Constructions of Comradeship: Ivor Gurney and the British First World War Veterans' Movement

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Where are they now, on state-doles, or showing shop patterns
Or walking town to town sore in borrowed tatters
Or begged. Some civic routine one never learns.
--Ivor Gurney, "Strange Hells," 1922

We are ex-Service men, but we are also Workers, and we realise
that our general interests are identical with those of all our fellow
workers.
--National Union of Ex-Servicemen, 1919

Poet-Veteran

Mental illness, artistic production, and the First World War were the three dominant strands of Ivor Gurney's life. Initially rejected for military service at the outbreak of the war, Gurney later enlisted with a Gloucester regiment and was in the trenches by the middle of 1916; spared the Somme debacle, he was shot through the upper arm in April 1917 and gassed during the Passchendaele offensive in September. He suffered a serious mental breakdown in the spring of 1918 while convalescing in Britain, during the course of which he threatened suicide and claimed to have talked to Beethoven. Upon his army discharge in October 1918 (on a half pension of 12 shillings per week) he lived a peripatetic life punctuated by several short stints of employment and reoccurring bouts of mental instability.[1] Finally, after continued erratic and alarming behavior, including repeated visits to the police station in an attempt to borrow a revolver to shoot himself, Gurney was committed to a mental asylum in late 1922, and remained there until his death from tuberculosis in 1937.[2]

Quite a "minor" poet in his day, Gurney has since received more attention, the bulk of it centering on the relation between his poetry and his mental illness. In the introduction to his 1954 edition of Gurney's work, Edmund Blunden refers to a majority of the poems as "slowed down by an afflicting intolerance," and quotes from one of Gurney's verses in order to summarize his own sense of the inextricability of the work from Gurney's mental state: "'The splendid fragments of a mind immortal / With rubbish mixed'" (25). More recent critics have continued in Blunden's psychological vein. George Walter argues that Gurney's oeuvre in

The Space Between,

general is defined by his particular condition, paranoid schizophrenia:

> [T]hose qualities that mark *Rewards of Wonder* out as a schizophrenic text are present in all of Gurney's work […] Everything that he wrote is characterised by cognitive processes which, in their most overt forms, are used to diagnose a recognized form of clinical insanity. (12)

For Walter, Gurney's work bears the stamp of the same "cognitive processes" manifested in his illness. Daniel Hipp, writing of the link between Gurney's psychology and his postwar poetry, argues that

> Gurney uses poetry as a means of engaging in a type of poetic "self-therapy" by returning to the time he felt most whole—his years in the trenches—to reconstruct this self of the private soldier that, once the war was over, was no longer available to him in life. (5)

For Hipp, Gurney's poetry has above all a private or personal purpose of staving off the onset of dementia. Both critics, then, tie the meaning of the poetry directly to its author's troubled mental state: for Walter, Gurney's poetry is symptomatic of mental illness; for Hipp, it is an attempted remedy.

While these views are entirely appropriate with regard to a man like Gurney, insofar as they emphasize the psychological determinations of his work they tend to overlook its ever-present social dimensions. I would argue that, first, Gurney's poetry was not always written in the throes of debilitating mental illness; periods of lucidity alternated with periods of acute neurosis or psychosis (increasingly longer and more pronounced, to be sure). The collections published during his lifetime (in 1917 and 1919) offer far fewer, if any, signs of his schizophrenia as compared to his later work. Indeed, Walter's argument is focused on Gurney's poetry of the 1920s and thus does not necessarily apply to the earlier work. Second, linkages in Gurney's poetry between the psychological and the social and political spheres need to be further explored. If, as for Hipp, Gurney's postwar poems revisit his time in the trenches in the pursuit of mental stability, this revisiting often includes detailed renditions of trench camaraderie, a decidedly social, and as we will see, political relationship. In other words, Gurney's poetic "self-therapy" was in part based on reconstructing a specific communal bond, and thus the supposed individualistic provenance of these poems is broadened by larger concerns.

Other recent scholarship approaches Gurney's poetry more squarely in terms of the social and political coordinates of his historical moment. For Piers Gray, Gurney is a "marginal man," estranged from mainstream English culture by the dislocations consequent to service in the trenches:

> [Gurney's] only true peers are other soldiers: within his own culture, he returns to see himself in all the different forms of exile that are possible. Pushed to the edges, he is an alienated consciousness, marginalized by the very

culture he fought to save [... and] articulating objectively
the values he has understood to be worth saving (13).

Gray's situating of Gurney within the context of the wartime and postwar social fractures between combatants and non-combatants is important insofar as it shifts the critical focus away from strictly psychological categories. At the same time, however, Gray perhaps overestimates the war's impact on Gurney and minimizes the extent to which he was a marginal figure (both socially and psychologically) well before the war. In this regard, Gray's reading is consonant with a "Mythic rendering of the war's effects—namely, that soldiers were purely victims of a war that produced massive and traumatic social and cultural change.[3]

Rather than approaching him through the wide lens of postwar alienation, I will narrow the focus to trace the development of the concept of comradeship in Gurney's work, from the early poems of *Severn and Somme* to poems written in asylum. This approach positions Gurney as the exemplary poet of the British *veteran* experience, particularly with regard to the difficult transition many veterans faced upon returning to Britain, and links his work to the political and social aims and progress of the multi-faceted veterans movement, to which I will have occasion to refer in a moment.[4] My discussion complements the work of John Lucas, who emphasizes Gurney's attachments to his fellow soldiers and veterans vis-à-vis the civilian/non-combatant world. In particular, Lucas argues that Gurney's representation of wartime comradeship is based on a socialist intention to reform England; as he writes, the 1919 collection *War's Embers* presents "poems which testify to comradeship and what comes of that: a desire to make a new world" (31). However, though Lucas' approach, like Gray's, is a helpful departure from psychologically-based approaches, his direct correlation between Gurney's depictions of trench comradeship and a radical, socialist worldview demands closer inspection. I will return to Lucas's argument in my examination of specific poems; suffice it to say here that comradeship was defined by Gurney and other veterans in multiple ways and implied multiple political affiliations. Before we turn to Gurney's poetry, then, we must examine the genealogy of First World War comradeship and its relation to veterans' postwar politics in order to understand better how the concept functions in his work.

