheep enclosure; and hidden high and white the sun.

Brown the sense of things, the light smoke blows across
The field face, light blue wisps of sweet bitter reek
Dear to the Roman perhaps, so old seems the dross
Burning of root, grass, wheat, so near, easy to seek.

Old is the land, a thousand generations
Have tilled there, sought with bright sweat the stuff of its bread.
Here one comes for the sense of fine books, revelations
Of beauty in usualty, found as well of heart as of head.

And all the tales of far Europe that come on one,
The sense of myriads tending the needings of life,
Are more to one than the near memory of battle gun.
Peace with its sorrow blots out the agonies of strife.

There is a touch of Hardy's "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'" about this, in the couch grass, the wisps of smoke, and the general sense that this English rural life "will go onwards the same." But the last stanza adds complexity: first, it widens the poet's vision to include "far Europe" and the "myriads" there too who also tend "the needings of life"; and then, it focuses our attention back on the poet himself, the spectator of, the brooder over, the scene. The "memory of battle gun" never left Gurney, but it was overlaid for the time being by a sense of the ordinary daily struggles of the human race, seeking "with bright sweat the stuff of its bread." The "brown earth" both consoles and saddens with its tale of endless toil.

There are qualities here which strike one as specifically English. Gurney's intimate knowledge of the countryside—the type of work being done, fields being farmed, the skyscape ("hidden high and white the sun"), the history of the land; the emphasis on endurance; the sympathy which avoids sentimentality and obviates self-pity; the pervasive melancholy; and the occasional unostentatious eccentricities of style and diction which give bite to the lines—"as tired/As muscle has the right to bear," for instance, or "beauty in usuality." Gurney's is not a strident voice, but it has a low-key resonance which is entirely in tune with the tradition.

Happily, Gurney's Englishness is not at all insular. Like Thomas and D. H. Lawrence, he was much attracted by the verve and assertiveness of American writers, and was a particular admirer of Whitman—"For his courage, colour or master-in-action mood" (Walt Whitman) and Thoreau ("Little I know but 'Walden,' it is well enough/For love" ("Henry David Thoreau"). And as a musician whose compositions have been less neglected than his poetry, he had wide cultural tastes. Here, perhaps, he scored a point over Larkin, who claimed to eschew other cultures. A poem which charmingly illustrates Gurney's receptiveness to foreign influence is "Early Winter," in which he celebrates his love of those flowers of Japanese origin which grow in the heart of the English countryside:

I love chrysanthemums and winter jasmine,
Clustering lichen'd walls a century old;
That in my western ways when days draw in,
Grow in the farm gardens in the first cold.
Strange foreigners should prove
So homely to my love.

For all the age that lies upon this land
Seems to call out for things native, things like
Britain knew, when the tongue talked soft, and
Not yet Rome from the far Gaul might strike.
Yet here Japan
Has flowered, as after plan.

At the end of the poem, it is the *rightness* of the Japanese presence which strikes him most.

As far back as 1973 it was pointed out that "Technically, his [Gurney's] poetry is a good deal more verbally complex than at first it appears... he is a poet who would repay some fuller analysis."²¹ And there are signs, even apart from Hurd's biography and Kavanagh's collection, that the literary industry is at last catching up with Gurney. A selection of his war letters was published in 1983.²² In 1984, the same year that Hurd's and Kavanagh's books came out in paperback, the prominent contemporary poet, Geoffrey Hill, chose to give the F. W. Bateson Memorial Lecture on Gurney at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Hill spoke movingly, in a dense and closely researched critique, of Gurney's "incontestable grandeur."²³ Donald Davie and Charles Tomlinson are other well-known poets who have praised Gurney.²⁴ Yet there is a dearth of critical articles about him: his work is generally discussed only in accounts of war poetry. There is still no full-length study of his poetry, and he is consistently under-represented in anthologies, except for some of those which deal specifically with the First World War. For instance, not one of his poems appears in Hamlyn's 1985 *Britain in Verse*, in which Hopkins, Hardy, Thomas and other more recent poets of the English countryside (such as George Macbeth) are all represented. The mists have not quite "Gone out" for Gurney yet.

We cannot be sure who will continue what is best in our tradition, and enrich it in the future; but the time has come to build on Kavanagh's valuable groundwork, and acknowledge that Gurney was one of the poets who did so in the past.

NOTES

1. See Anthony Thwaite, *Twentieth-Century English Poetry: An Introduction* (London: Heinemann, 1978) 53.
2. *The Art of the Real: Poetry in England and America since 1939* (London: Dent, 1977) 102.
3. (Oxford: Oxford UP). NB Subsequent references to Kavanagh's useful introduction, and to Gurney's poetry, are all to the paperback edition of 1984.
4. (Oxford: Oxford UP). The reference in n. 9 is to the paperback edition of 1984, which has been the source of my information about Gurney's life.
5. Edna Longley, "Wasting Nothing," rev. of *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* by Andrew Motion, *New Statesman* 23 Jan. 1981: 29.
6. "The Squaring of Human Sorrow," rev. of *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney* by Michael Hurd, *Times Literary Supplement* 13 Oct. 1978: 1137.
7. *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972) 122.
8. Quoted in Kavanagh 13.
9. "[H]e began to feel that he had been betrayed by the country he loved and whose cause his art and his life had served," Hurd 145.
10. Kavanagh 20.
11. "Sad Variety," rev. of *Poems by Ivor Gurney*, ed. Edmund Blunden, *Times Literary Supplement* 8 Oct. 1954: 642.
12. Kavanagh 22. Some of the blame may be laid at Gurney's door, too. "Do as you please... punctuate as you please," he had written, when sending his poems from France (Ivor Gurney, *War Letters: A Selection*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton [Manchester: Carcanet, 1983] 115, 141).
13. *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1980) 90.
14. See the end of Silkin's discussion, 129.

15. "Beaten Down Continually," rev. of *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, ed. P. J. Kavanagh, *Times Literary Supplement* 15 Oct. 1982: 1121.
16. Kavanagh 14.
17. Kavanagh 14.
18. Silkin 123. Silkin uses this word of the last stanza of "To His Love"; Geoffrey Hill expands on the failing only to demonstrate how Gurney "takes the bankrupted stock into the receivership of his own idiom." ("Gurney's 'Hobby,'" *Essays in Criticism* 34 [1984]: 108.)
19. See Motion's opening paragraph in "Beaten Down Continually."
20. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (London: Routledge, 1973) 118.
21. "Hero Betrayed," rev. of *Poems of Ivor Gurney, 1890-1937*, ed. Leonard Clark, *Times Literary Supplement* 13 Aug. 1973: 996.
22. See n. 12 above.
23. Later printed in *Essays in Criticism*, see n. 18 above.
24. See Davies' "Gurney's Flood," *London Review of Books* 5 Feb. 1983: 7; and Tomlinson's "Ivor Gurney's 'Best Poems,'" *Times Literary Supplement* 3 Jan. 1986: 12.

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