

Captain Siegfried Sassoon at the Somme

Introduction

July 2016 marks the 100th anniversary of the opening of the battle of the Somme in northern France in WW1 on July 1st 1916¹. Lieutenant later Captain Siegfried Sassoon² was a British Army officer who served in that battle and survived. This work aims to both help commemorate the centenary of the battle and to draw lessons from the life and experiences of Captain Sassoon as a testimony to Lamentations 3:22-23 **“It is of the LORD’S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.”**

Besetting Sin

It should be understood that Sassoon was caught in a besetting sin for much of his life. The Wikipedia article reveals it. Paul therefore admonishes today’s believer **“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin”** Hebrews 12:1-4.

It was the Lord Jesus Christ that **“resisted unto blood, striving against sin.”** Therefore today’s believer can plead **“the blood of Christ”** against any sin and overcome it³ insofar as **“How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”** Hebrews 9:14 **“and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin”** 1 John 1:7.

Biography

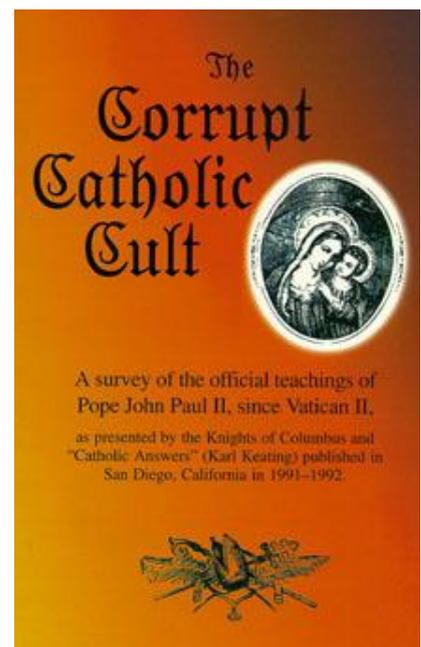
Captain Siegfried Sassoon, 1886-1967, served in France in WW1 with the Royal Welch Fusiliers at the Somme and at Arras and later in Palestine, after which he returned to France, where he was wounded and sent home to convalesce some months before the armistice. He is well known as one of the most forthright and articulate writers of the war – and against the war. He lodged a written protest against the war with his commanding officer in July 1917, as a result of which he was committed to a hospital for war neuroses cases in Craiglockhart, Edinburgh.

He describes his early life and his war experiences in his semi-autobiographical work, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, London: Faber and Faber, 1972. Catholic nun Dame Felicitas Corrigan describes his later life and eventual conversion to Christianity in 1957⁴ in her book *Siegfried Sassoon: Poet’s Pilgrimage* London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1973.

Dame Felicitas was instrumental in Sassoon getting saved but this work is not an endorsement of the corrupt cult of Catholicism⁵. It is an account of how one man got saved and what may be learned from his salvation and before it. Sassoon became a Catholic after his conversion but he is not misled by the corrupt Catholic cult any



Siegfried Sassoon (May 1915)



longer *nor by his besetting sin* in that he now stands among “...*the spirits of just men made perfect*” Hebrews 12:23.

The Poem Hunter site⁶ lists Sassoon’s *Collected Poems*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1961 with these biographical details.

Siegfried Sassoon was perhaps the most innocent of the war poets. John Hildebidle has called Sassoon the “accidental hero.” Born into a wealthy Jewish family in 1886, Sassoon lived the pastoral life of a young squire: fox-hunting, playing cricket, golfing and writing romantic verses.

Being an innocent, Sassoon’s reaction to the realities of the war were all the more bitter and violent - both his reaction through his poetry and his reaction on the battlefield (where, after the death of fellow officer David Thomas and his brother Hamo at Gallipoli, Sassoon earned the nickname “Mad Jack” for his near-suicidal exploits against the German lines - in the early manifestation of his grief, when he still believed that the Germans were entirely to blame)...Sassoon also showed his innocence by going public with his protest against the war (as he grew to see that insensitive political leadership was the greater enemy than the Germans). Luckily, his friend and fellow poet Robert Graves convinced the review board that Sassoon was suffering from shell-shock and he was sent instead to the military hospital at Craiglockhart where he met and influenced Wilfred Owen.