Comradeship and Veterans' Organizations

The British nation at arms consisted of people of both genders, and of every class, age group, and region, from soldiers, auxiliaries, munitions workers, relief workers, and families, all of whom came together in contributing to the war effort. Many of the differences that had separated people in peacetime were rendered (at least rhetorically) moot in the exigency of the crisis. As Eric Leed has written, "The declaration of war established a unanimity of fate and a kind of anonymity of obligation in which the conventions of social class no longer seemed to identify individuals" (45). And as Benedict Anderson would perhaps put it, in his study of the relation between nationalism and print culture, the "imagined community"

of the nation became for many a more deeply felt reality at the outbreak of the war. Indeed, if Anderson describes the nation as a form of comradeship—"[The nation] is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship"—then a people at war felt these national bonds all the more keenly (7). Such a comradely community was encouraged by official and unofficial war propaganda, including the unprecedented outpouring of patriotic verse, and was bounded by such novel community-defining edicts as the 1914 Defense of the Realm Act.[5]

At the same time, this expansive sense of a nation at arms risked collapsing into the general war effort the particular physical and psychic reality experienced by soldiers—in effect, as Leed and Anderson imply, masking a key difference with a rhetoric of equality. In response to such totalization, many soldiers began to emphasize the singularity of their experiences.[6] This nascent social chasm matured in soldiers' increasing tendency to identify not with the nation but with those who shared their particularly onerous duty: namely, their fellow soldiers. This collective identity, or comradeship, was based on a common sympathy informed by the concrete elements of the everyday life of combatants. As Leed argues, comradeship was a product of

> The material conditions of life in the trenches. It was a comradeship much less exalted, luminous, and altruistic than expected…This was the basis of comradeship found in war, a comradeship rooted in those minimal human connections permitted, even required, in a world in which everyone was a potential victim of the anonymous forces of chemicals and steel. (93-94)

With combatant comradeship, then, the soldier—particularly if he were in the ranks or a junior officer—is less the heroic emissary of the nation's cause than a kind of proletarian with a consciousness that he and his fellow-soldiers constituted a class separated from civilians because they bore a disproportionate measure of the war's toll.

Such has been the standard concept of comradeship in the literature and scholarship, from the majority of books published in the late 1920s and early 1930s to such landmark treatments by Paul Fussell and Robert Wohl, as well as Leed. However, more recent scholars have questioned this reading of soldierly identity and particularly those claims regarding the nature and strength of comradeship. For instance, Joanna Bourke argues that key differences between soldiers have been overlooked, such as class, unit affiliation, marital status, religion, and region of origin (145-47). While Bourke's point is important, we must note that her argument is based on a peculiar, and arguably idiosyncratic, concept of comradeship. Her preferred term for comradeship is "male bonding," which she defines as an "intimate, emotional interaction between men in which the individual identifies himself as an integral part of an all male group" (127). But this definition most ap-

propriately applies to select small unit relationships, and doesn't necessarily vitiate a connection between soldiers as an army, notwithstanding individual differences. That is, the kind of comradeship that Leed describes entails soldiers' experience of a collective yet relatively impersonal commitment to their cohort's welfare. Though not seamless or universal, such a sense of comradeship was shared by enough soldiers to be significant. Sarah Cole helpfully clarifies this distinction by contrasting comradeship with friendship, the latter term approximating Bourke's "male bonding": for Cole, friendship concerns "individualized relations of amity or love," while comradeship concerns a "corporate or group commitment" (145).[7] Cole's discussion of friendship and comradeship usefully separates two concepts Bourke conflates, while leaving room for a fuller exploration of "corporate" comradeship itself. The need for this further exploration of corporate comradeship is particularly pressing when we take up the question of the fate of comradeship in postwar Britain.

As this latter problematic is a key concern of mine in this paper, we need to examine how Leed's, Bourke's, and Cole's concepts of comradeship inform their arguments on veterans' postwar politics. Leed claims that combatant comradeship, based as it was on the brute materiality of trench life, is characterized by an absence of political meaning: combatants are "silent," and comradely bonding occurs when civilian identities are "stripped" away (199). The upshot of Leed's argument is that comradeship provides organized veterans with no ideological foundation. For instance, Leed argues that veterans' organizations were hampered by an "inability" to link the war experiences of their members to a viable postwar politics (200). Though this last point has its merits, I would argue that Leed overemphasizes the "silence" of the veteran who is "stripped" of ideology by the flaying experiences of war and is thus unable to translate that experience into a postwar politics. Rather, such silence is often a function of a relationship, not just of one's own inability to articulate; one will tend toward silence if one doesn't expect to be heard or understood.[8] Leed's emphasis on veterans' silence, then, presupposes the primacy, and the absolute reality, of the putative audience for veterans' stories and advocacy—in this case, Britain's liberal-capitalist consensus. Such presuppositions are implied whenever we speak of veterans needing to "readjust" to civilian life, as if the latter were an immutable norm. In other words, Leed's stress on the failure of veterans to translate their own experience into a politics reifies the target "language" in that translation and doesn't allow for the failures of British society to accommodate them.

