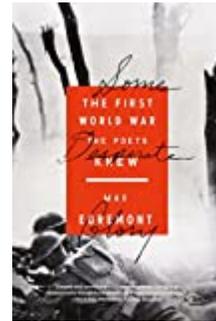


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Max Egremont. *Some Desperate Glory: The First World War the Poets Knew.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. 352 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-28032-1; \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-374-53544-5.



Reviewed by Alex Nordlund (University of Georgia)

Published on H-War (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

For the past century, the First World War in Britain is perhaps best known not just for the devastation and human loss left in its wake but also for the art that it inspired. Max Egremont's *Some Desperate Glory: The First World War the Poets Knew* adds yet another work to the exhaustive canon on the subject, with an emphasis on the British poets and their wartime experiences on the western front. Many works have looked at these war poets, but what makes Egremont's work more intriguing is its emphasis on the poets and their work rather than their war experiences.

Egremont focuses his study on the well-known Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney, and Edmund Blunden, but also brings attention to more obscure authors, such as Julian Grenfell, Charles Sorely, and Robert Nichols. Using a chronological approach to the First World War, Egremont avoids treating these men as victims of the war like other scholars have done in the past. Rather, in a humane fashion, he depicts them as complicated artists who were both products of their own time and often at odds with contemporary sociocultural norms, stating that "most of them were uneasy in the pre-war world. Many were formed by ... the late-Victorian public schools.... Some saw war as a rescue" (p. xi). By

the time the war had ended, they remained misfits of their times, adhering to Georgian style in their poetry, which was often at odds with modernists who did not fight in the war, such as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound. But Egremont is careful not to have war experience be the center of these men's identities, concluding that "their pre-war and post-war lives show them as extraordinary: often tormented casualties of their age, not typical of it" (p. 263).

In addition, Egremont also connects these writers to the wider British literary scene, alluding to such authors as Virginia Woolf, Edward Marsh, and H. G. Wells, thus linking them to a vast artistic network that existed in Britain before, during, and after the war. It is this consideration that is perhaps the greatest contribution Egremont has to offer, as it pulls these men outside of their simplistic identities as war poets and collectively as antiwar poets. He also highlights the prewar links with Germany that many shared, notably, Graves, Brooke, and Sorely. For readers interested in exploring the postwar lives of these authors, *Survivors of a Kind: Memoirs of the Western Front* (2008) by Brian Bond is one of the best recent studies to pair with this work as it explores the memoirs and fictional accounts written by British veterans in greater length.

Some historians may find Egremont's description of the origins of the war and the conduct of the war itself simplistic and one-sided in favor of the poets. He, however, quite admirably considers these potential objections. Alluding to the appropriate historiography, he stands up in defense of the poets' war and insists that surely, it's necessary to separate politics, even history, from the poetry (p. 262).

Although the content of the work is not entirely new to a specialist, *Some Desperate Glory* stands above many

of its predecessors with Egremont's clear prose, insightful narrative, and impressive ability to analyze poetry in simple terms, making it very accessible to one unfamiliar with the subject. It is highly readable and also offers a selection of poems written by the authors under consideration. Academic readers may find themselves frustrated with the lack of citations and the awkward format of the endnotes, but this critique is perhaps best directed at the publisher rather than Egremont, who has added yet another valuable study to the literary legacy of the First World War in Britain.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Alex Nordlund. Review of Egremont, Max, *Some Desperate Glory: The First World War the Poets Knew*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44522>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.