

Word Worth®

WORD WORTH

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IDEAS AND THE ARTS

March 2006

Volume VI Number 3

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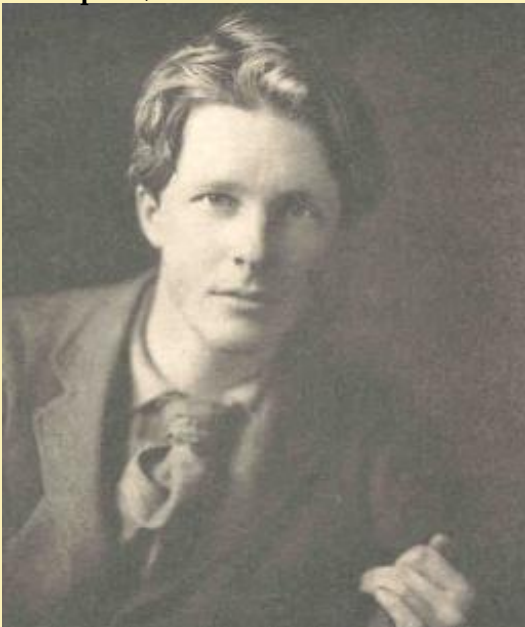
Rediscovering Rupert Brooke

by M H Perry

Rupert Brooke has been rediscovered on a number of occasions since his death in 1915. There are two primary reasons for his not remaining in the forefront of literary consciousness and those are his poem "The Soldier" and his charisma. Brooke attracted attention wherever he went. He apparently had physical beauty that was combined with a personality to draw people to him. Had photography, both motion and still, been as developed as it became in the second half of the twentieth century, he probably would have attracted the kind of following that England's Princess Diana did. Poet William Butler Yeats called Brooke, "The most handsome man in England." Winston Churchill wrote a eulogy on Brooke's death, that was a part of the obituary in *The Times*, stating "Rupert Brooke is dead. A telegram from the Admiral at Lemnos tells us that this life has closed at the moment when it seemed to have reached its springtime."



For a poet, charisma has short-term advantages but long-term liabilities. Initially, it brings the kind of consideration that allows the individual to stand out, get noticed, and get published. Long-term, it makes academicians and critics over-look the poetry, prejudging it to have been written not by a poet but by a personality. Brooke's appearance as well as his personality stood out.



The poem "The Soldier" was the second, and major, thing that prevented Brooke from being taken seriously as a poet. Among the things he wrote, it is that poem which is often published as the outstanding example of his work. It was that which, no doubt, made him the darling of Sir Winston Churchill. The problem with this poem is that what it initially seems to be—a poem about a soldier—is not what it is, in actuality, about. Taken as a soldier's poem, or war poem, it comes across as unrealistic compared to the literature that came out of the trenches of World War I—such

as Wilfred Owen's poem:

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And floundering like a man in fire or lime. —
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.

Owen's poem is grippingly intense and is an astoundingly beautiful poem with an awful, ugly, and gruesome subject. Viewing it in terms of John Keats' lines

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

the poem reveals true beauty. Compared with that poem, Brooke's comes across as naïve, insincere, and *untrue*. Those who dislike it for its superficial appearance as an endorsement of the glory of death in war exalt in pointing out that Brooke did not die heroically storming an enemy stronghold, but from complications of sunstroke—not a hero's demise.

The quality which makes the poem survive, however, has nothing to do with war and very little to do with soldiers—at least, not with soldiers as distinct from any other human position.

“[The Soldier](#)” is simply about a deep, deep love of the homeland, and it is that which has made its appeal universally enduring. The name, England, in the poem can be exchanged for the name of any other country, state, county, or town, and then we immediately see the poem’s allure.

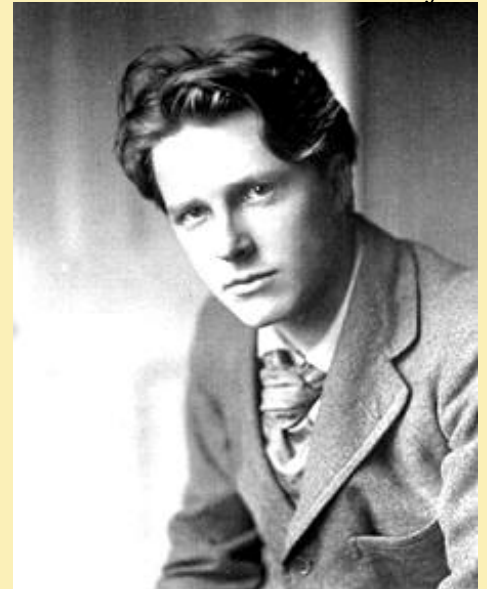
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
 A body of England's, breathing English air,
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

Brooke loved life and all the promises that life brings. His legend as a student at Cambridge has endured as a result of his contagious enthusiasm, his drive to live every moment of being. Not uncommon among those who passionately love life, however, is a constant awareness of, and even a flirtation with, death. The knowledge that the party must end can cast a shadow on the revelry.