Bourke and Cole are also dismissive of veterans' organizations' political careers, especially those based on constructions of comradeship: while Bourke, with some justice, notes that veterans' groups' "own rhetoric" assumed the "strength of wartime bonding," she goes on to make a stronger, more questionable claim, namely that the organizations failed *because* of their "spurious rhetoric" (153-54, my emphasis). Even leaving aside the fact that Bourke cites no evidence of such rhetoric from any of the major veterans' groups, it is too simplistic to claim that

their rhetoric of comradeship was the principal reason the veterans' movement largely died out in the early 1920s. For her part, Cole does provide some discussion of the veterans' organizations, but her primary interest in "male friendship" skews the analysis of comradeship. Indeed, her comparison of the conservative and docile veterans' organization the Comrades of the Great War with the apocalyptic "rough beast" in Yeats' "The Second Coming" is rather wide of the mark, and she generally emphasizes (with reference to the National Federation, the largest of the organizations) the reactionary elements in veterans' postwar politics (221-22). Such a reading of the veterans' groups perhaps follows from Cole's tendency to identify social alienation and even "tragic union" in the poems by Owen and Sassoon (such as "Smile, Smile, Smile" and "Banishment," respectively), which emphasize soldier-to-soldier bonds. Though they offer important and compelling articulations of wartime soldierly bonds, because Owen did not live to address the postwar period directly and because Sassoon largely stopped writing war-related poetry in the years following the Armistice, their verse is less useful than Gurney's in addressing comradeship and veteran identity.

My point here is not only to question these scholars' readings of veterans' politics as based on forms of comradeship but also, more specifically, to show that veterans' organizations' deployment of a rhetoric of wartime comradeship was much more varied and complex than allowed for in existing scholarship. If Leed, Bourke, and Cole tend to slight the significant political uses veterans made of comradeship, a look at the arguments made by the veterans' groups themselves tells a different story. None of the veterans' organizations understood comradeship in terms of friendship or male intimacy; instead, each group in its own fashion used a corporate form of comradeship to consolidate a specific social and political agenda.

The largest of these veterans' groups, with over a hundred thousand members and scores of branches throughout England, was the National Federation of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers (Federation), formed in summer 1917. While an often fractious mixture of progressive-thinking and apolitical, if discontented, veterans, and initially limited to ex-enlisted men, the Federation was the organization most effective in winning material concessions from the state, including improved pensions, employment assistance, and disability benefits. In addition to mounting occasional public demonstrations and sending periodic delegations to Parliament and the Cabinet, the Federation published a bi-weekly journal, *The Bulletin*, from March 1919 to December 1920, which served as an important means for disseminating their views and maintaining a measure of organizational cohesion.

Throughout the journal's pages, the position of veterans in the postwar configuration of social and political relations is articulated in terms of the wartime bonds of comradeship, as we see in the following excerpt from Federation chairman T. F. Lister's editorial appeal for increased membership: "The goal is the enrolment of EVERY discharged and demobilised man. The purpose is that the men who won victory in foreign fields must be determined upon victory at home…the partnership of death must give place to the partnership of life…DO YOUR BIT"

(*Bulletin* 27 March 1919, 1). For Lister, as for the Federation as a whole, just as comradeship—here, the "partnership of death"—was integral to winning the war, the retention of those wartime bonds—the "partnership of life"—will guide veterans' attempts to obtain public attention and financial redress. At the same time, its stress on the singular identity of veterans tended to isolate the organization from political allies; for instance, in 1919 the Federation separated itself from party politics, and jettisoned its first chairman, J. M. Hogge, a Liberal M.P. Furthermore, the Federation explicitly juxtaposed the identity and needs of its members from such non-veterans as "conchies [conscientious objectors]," "shirkers," and "pin-money girls." In so doing, the Federation highlighted the specific sacrifices of its members for the nation but also opposed itself to significant numbers of potential allies in the civilian population.

While the Federation based its program upon a comradeship which emphasized veterans' differences from the general postwar population, the National Union of Ex-Servicemen (NUX) based its socialist program upon a concept of comradeship that attempted to link the problems of the veteran soldier with those of the working class. Formed in 1919 largely from ex-Federation members dissatisfied with the group's focus on obtaining specific veterans' benefits from the state, the NUX instead favored ties with the Labour party and its platform of nationalization of industry and broad social welfare provision.[9] The NUX's complex conception of comradeship is encapsulated in the following excerpt from its *Statement of Aims and Policy*, which appeals to veterans as both ex-soldiers and members of the working class: The first point of the manifesto, "To protect our *special* interests as ex-Service men," includes considerations of adequate pensions and employment assistance, much like the Federation program. The second point, however—"To promote our *general* interests as ex-Service men in every possible way"—broadens the veteran perspective in order to guard against a narrow identity politics. As it continues: "*We are ex-Service men, but we are also Workers*, and we realise that our general interests are identical with those of all our fellow workers. We shall therefore support the Trades Unions in their struggle to improve the conditions under which all Workers—including ourselves—must work" (*Statement*).

The General Secretary of the NUX explicitly contrasted its program with those of other veterans' organizations, such as the Federation, who "have been taught to think of themselves *as ex-service men*, purely and simply. The members of the NUX have always thought of themselves as *ex-service workers*" (Mander 5). Indeed, alone among the veterans' organizations the NUX offered an explicit leftist critique of the British socio-political system, and worked to integrate the concerns of its members with a socialistic program. For instance, the NUX launched a plan—the "back-pay" scheme—which aimed to achieve such a synthesis by calling for the state to remunerate veterans the difference between what they were paid during the war (1 shilling a day for privates) and what "Australian troops" received (6 shillings). This enormous sum would be provided for by the abolishment of private property, the capital accrued thus being available for public allotment. The plan

neatly encompasses the interests of veterans and workers: veterans would receive a sizable monetary outlay and workers would benefit from the transfer of private profit to the public domain.

