

‘War’s Hell!’ the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Poetry and Literature

The First World War inspired an outpouring of literature and poetry. Through writing soldiers expressed their emotions, whether patriotism, heroism and admiration or horror, anger and sadness. Writing was also a means of recording eye-witness accounts.

The Capture of Mametz Wood, a poem by an ordinary soldier, Private Sydney Hatherell of Pontycymmer, appeared in the *Glamorgan Gazette* on the 25th of August 1916, only a few weeks after the battle.

There were also a number of recognised writers who served with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in and around Mametz Wood and recorded their experience. These include Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Robert Graves (1895-1985), David Jones (1895-1974) and Llewelyn Wyn Griffith (1890-1977).

One of the most famous Welsh-language poets Hedd Wyn (Ellis Humphrey Evans; 1887-1917) also served in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers but was not at Mametz Wood. He posthumously won the chair at the National Eisteddfod in 1917 for his poem *Yr Arwr* (The Hero). At the ceremony, held in Birkenhead, a black sheet was draped over the chair, and Hedd Wyn is still known today as *Bardd y Gadair Ddu* – Poet of the Black Chair.

That the prose of war should prove the truth of poetry’s tale of man’s feeling – that it should now be easy to believe that some of those magic lines were indeed a reflection of the real thoughts of real men and women – that was an astonishing discovery.

(Llewelyn Wyn Griffith)

Information for teachers

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Robert Graves (1895-1985)

Robert Graves joined the army as soon as war was declared. He was staying in Harlech, north Wales, having finished school and joined the nearby Royal Welch Fusiliers at Wrexham. He was training with them by August 11th 1914 and served until 1918.

Although initially very supportive of the war effort, Graves soon used his poetry to write candidly about the sheer horror of trench warfare that he witnessed when fighting in France. He also questioned the war propaganda of the time. He met and became friends with another war poet and fellow Royal Welch Fusilier soldier, Siegfried Sassoon. The poem *A Dead Boche* was published in 1917. It refers directly to his experience of the Battle of Mametz Wood. ‘Boche’ was a disparaging word used in the First World War to describe a German soldier.

On July 19th 1916 Graves was badly wounded in the chest and lung and pronounced dead by a surgeon. Graves recovered and was able to read the report of his own death in *The Times*. His autobiography *Goodbye to All That* was published to great acclaim in 1919. In it Graves gives a damning description of his experiences in the First World War.

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Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)

Siegfried Sassoon joined the army in August 1914, on the day Britain declared war on Germany. He transferred into the 3rd Battalion (special reserve) Royal Welch Fusiliers as a second lieutenant in May 1915.

His battalion fought in and around Mametz Wood. Sassoon was considered an extremely brave and courageous soldier. He carried out a single-handed attack on a German position in an attempt to dislodge a sniper and was awarded the Military Cross in 1916.

Sassoon’s early style of poetry, described as lucid and graceful, changed after his experiences of the brutality of war. He began to write about the grim reality - of the rotting corpses and filth - that surrounded the soldiers. He often used sarcasm and was not afraid to use very blunt language in his poetry, as in the poem *Aftermath* (1919) which references Sassoon’s experience at Mametz Wood. In his autobiography *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* he conveyed the horrific and savage scenes that he witnessed, in order to challenge public perceptions of soldiers’ experiences on the battlefield.

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David Jones (1895-1974)

On 2 January 1915 David Jones enlisted as a private in the 15th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers. Jones had spent four years studying at the Camberwell School of Art. His Welsh father had written directly to David Lloyd George about signing up his son. Lloyd George (then Secretary of State for War), was trying to raise a Welsh Army Corps.

David Jones fought at the Battle of Mametz Wood. When advancing in darkness through the wood he was shot in the leg. Unable to walk he crawled back towards the British trenches, having discarded his rifle as it became tangled in the undergrowth and impeded his progress. He was eventually found by a stretcher bearer and taken to a casualty clearing station ten miles behind the line. He returned to Britain on the hospital ship *St David* and was taken to a hospital in Birmingham. He later returned to France but was invalided home with severe trench fever in 1918.

David Jones drew sketches whilst he was in France, observing the people and places around him. His poem inspired by his experience, *In Parenthesis*, was begun in about 1927 and completed in 1932. As well as drawing on the trauma of his experiences in the trenches, Jones incorporated references from mythology, history and literature, including the Mabinogion.

After the war Jones became one of the 20th-century’s most important modernist artists and poets. His experience of the First World War, of life in the trenches and in particular his experience at Mametz Wood, proved to be one of the principle influences on his complex and intricate work.

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Llewellyn Wyn Griffith (1890-1977)

Llewellyn Wyn Griffith was born in Landrillo yn Rhos, north Wales. He joined the army in September 1914, accepting a commission in the 15th (1st London Welsh) Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

He wrote an account of his experience in the First World War in his memoir, *Up to Mametz*, which he wrote in the early 1920s and published in 1931. His vivid descriptions of his experiences and observations at the battle of Mametz Wood are an important and evocative historical resource.

Griffith recalls the death at Mametz of his nineteen-year-old brother Watcyn. Griffith was acting brigade major and had ordered the signals officer to get a message through to get the position of the artillery moved. The message was sent via a runner, his brother. The message got through but he was killed by a shell on his way back.

'So I had sent him to his death, bearing a message from my own hand, in an endeavour to save other men's brothers.'

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Owen Sheers (1974-)

Owen Sheers is an award-winning poet, novelist and playwright and Professor in Creativity at Swansea University. He was born in Fiji and brought up in south Wales. In 1998 Sheers came across the book *Up to Mametz* by Llewelyn Wyn Griffith. He went on to travel to the site of the battle to explore the writings of Llewelyn Wyn Griffith further and the writings of David Jones, one an officer and the other a private. Sheers considers David Jones’s *In Parenthesis* to be the most interesting piece of writing to come out of the First World War. As a result of this visit he wrote the poem *Mametz Wood* (2005), describing how farmers today still plough up the remains of the gunned-down soldiers.

In 2014 in an ancient woodland near Usk, Monmouthshire, the National Theatre of Wales staged a largescale site-specific production performance of *Mametz*, a play written by Sheers. It draws on the written material of those who fought or witnessed the battle first-hand. The play received wonderful reviews and brought the story of some of the soldiers who fought at Mametz to a new, contemporary audience.

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