Sassoon is a key figure in the study of the poetry of the Great War: he brought with him to the war the idyllic pastoral background; he began by writing war poetry reminiscent of Rupert Brooke; he mingled with such war poets as Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden; he spoke out publicly against the war (and yet returned to it); he influenced and mentored the then unknown Wilfred Owen; he spent thirty years reflecting on the war through his memoirs; and at last he found peace in his religious faith...“my development has been entirely consistent and in character” [Sassoon said], “...I am a religious poet.”

This was true of him even as an unsaved man as these poems reveal. See below together with the attached study **The Redeemer**.

Religious Poetry

Sassoon had a sense of Paul's testimony *in principle* according to "my...manner of life" 2 Timothy 3:10. Today's believer should have an equivalent testimony to have "plentifully declared the thing as it is..." Job 26:3 and "Provide things honest in the sight of all men" Romans 12:17. "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost" Romans 9:1.

Table Testimony to Sassoon's testimony "...I am a religious poet"

<i>Villon Pre-War</i>	<i>At Carnoy July 3rd, 1916</i>	<i>Autumn circa 1917</i>
<i>They threw me from the gates: my matted hair</i>	<i>Down in the hollow there's the whole Brigade</i>	<i>October's bellowing anger breaks and cleaves</i>
<i>Was dank with dungeon wetness; my spent frame</i>	<i>Camped in four groups: through twilight falling slow</i>	<i>The bronzed battalions of the stricken wood</i>
<i>O'erlaid with marish agues: everywhere</i>	<i>I hear a sound of mouth-organs, ill-played,</i>	<i>In whose lament I hear a voice that grieves</i>
<i>Tortured by leaping pangs of frost and flame,</i>	<i>And murmur of voices, gruff, confused, and low.</i>	<i>For battle's fruitless harvest, and the feud</i>
<i>So hideous was I that even Lazarus there</i>	<i>Crouched among thistle-tufts I've watched the glow</i>	<i>Of outraged men. Their lives are like the leaves</i>
<i>In noisome rags arrayed and leprous shame,</i>	<i>Of a blurred orange sunset flare and fade;</i>	<i>Scattered in flocks of ruin, tossed and blown</i>
<i>Beside me set had seemed full sweet and fair,</i>	<i>And I'm content.</i>	<i>Along the westering furnace flaring red.</i>
<i>And looked on me with loathing.</i>	<i>To-morrow we must go To take some cursèd Wood ...</i>	<i>O martyred youth and manhood overthrown,</i>
	<i>O world God made!</i>	<i>The burden of your wrongs is on my head.</i>
<i>But one came</i>		
<i>Who laid a cloak on me and brought me in</i>		
<i>Tenderly to an hostel quiet and clean;</i>		
<i>Used me with healing hands for all my needs.</i>		
<i>The mortal stain of my reputed sin,</i>		
<i>My state despised, and my defilèd weeds,</i>		
<i>He hath put by as though they had not been.</i>		

In sum "...if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world"

1 John 2:1-2. The overview of Sassoon at the Somme follows.

Sassoon's Somme Ordeal

Based on Extracts from a Talk Transcript

Writer's note: Prepared for and delivered during a magnificent Holt's Tour⁷ of the Somme in about 1984, courtesy of Major and Mrs Holt's invitation. I seem to recall it went down fairly well. A few up-to-date annotations are inserted in **blue text** in **blue braces []** or as numbered endnotes. Stand-alone page references, e.g. pp 332ff are with respect to Sassoon's work *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* or other sources cited as appropriate. A final section has been added in normal text.

Sassoon – Introduction

Many here may be familiar with Siegfried Sassoon's writings. For those not familiar with his writings, I trust I can whet some appetites **[and prepare the ground for further scriptural lessons that may be drawn from Sassoon's life and experiences]**.

Sassoon – the Man

- In many ways he was a typical young English sportsman and gentleman, like multitudes who flocked enthusiastically to the colours in 1914.
- But being part-Jewish, he was endowed with great gifts (like most Jews) including the ability to express himself vividly and forcibly.
- To visualise Sassoon, consider the characterisation of the athlete Harold Abrahams **[by actor Ben Cross⁸]** in the film *Chariots of Fire*. To me, they seem very similar, physically and mentally.