But of course in a postwar political climate which tended to see "Bolshevism" in any ideas or movements that challenged the status quo and which kept British troops abroad to put down the nascent revolutionary regime in Russia, such proposals as the NUX's "back-pay" scheme found little traction. Indeed, the progressive wings of the veterans' movement were increasingly marginalized after the war by the state-endorsed drive to amalgamate veterans into a single organization. As early as 1918 leading politicians and industrialists sponsored the formation of the Comrades of the Great War as an establishment counterweight to the Federation's militancy. The government withheld the United Services Fund (some 10 million pounds collected during the war from soldiers' "canteens" or commissaries) until the various veterans' organizations united (Wootton 108). At the inter-organization amalgamation conference in August 1920 the Comrades succeeded in stifling many of the Federation's more progressive proposals for the new organization and drove the NUX to drop out of negotiations (Wootton 111-12). Amalgamation became official in May 1921 with the birth of the British Legion; ex-Field Marshal Douglas Haig was elected to serve as president, the Prince of Wales was named "First Patron," while the Federation's Lister was elected to serve as chairman. The United Services Fund was eventually used for the construction of British Legion social clubs for the myriad branches located throughout England.[10]

Thus, a combination of external political pressures and internal difficulties hastened the transformation of the veterans' movement from a progressive, even militant political force to a status quo oriented and increasingly conservative entity. This shift in political orientation was reflected in the early years of the Legion's existence in its emphasis on a meliorist conception of comradeship. In the inaugural issue of the *British Legion* journal, chairman Haig hoped for a "resurrecting [of] the best ideals of comradeship" in a column which asked Legion branches to "promote a better feeling between employer and employed" (July 1921, 7). Haig's positioning of the Legion as a mediator between labor and capital depended upon an idealized version of comradeship, in contrast to the materialist sense of comradeship described by Leed, above. Such a concept of comradeship as heroic "self-suppression" was echoed by novelist John Galsworthy in the following issue. In other words, instead of advocating for their economic and social interests, veterans instead were to help unite postwar Britain under the banner of "service, not self," the latter being the Legion's motto. As the political capital of organized veterans gradually declined in the postwar era, the bonds of comradeship were conceived "as a succour [for] the tragedies of peace" (August 1923, 36). Here, the problems veterans faced in postwar Britain were taken for granted as beyond the purview of organized veterans, and comradeship now served to buffer veterans against these problems.

As veterans' organizations in 1917-21 were striving, with diminishing

success, to intervene in the debates concerning the shape of postwar Britain via politicized conceptions of comradeship, Gurney was writing poems that not only articulate the difficulties of his life as a veteran but also pose the problem of veteran identity in terms of the relation between the wartime bonds of comradeship and postwar, civilian-centered society. While Gurney's concept of comradeship, initially, was conventional and nation-oriented, it later shifted toward an uneasy blend of combatant-centered exclusivity (a là the Federation) and socialistic egalitarianism (a là the NUX). At the same time, his work expresses both the precariousness of the notion of comradeship and the ways in which it was subject to a hostile political culture that reestablished civilian social and economic norms rather precipitously. Beyond its psychological dimensions, then, Gurney's postwar poetry elaborates political and social issues which were at the heart of veterans' organizations' struggles. It is for this reason I champion him as the exemplary poet of the British veteran experience.

Early Period: From "England" to "Our Commonwealth"

In the preface to his 1917 volume *Severn and Somme*, Gurney dedicates the volume to friends, authors living and dead (ranging from Shakespeare to Hilaire Belloc), his boat *Dorothy*, and his "comrades" in the Gloucester regiment, who, he writes, "have so often wondered whether I were crazy or not" (19). A reader coming upon the volume for the first time may have been (and may well be) slightly puzzled at this admission, for aside from rare moments in the collection when Gurney strikes a haunted note (for instance, in "Pain" or "The Ballad of Three Spectres"), *Severn* is relatively free of the darkness and distress that inhabit much of his later work. My point is that though the book is dedicated to quite a number of people, Gurney's volunteering of intimate bits of information about himself as he professes his affection for his comrades implies that he is increasingly identifying himself with his fellow soldiers rather than with his pre-war friends. Moreover, the preface's *apologia* for the volume's "roughness" in technique is made by reference to the spartan and unpredictable writing conditions faced by a private soldier on the Western Front. In this respect, too, Gurney emphasizes his burgeoning soldierly self.

       The poem from *Severn* that I will discuss, "To Certain Comrades," elaborates the preface's sense of an identity in transition. Written "in trenches" in July 1916, and dedicated to two dead privates from his regiment, the poem conceptualizes comradeship in the transcendent terms of a bond that not only survives death but is strengthened by death and time's passage:

> Such friendship is not touched by Death's disaster,
> But stands the faster;
> And all the shocks and trials of time cannot
> Shake it one jot. (*Severn* 21)

An equally conventional trope—that death itself will be eclipsed by the power of comradeship—concludes the poem:

> [I]f we may not live to serve in peace
> England, watching increase—
> Then death with you, honoured, and swift, and high;
> And so—not die. (22)

Such standard idealizations are less of the friendship as "male intimacy" variety described by Cole and are more akin to the "exalted" sense of comradeship Leed contrasts with the "material" and "minimal" sense of combatant bonding.

Nonetheless, the poem poses comradeship as inherently threatened by temporality and death: while in the first stanza quoted above Gurney attempts to put paid to the "shocks" of "time" with the declarative "cannot," in the second stanza comradeship can only survive in the ideal sphere of the afterlife. In other words, the poem's impetus toward preserving comradely bonds is premised on the possibility that time and the violence of war tends to diminish them. The paradoxical use of "death" here is exemplary in this regard—though Gurney strives to displace the act of dying with the more abstract state of "death," this attempt at differentiation does not eclipse these terms' near identity. "To Certain Comrades" positions comradeship as an escape from the bonds of space and time; in the next poem I examine, "On Rest," Gurney articulates a comradeship that is fully embodied and temporal.