Poet Frances Cornford described Brooke in a poem as “*A young Apollo, golden-haired*”—this part is trite—but she went on to say,

*Magnificently unprepared
 For the long littleness of life.*

It’s the “long littleness of life” that a number of vibrant people have problems with. It was probably that which was the underpinning of what led to Sylvia Plath’s tragic death. Had Diana been better able to handle life’s tedium, she may have been better able to endure not only a bad marriage, but also the tiresome processes necessary for personal protection that surely would have prevented the horrific crash in the Paris tunnel.



Brooke was someone clearly at odds with “the long littleness” and made the world a more exciting place wherever he went. His poetry combines praise for life with a constant sense of sadness that it will sometime end. The poem “[Tiare Tahiti](#)” begins with an overly rhymed verse philosophizing about the nature of the hereafter:

And my laughter, and my pain,
 Shall home to the Eternal Brain.
 And all lovely things, they say,
 Meet in Loveliness again;

He is quickly reminded, nonetheless, that it means that the *here* will be lost:

Oh, Heaven's Heaven! but we'll be missing
 The palms, and sunlight, and the south;
 And there's an end, I think, of kissing,
 When our mouths are one with Mouth. . . .

The poem, “[The Great Lover](#)” makes use of the cataloguing technique invented by Walt Whitman to celebrate all the simple things of life. The concept was copied in a popular song decades later.

In the poem, “[Menelaus and Helen](#),” Brooke celebrates the magnificence of the love that made

Menelaus go after Helen, and then uses an ironic twist to suggest that old age and decay wash away all the loveliness. What makes Brooke live on is his capacity for outstanding craftsmanship. “Menelaus and Helen” is a double Petrarchan sonnet, perfectly wrought without a single careless line or word.

And so, more than ninety years after he ceased writing, this poet—who died at the age of twenty-seven on the day generally agreed to be Shakespeare’s birthday—lives on.

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A Crick Ran through It

by Charles Miess

There used to be an old crick that wound its way through wild plum trees and black willows and passed within a hundred feet of the front door of the old farmhouse where I grew up. From there, it skirted around a small building that was a granary when the farm was a farm. It meandered along on its bed of shale and clay, stones and boulders, through shallow vales of cattails and cowslips and then deep into the woods to some mysterious destination.

In early spring when the accumulation of winter snow melted quickly, the crick would fill its banks and rush and roar. Then it was as awesome as Niagara Falls is to me today. I particularly remember one Saturday morning when Mom and Dad had gone into Buffalo to do the weekly grocery shopping. The crick was boiling over the boulders as never before – with white spray flying. I must have been about eight years old. My sister, Ethel, the oldest, was watching us. Little Sharon was about three and I wanted to take her outside with me, but Ethel forbade it. So I begged and pleaded and I promised (cross my heart and hope to die) to keep her away from the crick. Ethel finally gave in and dressed Sharon in her puffy little snowsuit until she looked like a pink beach ball.



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We couldn't have been out more than ten minutes when I had not only forgotten my promise, but had forgotten about Sharon too. I was throwing sticks into the rushing water and watching them race away when I noticed a little pink cork bobbing downstream in the middle of the crick. It was Sharon floating on her back. I ran as I had never run before. I rushed into the swift current to see her cradled in a trough of water, still smiling and without a drop on her face. How I managed to rescue her without being swept away myself, I'll never know. I don't think Ethel knows about that to this day.

During summer, the crick took on a completely different personality. It was calm and peaceful



and friendly yet still with an aura of mystery. I spent many happy hours sitting on the bank listening to the water talk its way over and around the rocks, sounding like tiny gnomes engaged in conversation. The background was filled with the lazy buzz of cicadas basking in the warm summer sun. Occasionally a dragonfly zoomed by and I would cover my ears. Cover them, because the old lady down the road said that dragonflies were the devil's darning needle, and would sew them up if I were bad. With the water tickling and cooling my bare feet, I remember looking into the azure sky and dreaming about my future and the wide world

outside that I had yet to see.

My brothers Bill and John often joined me at the crick and we were frequently inspired to grand projects. I can remember the day we gathered up all the flat rocks we could find and laid them row on row to make a dam. Then we dug up yellow clay and lined the front of the rocks until the slow-moving water backed up and formed a pool. We made little boats of paper, peopled them with sow bugs and crayfish, and sailed them back and forth in the dappled sunlight until the boats got soggy and sank to the bottom.

Later that day, Bill taught John and me how to skip little flat stones across the surface of the water. You had to hold the stone horizontal and throw it so it hit hard and flat. When done properly, the stones would bounce like a rubber ball and land far to the other side of the crick. I soon mastered the technique and Bill and I decided to have a contest to see who could bounce a stone the farthest. The loser was obligated to buy the winner a box of *Good and Plenty* candy on our next trip to the store. I lost that contest, but I wasn't too concerned, because trips to the store were far and few between in those days. We finished up the day with a peeing contest to see who could hit the highest spot against the grey and weathered boards on the back of the old granary. I won that one, but there was no prize except for the glory.