Sassoon – the Soldier

- He served with the 1st Battalion, the Royal Welch Fusiliers, opposite **[the village of] Fricourt** on July 1st 1916. **[His battalion was part of the elite 7th Infantry Division, a Regular division which had seen service in France since 1914⁹.]**
- Before the battle, he had earned the nickname MAD JACK for his daring exploits, for which he was awarded the MC, Military Cross¹⁰. **[The Wikipedia article on Sassoon states On 27 July 1916 he was awarded the [Military Cross](#); the citation read:**

2nd Lt. Siegfried Lorraine **[sic] [Lorraine] Sassoon**, 3rd (attd. 1st) Bn., R. W. Fus.

For conspicuous gallantry during a raid on the enemy's trenches. He remained for 1½ hours under rifle and bomb fire collecting and bringing in our wounded. Owing to his courage and determination all the killed and wounded were brought in]

- He saw the battle from a support trench that he termed "*our opera box*" and recorded the day's events in a diary that he transcribed into his memoirs, pp 332ff, with the comments "*A small shiny black notebook contains my pencilled particulars. It will do no good embellishing them with afterthoughts. I cannot turn my field glasses on the past...Fricourt half-hidden by clouds of drifting smoke, blue, pinkish and grey. Shrapnel bursting in bluish-white puffs with tiny flashes. The birds seem bewildered; a lark begins to go up and then flies feebly along, thinking better of it. Others flutter above the trench with querulous cries, weak on the wing...There were about forty casualties on the left (from the machine-gun in Fricourt). Through my glasses I could see one man moving his left arm up and down as he lay on his side; his face is a crimson patch. Others lay still in the sunlight...*"

- [Sassoon could clearly bring the reader up sharp with the horror of the war but he possessed extraordinary sensitivity to the tragedy of the war.] We visited the Devon and Gordon Cemetery. Sassoon was in that area in July 1916 as his battalion moved into an area known as The Quadrilateral. This is what he wrote, p 336.

“[At] ...the first of many halts...I saw, arranged by the roadside, about fifty of the British dead. Many of them were Gordon Highlanders. There were Devons and South Staffordshires among them, but they were beyond regimental rivalry now – their fingers mingled in blood-stained bunches, as though acknowledging the companionship of death. There was much battle gear lying about, and some dead horses. There were rags and shreds of clothing, boots riddled and torn, and when we came to the old German front-line, a sour pervasive stench which differed from anything my nostrils had known before...I wanted to say that I had seen “the horrors of war;” and here they were, nearly three days old...”

Sassoon penned his earliest anti-war poem from this experience [thinking of those at home].

The Road

(from *Collected Poems, The Old Huntsman*)

*The road is thronged with women; soldiers pass
And halt, but never see them; yet they're here –
A patient crowd along the sodden grass,
Silent, worn out with waiting, sick with fear.
The road goes crawling up a long hillside,
All ruts and stones and sludge, and the emptied dregs
Of battle thrown in heaps. Here where they died
Are stretched big-bellied horses with stiff legs,
And dead men, bloody-fingered from the fight,
Stare up at caverned darkness winking white...*

- During the Somme battle he captured a German trench single-handed in broad daylight. The Germans in it had beaten off a surprise attack by an entire battalion the previous night. A single lunatic named Sassoon was too much for them!
- That same day, Sassoon led a successful bombing i.e. grenade-throwing counter attack against the Prussian Guard, Germany's elite, pp 341ff. [Sassoon's cricketing background obviously stood him in good stead with respect to grenade-throwing.]
- Later that day, he was reprimanded by his commanding officer, Colonel Stockwell, for not informing Stockwell of his whereabouts and activities. One day in the [then precarious] life of 'Mad Jack' Sassoon. Robert Graves p 174 writes *“Siegfried distinguished himself by taking, single-handed, a battalion frontage which the Royal Irish Regiment had failed to take the day before. He went over with bombs in daylight, under covering fire from a couple of rifles, and scared away the occupants [but] instead of signalling for reinforcements, he sat down in the German trench and began reading a book of poems which he had brought with him. When he finally went back he did not even report. Colonel Stockwell, then in command, raged at him. The attack on Mametz Wood had been delayed two hours because British patrols were still reported to be out. ‘British patrols’ were Siegfried and his book of poems.”* Dame Felicitas adds, pp 19-20 *“He dwelt alone...among throngs of men in the Gehenna of the Somme. When ‘Mad Jack’ captured a German trench with little more than a wave of his hand, his immediate reaction was to sit down somewhere, fish in his pocket, bring out a book of poems, and forget all about the Germans on the run. The gas and flames of diabolical warfare could not blast or consume his tree of life.”* *“I'd have got you a D.S.O. if you'd only shown more sense,”* the CO said, Graves, p 174.