Gurney's "'On Rest'" (July 1918) takes its title from the military practice of rotating units out of the front lines, first into reserve positions and then to "Rest" quarters in more rearward areas out of the reach of artillery. Quite a departure for Gurney at this stage of his career in its length of seventy lines, the poem reviews the entirety of a calendar day in a series of contrasts between memories of the rigors of front-line duty and the pleasures of "Rest": "Revally" is sounded at first by thrushes, not by the bugle; the "still air" of the morning presents no "whizzbangs… to fear"; the jocular banter of the soldiers is "hurtless battering" compared to the impact of shells; instead of laboring to repair a trench, prepare for inspection, haul rations, or give and receive rifle and shell fire, the men take leisurely walks, while away the afternoon in estaminets, or enjoy a peaceful sunset. But the most striking contrast the poem offers is that between the normally hierarchical structure of military discipline and the relaxation of such divisions for soldiers on "Rest." It is this section of the poem which provides one of Gurney's most enthusiastic renditions of combatant comradeship.

After breakfast, the men are free to mill about the camp, and as they collect themselves together, the poem presents a tableau of comradely communion:

> Now wonders begin, Sergeants with the crowd
> Mix; Corporals, Lance-Corporals, little proud,
> Authority forgotten, all goes well
> In this our Commonwealth, with tales to tell,
> Smokes to exchange, letters of price to read,
> Letters of friends more sweet than daily bread.
> The Sergeant-Major sheathes his claws and lies

> Smoking at length, content deep in his eyes.
> Officers like brothers chaff and smile--
> Salutes forgotten, etiquette the while,
> Comrades and brothers all, one friendly band. (*Severn* 90)

All grades of NCO mix in with the men's relaxation, and even commissioned officers shed, for the moment, their compulsory reserve. The free and open exchange of stories, smiles, banter, and sundry small items is the material basis of the free, horizontal flow of comradeship in this "our Commonwealth." This "our" is important to note, for here, more explicitly than in "To Certain Comrades," the bond between soldiers is their own and excludes non-combatants. And the allusions ("brothers" and "band") to the king's exhortations to his soldiers before Agincourt in Shakespeare's *Henry V*—perhaps the *locus classicus* of comradely sentiment—underscore the poem's emphasis on a combatant-based concept of comradeship.

The poem presents a combatant-oriented concept of comradeship in which soldiers derive their identity not from their role as the military arm of a nation at war but from their common endurance of front-line hazards and exertions, and their sense, based on that endurance, that "all's equal now" (90). But perhaps there is more going on here. Lucas argues that the vision of wartime comradeship in "'On Rest'" serves as a viable model for postwar society:

> [T]he poem celebrates a socialistic commonwealth built out of the comings-together of men during the war. I've no doubt many of the men Gurney encountered in the trenches were already socialists. They would therefore have been included among those who, as he noted, "if they return are to do the work and shape England anew." (19)[11]

In this reading, the poem's depiction of a comradeship which transcends rank is a socialist forecast for the dissolution of the barriers of class and privilege in England itself.

I largely agree with Lucas here. However, this reading slights the tensions implicit in the poem's depiction of exclusive and egalitarian comradeship, in which the latter blooms not with the transcendence but with the temporary relaxation of military discipline. As in "To Certain Comrades," the pressures on comradeship are evoked as they are negated: "authority" and "salutes" are "forgotten"; the "claws" of the "Sergeant-Major" are "sheathed," and so on. This is to say that while the poem paints a picture of the common sympathy among soldiers that is usually masked by formal discipline, Gurney doesn't let us forget that these constraints condition comradeship itself.

"On Rest" lets us see that the palpable bonds characterizing combatant comradeship are a function of two conditions that militate against its preservation: first, it flowers in the temporary abeyance of military rank, and second, it pertains exclusively to those doing the fighting. These constraints on comradeship in wartime carry over into peacetime as well, for the kind of egalitarianism or socialism

which is figured in "On Rest" would prove difficult to achieve as veterans' orga-
nizations' (especially the NUX and, to some extent, the Federation) attempted to
build political coalitions with sectors of the non-veteran population. Further, the
fact that comradeship in the poem exists only with the temporary relaxation of
discipline corresponds to the difficulties these groups had in pursuing a politics
based on comradeship in a postwar climate characterized by the competitiveness
and hierarchies of liberal capitalism. Gurney's poem, then, illustrates the same
problems experienced by the growing veterans' movement in its attempts to apply
models of comradeship to a political intervention in postwar Britain. The Federation
was ultimately unable to extend its combatant comradeship to other constituencies,
and the socialist National Union was unable to persuade enough ex-soldiers that
they had just as much in common with Labor and the working class as with their
fellow veterans. The movement's difficulties in linking veterans and non-veterans
in political practice complicates assumptions that wartime comradeship, whether
as conceived by organized veterans or by Gurney, would translate smoothly into
a postwar politics, socialistic or otherwise.

Later Period: From "Blighty" to "Strange Hells"

The problems of return to Britain inhabit numerous poems of Gurney's later period,
as he revisits the process by which veterans (or the countless numbers of "friendly
bands") were uprooted from their wartime lives and transplanted to a world in which
civilian norms and institutions once again obtained.[12] In "Swift and Slow" (1921),
after returning from France, Gurney's speaker-veteran finds an inhospitable Britain:
"But here having escaped the steely showers / […] Find slow death in the loved
street and bookish doom" (*Collected* 88). Similarly, in "Blighty" (1921):

> It seemed that it were well to kiss first earth
> On landing, having traversed the narrow seas […]
> But mud is on our fate after so long acquaintance,
> We find of England the first gate without Romance;
> Blue paved wharfs with dock-policemen and civic decency.
> (*Collected* 123)

After an active military life of mortal danger and comradely bonds, Gurney's
veterans experience isolation and both implicit and explicit regulation in the post-
war world, with "civic decency" standing in for the return to "business as usual."
So too in the longer version of "First Time In" (1925), in which he rehearses the
pleasures of trench comradeship before turning to the difficult transition to postwar
life: "Since after-war so surely hurt, disappointed men/Who looked for the golden
Age to come friendly again" (*Collected* 129).

Veterans' organizations likewise emphasized the disappointment of return,
often explicitly elaborating this transition in terms of the postwar competition for
work between themselves and non-combatants. As a member of the Comrades of
the Great War wrote in the *Comrades' Journal*:

> O, those long, long dreams of "Blighty"!—and here it

is, taxing you and rationing you, bustling you out of the
way, trampling down all opposition in the mad quest
for the biggest slice of life, impatient of ideals that
cannot be translated into [pounds], thinking eternally
of profits, profits, profits!—a jeering, jostling, junketing
phantasmagoria. (July, 1919, 4)

The very next sentence in this passage links this criticism of postwar cutthroat
capitalism to women: "[T]hose women you dreamed of, ethereal visions who
cheered you and inspired you to hang on when the whole world was slipping from
under your feet—well, they've got your job, and won't budge!" Such sentiment
is in accord with many veterans' organization's position on postwar gender rela-
tions, especially the employment of women in once male-dominated positions. But
instead of trying to account for the separate spheres-based strictures on women's
participation in the war, or scrutinizing a socio-economic system which allowed (or,
better, depended upon) unemployment, many veterans directed their frustrations
toward those with whom they competed for work and social status.

In "Strange Hells," written in 1922, just before Gurney was committed
to asylum, the contrast between comradeship and the disappointing return from
war is elaborated most forcefully. With this poem, however, Gurney goes further
by subtly articulating how the nature of soldiers' bonds impeded comradeship's
smooth translation onto postwar Britain. As we will see in the following extended
discussion, the collective identity of soldiers is cemented by the marginalization
of women. In the first section Gurney presents a typical scene of trench combat,
in which a group of men exchange shell-fire with the enemy:

> There are strange hells within the minds war made
> Not so often, not so humiliatingly 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 lower their heads
> And sang with diaphragms fixed beyond all dreads,
> That tin and stretched-wire tinkle, that blither of tune:
>
> "Apres la guerre fini" till Hell all had come down,
> Twelve-inch, six-inch, and eighteen pounders hammering
> Hell's thunders. (*Collected* 140)

This section oscillates between a sense of the war's destructive force and the
heroic endurance of the men. The deliberately awkward enjambment of lines
1-2 underscores this ambivalence, as the lines waver between an emphasis on
the mental effects of bombardment and a diminution of those effects. The gun-
ners' will to withstand such a force—here a "racket," which emphasizes its sonic
dimensions—is manifested as a collective vocal resistance, with their "combined
black shout" with "diaphragms fixed." The soldiers are not passive victims of battle

but active participants in it; the inarticulate noise of the guns is answered not only by returned shell-fire, with "guns aligned," but also with the sense-making, and sense-preserving, song of the men. Thus the first section of the poem presents the paradigmatic wartime trauma of receiving shellfire as considerably mitigated by the gunners' collective singing.[13]

But how might the content of the song referred to in the poem, "Apres la Guerre Fini," relate to its performance? If their singing contributes to the soldiers' mental endurance of such barrages, does the specific meaning of the song itself contribute to that collectivity? To begin with, the song's title, translated as "after the war is over," implies that the men are engaging in an optimistic projection into the future: that what, in part, sustained them during bombardment was a comforting mental image of the postwar, of "England," of "home." On the other hand, perhaps "apres la guerre fini" registers a different meaning than this sort of wartime fantasy of postwar contentment. Partridge glosses the phrase as having a latently sardonic edge—here, taken as an answer to the common soldierly question of "when will I see home again?" the phrase means "never" (17). In this reading, the future's eclipse by the seemingly never-ending war is sounded in a note of black-humor, one often expressed by combatants. In any event, the phrase, as well as the song as a whole, with its roughly anglicized grammar and French vocabulary, is itself an historical, inter-linguistic product of English soldiers' long sojourn in France, and thus its mere existence, irrespective of its meaning, registers in linguistic terms that state of in-betweenness that Leed takes to be the hallmark of combatant "liminality."[14] Semantically and historically, the phrase embodies soldiers' common bond and common lot in war vis-à-vis the home front and postwar Britain.

The tenor of this relation between soldierly comradeship and the civilian world is elaborated in the song's verses. The following are the last two of its three stanzas, as printed in Brophy and Partridge's compendium:

> Apres la guerre finie,
> Soldat anglais parti;
> Mademoiselle in the family way,
> Apres la guerre finie.
>
> Apres la guerre finie,
> Soldat anglais parti;
> Mademoiselle can go to hell
> Apres la guerre finie. (33)[15]

Perhaps this song's version of Anglo-French relations needs little comment. In a culture which segregated the respective wartime roles of men and women, the song's sentiment is not altogether exceptional. Indeed, the topic of gender conflict within the larger frame of the war is a common concern of the literature of the period and a frequent topic in recent scholarship.[16] Though the woman referred

to in the song is French, not British, this raucous kiss-off merits inclusion within a wartime context of gender relations in which male comradeship is defined against the female, civilian world.