[Sassoon's ordeal on the Somme ended abruptly on July 23rd 1916 when he was evacuated suffering severe trench fever and remained in England convalescing for the rest of the year¹¹.]

Sassoon – the Protester

[Sassoon returned to France in February 1917 but was evacuated to England a second time in April after having been wounded in the battle of Arras, pp 440-449. Soon afterwards, he wrote his protest against the war that he forwarded to his CO, p 496, the outcome of which action was that he was sent to Craiglockart War Hospital in Edinburgh. See **Biography**. Though post-Somme this aspect of Sassoon's life and experiences together with those alluded to in remarks on Sassoon's survival and salvation, see below, are directly connected to Sassoon's Somme ordeal and the scriptural lessons prompted by his life and experiences. Sassoon had this to say of his time at Craiglockhart War Hospital, pp 556-557, no doubt drawing upon what he had seen and endured during all his time at the front. He thereby gives another example for today's believer to have "plentifully declared the thing as it is..." Job 26:3 and "Provide things honest in the sight of all men" Romans 12:17.]

"By night...the hospital became sepulchral and oppressive with saturation of war experience. One lay awake and listened to feet padding along passages which smelt of stale cigarette-smoke; for nurses couldn't prevent insomnia-ridden officers from smoking half the night in their bedrooms, though the locks had been removed from all doors. One became conscious that the place was full of men whose slumbers were morbid and terrifying – men muttering uneasily or suddenly crying out in their sleep. Around me was that underworld of dreams haunted by submerged memories of warfare and its intolerable shocks and self-lacerating failures to achieve the impossible..."

"By night each man was back in his own horror-stricken Front Line, where the panic and stampede of some ghastly experience was re-enacted among the livid faces of the dead. No doctor could save him then, when he became the lonely victim of his dream disasters and delusions."

"Shell-shock. How many a brief bombardment had its long-delayed after-effect in the minds of these survivors, many of whom had looked at their companions and laughed while inferno did its best to destroy them. Not then was their evil hour, but now; now, in the sweating suffocation of nightmare, in paralysis of limbs, in the stammering of disconnected speech...they, who in the name of righteousness had been sent out to maim and slaughter their fellow-man. In the name of civilization, these soldiers had been martyred, and it remained for civilization to prove that their martyrdom wasn't a dirty swindle."

Sassoon – the Survivor

- His protest availed nothing, so he went back to fight. He described his decision to do so as follows, pp 540-541. *"I visualized an endless column of marching soldiers, singing "Tipperary" on their way up from the back areas; I saw them filing silently along ruined roads, and lugging their bad boots through mud until they came to some shell-hole and pillar-box line in a landscape where the trees were all stumps and skeletons and no Quartermaster on earth could be certain of getting the rations up..." "From sunlight to the sunless land" ...The idea of going back there was indeed like death...[but] going back to the War as soon as possible was my only chance of peace."*
- In July 1918, he was shot in the head but survived and was sent to hospital, to be repatriated to England. (Three successive Julys of the war were significant for Sassoon; July 1916, at the Somme, July 1917, his Declaration against the war, July 1918, wounded and sent home.) He described his repatriation as follows, pp 652-653, mostly peaceful, though it included some parting horror from the war [and a sense of what is now called Survivor Guilt¹²].