In this first section, then, Gurney presents an image of a robust group of soldiers bearing up against shellfire by means of a collective identity cemented by their singing of a war-born tune that hinges on a rejection of women. This subtext of gender relations in "Strange Hells" is not an isolated instance in Gurney's oeuvre. In the early poem "The Estaminet" (1917), we see that as the men drink and sing they also trade tales of women back home, that place

> Where never thuds a "Minnie,"
> But Minnie smiles at you
> A-meeting in the spinney,
> With kisses not a few. (*Severn* 35)

Though the poem puns on the soldiers' term "Minnie" (English slang for the German trench mortar, or *minenwerfer*) and a name common to English girls, Gurney explicitly differentiates the two with the signal terms "never" and "But." The conventional binaries of woman/home-front/safety and man/war-front/danger are thereby reinforced.

We can see how Gurney transposes such oppositions onto the postwar world if we return briefly to "Blighty." As soldiers disembark to find Britain marked by "dock-policemen and civic decency," the poem concludes with the nation personified as a mother: "A grim-faced black-garbed mother efficient and busy / Set upon housework, worn-minded and fantasy-free, / A work-house matron, forgetting her old birth friend—the sea" (*Collected* 123). This female figure represents the postwar shabbiness that seems all the more shabby set against the soldiers' earlier dreams of their homecoming. In other words, the gendered binaries of comradeship and the civilian world that we have seen operating in "Strange Hells" are less an anomaly than a key facet of Gurney's poetry. His poems exemplify the logic by which the exclusively masculine components of wartime comradeship and veteran identity, which helped men survive the war, were also a stumbling block in the path toward the kinds of effective coalition building which would substantively address the problems faced by veterans in the postwar era.

Such consequences are the focus of the second and final section of "Strange Hells"; whereas in the first section the soldiers comprise a cohesive unit, in the poem's conclusion the men are dispersed along the margins of postwar society:

> 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 face how

> heart burns. (*Collected* 141)

The first word in this section, "Where," is the dislocated counterpart to the first section's opening "There," in which the men are centered in collectivity. And if in the first section the soldiers' voices and bodies were once integrated in song, now the speaker-veteran's "heart burns" internally while outwardly, for unspecified reasons, he must not voice such discontent. This silencing is directly related to the three occupations listed in these lines. While affording a modicum of agency, living on welfare, displaying fabric, and begging are all essentially passive pursuits, and, as elements of the postwar "civic routine," are a far cry from the soldiers' masculine and world-significant war activities. The first section's wartime suppression of women, it seems, has returned in inverted form with the second section's postwar images of marginalized and feminized veterans. While in other poems Gurney hints at such an equation, "Strange Hells" links these points together.[17]

The Bitter Asylum of Comradeship

Soon after writing "Strange Hells" Gurney was placed in the mental asylum where he would remain until his death. In these early asylum years we see a new attitude toward his time with the Gloucesters, for while in the immediate postwar years his memories of comradeship were in part a refuge from a dispiriting present, now the bond which he shares with veterans provides no escape from the pains of his institutionalization. In "Farewell," after rehearsing the joys of combatant comradeship, and declaring that "there was not one of all that battalion / Loved his comrades as well as I," Gurney addresses his departed comrades directly:

> Dear battalion, the dead of you would not have let
> Your comrade be so long—prey for the unquiet
> Black evil of the unspoken and concealed pit.
> You would have had me safe—dead or free happy alive.
> (*Collected* 266)

However strong the comradely sentiment remains, it is now displaced by time, death, and incarceration in a sharp reversal of the sentiments in "To Certain Comrades." In other asylum poems, Gurney is also capable of casting a reproachful eye toward his former comrades, holding them partly responsible for his present fate. The language of the disappointed comrade in "O Tan-Faced Prairie Boy" is quite explicit: "I left not you…why have you left me to fall / Into the hands of evil lying lies to the truth of Hell / …why have you dead ones not saved me—you dead ones not helped well?"[18] In these two poems we have an apt rendering of Gurney's unstable veteran identity as a combined function of both the vulnerability of combatant comradeship and the inhospitable postwar civilian world (however elliptically rendered by his strained psyche).

The interplay between wartime comradeship and postwar isolation in Gurney's later poems is reinforced formally. With the partial exception of "Strange Hells," in which the echoing of conventional sonnet structure (fourteen

lines and a decisive "turn") underscores the poem's implicit connection of its wartime trench scene and its postwar conclusion, in general these poems continue the direction Gurney had begun with the looser stanzaic structure (or avoidance of such altogether) in "On Rest." In addition to such structural features, grammatically Gurney's poems become more unconventional and involuted. In the last line of "Strange Hells" the speaker literally drops out of the poem: "The heart burns—but has to keep out of face how heart burns." The absence here of a proper noun or pronoun between "but" and "has" (one would imagine "one," "I," or "we") and the lack of an article or pronoun before "face" and "heart" formalize materially Gurney's increasingly unstable postwar identity as a veteran. In this and other poems he articulates both the historical crisis of identity experienced by many veterans and indicates, at the same time, his own retreat into mental and poetic isolation as the bonds of wartime comradeship recede into the past.

        Lastly, the vague references in "Farewell" to "black evil" and "the concealed pit" indicate a consciousness less aware of an audience in need of clarity and causal connections than a mind that cannot objectify its perspective. Similarly, in "It Is Near Toussaints" (All Saints Day, November 1), the voices of the living poet and his dead comrades seem to intermingle to such a degree that the quotation marks that demarcate one from the other seem inadequate.

> "Have they ended it? What has happened to
>   Gurney?"
> And along the leaf-strewed roads of France
>   many brown shades
> Will go, recalling singing, and a comrade for
>   whom also they
> Had hoped well. His honour them had happier
>   made.
> Curse all that hates good. When I spoke of my
>   breaking
> (Not understood) in London, they imagined of
>   the taking
> Vengeance, and seeing things were different in
>   future. (*Collected* 267)

The awkward displacement of prepositions ("They imagined of the taking / Vengeance"), elision of pronouns ("Kept sympathetic silence," line 10), and, as in "Farewell," the references to unexplained animosities and threats ("Curse all that hates good") trace the fractures in his flow of thought. I am not merely claiming that such poems are the work of a man struggling with schizophrenia; as others have argued, those they surely are. I am also claiming, as this survey of Gurney's work has endeavored to show, that these breakdowns in poetic form mark the fragility of comradeship, a social form that seemed to promise to serve as a faithful cornerstone of his life and work. In this experience, Gurney was not alone. For despite its best efforts, the veterans' movement, based as it

was on a bond that was precariously constructed between soldiers amidst the shared stresses of war, attenuated in the inexorably liberal and civilian-oriented social and economic forms and institutions of the postwar era. In such poems as Gurney's, the making and unmaking of veteran identity receive their most eloquent rendering.

Notes

1. While the impact of the war on his mental state has been a matter of some debate, it is generally agreed that Gurney suffered from significant mental disturbance before the war and that his war service contributed to, but did not initiate, his later, more severe illness. See Silkin 122, Hurd, and Fussell, *Boy Scout*.

2. A gifted pianist and composer, Gurney turned to poetry when military service made access to a piano difficult (in that sense, he was truly a poet made by the war). With the help of his longtime friend and amanuensis, Marian Scott, Gurney's first collection, *Severn and Somme*, was published in November 1917, followed by *War's Embers* in May 1919; a third collection, *80 Poems or So*, was rejected by his publishers in mid-1922, and a fourth collection, *Rewards of Wonder*, was compiled in 1924 but never submitted for publication in Gurney's lifetime. (This dating of Gurney's collections is taken from George Walter's edition of *Rewards of Wonder*).

3. Briefly, in the years after the First World War, a cultural Myth took root which held that British soldiers had been futilely sacrificed by a negligent, older generation, and that those who returned were forever alienated from their pre-war selves and postwar society. For a cogent exposition, see Hynes.

4. It is my hope that this discussion opens up a larger scholarly investigation into the connections between wartime/postwar literature and the cultural, social, and political lives of First World War veterans. Siegfried Sassoon's postwar career also dovetails in complex ways with the experience of veterans and the veterans' movement, though poetry was not the central means for this connection. See my essay "Siegfried Sassoon, Fellow Traveler." Wilfred Owen's poems adumbrate many of the issues veterans faced upon returning home, though of course Owen did not live long enough to address the postwar period. Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, Richard Aldington and others produced poems here and there that treat veterans' experience, though not in the sustained manner or with the political resonance attained by Gurney.

5. The Act, passed by Parliament in August 1914 and augmented on several occasions during the war, granted the state increased powers to censor and to control the country's borders (Hynes 78-80). For more general discussions of British propaganda, see Haste and Buitenhuis.

6. Siegfried Sassoon, in poems such as "The Hero" and "Fight to a Finish," and Wilfred Owen, in "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Insensibility," are prime examples of this tendency.

7.Santanu Das echoes Cole's distinction between comradeship and friendship

and implicitly corrects Bourke's critique of comradeship in writing that "while it is important to be alerted to the limits of 'mateship' in the trenches […] the numerous letters, diary entries, memoirs and trench narratives show an undeniable intensification and quickening of male bonds" (111, 113).

8.   Barham writes convincingly of the "constraints of a buttoned-up and psychologically unsophisticated culture" in his study of British soldiers and mental illness (174).

9. For a helpful history of British socialism, see Laybourn.

10. For more extensive histories of the veterans' movement, see Wootton, Ward, Kimball, and Latcham.

11.   Lucas's in-text quotation is from Thornton's edition of Gurney's letters (129).

12.   As compared to Britain's massive investment to recruit, train, equip, and support its soldiers, once demobilized these men received far less assistance in adjusting to the postwar world. At dispersal stations an enlisted man would be given a railway ticket, ration book, a month's pay, and the choice of a few pounds or a "demob suit." He would also receive a twenty pound "gratuity" and short-term unemployment insurance worth 29s per week (DeGroot 254). Granted, for an army the size of Britain's, this was no cheap return. But temporary provisions such as these did not protect the majority of enlisted/working class veterans (as well as "temporary officers") from the vagaries of the postwar economy. Moreover, though "shell-shocked" veterans received a fair amount of medical attention (of varying degrees of quality), there was scarcely any provision for the psychological readjustment of "normal" men, many of whom had been at war for several years, to civilian life.

13.   Clearly we have a quite different picture of the traumatic mental effects of war on soldiers than, for instance, Owen's "Mental Cases," in which the horrified speaker struggles to make sense of the pained gesticulations of clearly traumatized ex-combatants (169).

14.   For Leed, "liminality" refers to the "condition" of an individual "who is between cultural classifications and categories," and applies to combatants and veterans most especially (17).

15.   I have retained Brophy's and Partridge's "finie," although Gurney uses "fini."

16. The ways in which the war relied on and perhaps transformed traditional gender roles has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. See Gilbert's "Soldier's Heart" in *Behind The Lines* and Jenny Gould's history of women's involvement in the armed forces, in the same volume. Susan Kingsley Kent provides an important discussion of postwar gender relations in terms of Susan Jeffords's concept of "remasculinization."

17.   Hipp claims that the ending of "Strange Hells" "bears no resemblance to the memory that precedes it" (145). My argument is that the terms in which the postwar is conceived bear an implicit relation to the first section's representation

of wartime comradeship.

18.   *Collected* (251).   The title of this poem is taken from a Walt Whitman poem.

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