"'We'll be sending you across to England in a few days,' murmurs the nurse while she is dabbing at my head. She says it quite naturally, as if it were the only possible thing that could happen...Then I listen to the chatter of the other wounded officers in this room, talking about people being blown to bits. And I remember a man at the C.C.S. [Casualty Clearing Station]...He lay with one hand groping at the bandages which covered his whole head and face, gurgling every time he breathed...The War had gagged him – smashed him – and other people looked at him and tried to forget what they'd seen...All this I remember, while the desirable things of life,

like living phantoms, steal quietly into my brain... 'to England in a few days' ...And though it's wrong, I know I shall go there, because it is made so easy for me."

Sassoon in Sum – Man, Soldier, Protester

His besetting sin notwithstanding, see ***Besetting Sin***, Siegfried Sassoon the carefree, rustic young man tempered to steely soldierliness by "*the Gehenna of the Somme*" that provoked him to protest for peace according to Psalm 120:7 **"I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war"** against those that **"had the power of death"** Hebrews 2:14 over him thereby furnishes *even as an unsaved man* a challenging role model for today's believer according to 2 Samuel 10:12 **"Be of good courage, and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God: and the LORD do that which seemeth him good."**

Sassoon – the Saved Man [section added to the original talk]

Dame Felicitas discusses Sassoon's conversion to Christianity in some detail in her book. But the following references, pp 32, 233 are for me among the most significant.

"S.S.'s Diary 6 March 1954: 'Stayed in bed and read Part 1 of The Pilgrim's Progress. It is for all time, I think, in spite of its similitudes being outmoded. Its humanity will survive its being condemned by modern psychologists. It remains alive.' Note: Re-reading it in 1964, I found that in '54 I had understood nothing at all of the Gospel doctrine which pervades it. I read it with new eyes."

From the last stanza of ***A Prayer in Old Age*** 23 September 1964

*I ask one world of everlasting loss
In all I am, that other world to win.
My nothingness must kneel below Thy Cross.
There let new life begin.*

That stanza stands well with Paul's doctrinal statement on *new life* that brings to a head the major lessons to be drawn from the life and experiences of Captain Siegfried Loraine Sassoon *who even as an unsaved man* **"plentifully declared the thing as it is..."** Job 26:3 and did **"Provide things honest in the sight of all men"** Romans 12:17 after the manner of Paul himself according to Romans 9:1 **"I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost"** fulfilling in principle 2 Samuel 10:12 **"Be of good courage, and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God: and the LORD do that which seemeth him good."**

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" 2 Corinthians 5:17.

In spite of his Catholicism Sassoon always did rejoice in that transformation as today's believer should *because Sassoon had assurance of salvation as today's believer should in accordance with Paul's testimony.*

"...for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" 2 Timothy 1:12 **"In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel"** Romans 2:16.

In those things therefore and as an admonition to today's believer, the life and experiences of Captain Siegfried Sassoon are as indicated, see ***Introduction***, a vivid testimony to Lamentations 3:22-23 **"It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness."**

The Redeemer

By Siegfried Sassoon

www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171921

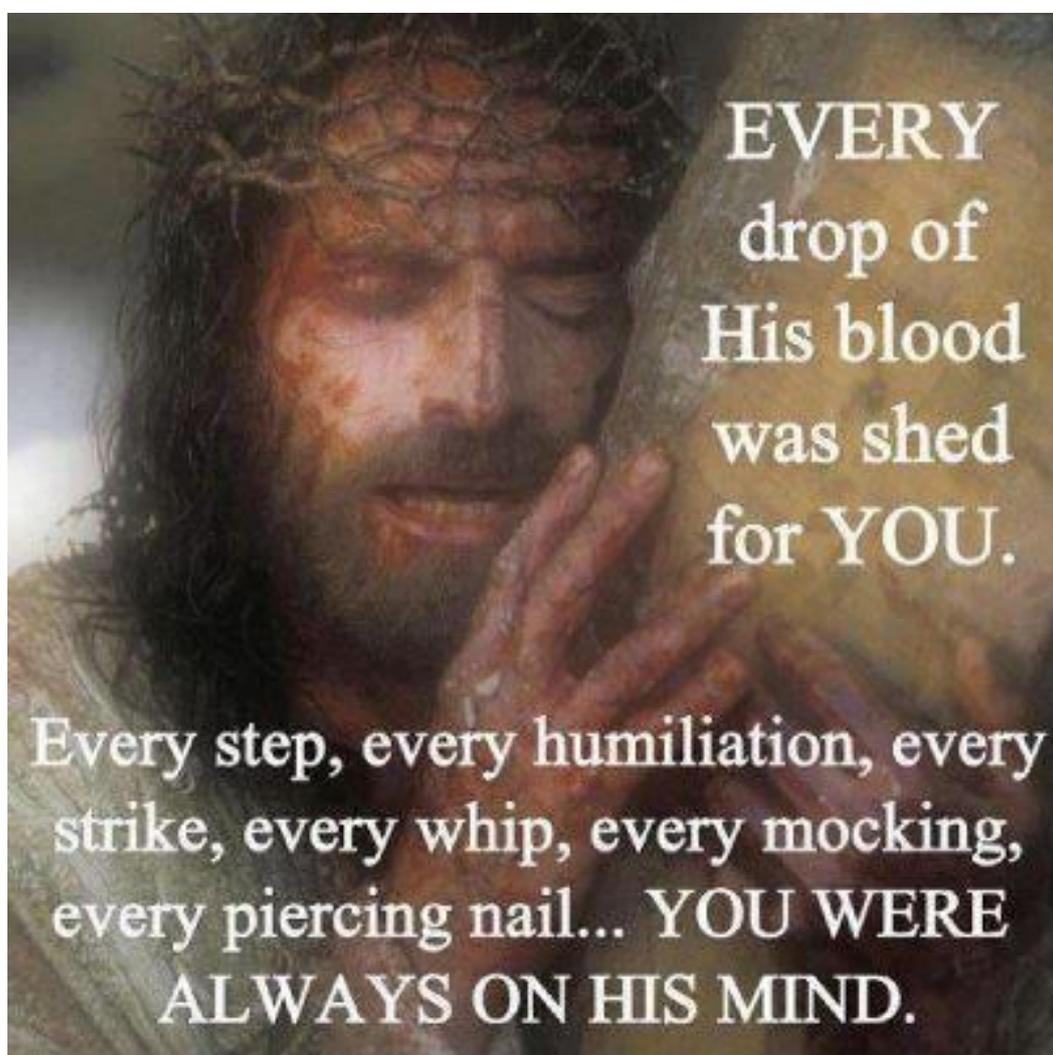
Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mire was deep;
It was past twelve on a mid-winter night,
When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep;
There, with much work to do before the light,
We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might
Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang,
And droning shells burst with a hollow bang;
We were soaked, chilled and wretched, every one;
Darkness; the distant wink of a huge gun.
I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;
A rocket fizzed and burned with blanching flare,
And lit the face of what had been a form
Floundering in murk. He stood before me there;
I say that He was Christ; stiff in the glare,
And leaning forward from His burdening task,
Both arms supporting it; His eyes on mine
Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine.
No thorny crown, only a woollen cap
He wore — an English soldier, white and strong,
Who loved his time like any simple chap,
Good days of work and sport and homely song;
Now he has learned that nights are very long,
And dawn a watching of the windowed sky.
But to the end, unjudging, he'll endure
Horror and pain, not discontent to die
That Lancaster on Lune may stand secure.
He faced me, reeling in his weariness,
Shouldering his load of planks, so hard to bear.
I say that He was Christ, who wrought to bless
All groping things with freedom bright as air,
And with His mercy washed and made them fair.
Then the flame sank, and all grew black as pitch,
While we began to struggle along the ditch...

The Redeemer – Explanatory Note

The enclosed WW1 poem depicts how men are in this life. Occasionally they may get a glimpse of the Redeemer when a faithful follower of His bears witness to Him. Unlike the men in the poem lit briefly by *Hell's unholy shine* they can turn to ***“the light of the glorious gospel of Christ”*** 2 Corinthians 4:4 but all too often they don't and continue to flounder in pitch black darkness until they go to ***“A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness”*** Job 10:22.

The last two lines of the poem have been omitted because they take the Lord's name in vain.

Nevertheless the imagery of the poem makes clear that today's believer is himself to be ***“as unto a light that shineth in a dark place...”*** 2 Peter 1:19 steadfastly making known the Lord Jesus Christ ***“In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins”*** Colossians 1:14.



www.pinterest.com/tonya033/i-love-jesus/

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” Isaiah 53:5

References

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