The years slipped by unnoticed, and before I knew it, I was in the Navy and the crick became the domain of the younger kids in the family. Not long after, my children and my nephews and nieces

made it their playground whenever we went out to visit *grandma and grandpa*.

But grandmas and grandpas don't live forever, nor do moms and dads. And so the day came when we had to sell the old farm and the crick along with it. The new owner wasn't there more than a month when he carelessly burned leaves too close to the one-hundred and fifty year old granary, and burned that dear old building to the ground. Then he brought in a bulldozer to push down the trees and straighten out the crick like a drainage ditch – until its mystery and its soul were gone forever.

The future that I dreamed about, alongside that crick a half century ago, is now largely in the past. In some ways it has been a bitter disappointment and in another sense, a triumph. I had no way of knowing then about the pain of divorce and separation from my own children. Yet, neither would I have suspected that I might someday have a part, although small, in the successful launch of rocket ships into outer space. And surely, I would not have thought – that fifty years into the future I would lay my graying head down on a pillow, and dream of the buzzing of cicadas and of skipping stones across the water in that old crick.



Charles Miess
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The Soldier

Rupert Brooke

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

The Great Lover

Rupert Brooke

I have been so great a lover: filled my days
So proudly with the splendour of Love's praise,
The pain, the calm, and the astonishment,
Desire illimitable, and still content,
And all dear names men use, to cheat despair,
For the perplexed and viewless streams that bear
Our hearts at random down the dark of life.
Now, ere the unthinking silence on that strife
Steals down, I would cheat drowsy Death so far,
My night shall be remembered for a star
That outshone all the suns of all men's days.
Shall I not crown them with immortal praise
Whom I have loved, who have given me, dared with me
High secrets, and in darkness knelt to see
The inenarrable godhead of delight?
Love is a flame: we have beaconed the world's night.
A city: and we have built it, these and I.
An emperor: we have taught the world to die.
So, for their sakes I loved, ere I go hence,
And the high cause of Love's magnificence,
And to keep loyalties young, I'll write those names
Golden for ever, eagles, crying flames,
And set them as a banner, that men may know,
To dare the generations, burn, and blow
Out on the wind of Time, shining and streaming. . . .
These I have loved:

White plates and cups, clean-gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;
Wet roofs, beneath the lamp-light; the strong crusts
Of friendly bread; and many-tasting food;
Rainbows; and the blue bitter smoke of wood;
And radiant raindrops couching in cool flowers;
And flowers themselves, that sway through sunny hours,
Dreaming of moths that drink them under the moon;

Then, the cool kindliness of sheets, that soon
Smooth away trouble; and the rough male kiss
Of blankets; grainy wood; live hair that is
Shining and free; blue-massing clouds; the keen
Unpassioned beauty of a great machine;
The benison of hot water; furs to touch;
The good smell of old clothes; and others such
The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,
Hair's fragrance, and the musty reek that lingers
About dead leaves and last year's ferns. . . .

Dear names,

And thousand other throng to me! Royal flames;
Sweet water's dimpling laugh from tap or spring;
Holes in the ground; and voices that do sing;
Voices in laughter, too; and body's pain,
Soon turned to peace; and the deep-panting train;
Firm sands; the little dulling edge of foam
That browns and dwindles as the wave goes home;
And washen stones, gay for an hour; the cold
Graveness of iron; moist black earthen mould,
Sleep; and high places; footprints in the dew;
And oaks; and brown horse-chestnuts, glossy-new;
And new-peeled sticks; and shining pools on grass;
All these have been my loves. And these shall pass,
Whatever passes not, in the great hour,
Nor all my passion, all my prayers, have power
To hold them with me through the gate of Death.
They'll play deserter, turn with the traitor breath,
Break the high bond we made, and sell Love's trust
And sacramented covenant to the dust.

Oh, never a doubt but, somewhere, I shall wake,
And give what's left of love again, and make
New friends, now strangers. . . .

But the best I've known

Stays here, and changes, breaks, grows old, is blown
About the winds of the world, and fades from brains
Of living men, and dies.

Nothing remains.

O dear my loves, O faithless, once again
This one last gift I give: that after men
Shall know, and later lovers, far-removed,
Praise you, 'All these were lovely'; say, 'He loved.'

Menelaus and Helen

Rupert Brooke

I

Hot through Troy's ruin Menelaus broke
To Priam's palace, sword in hand, to sate
On that adulterous whore a ten years' hate
And a king's honour. Through red death, and smoke
And cries, and then by quieter ways he strode,
Till the still innermost chamber fronted him.
He swung his sword, and crashed into the dim
Luxurious bower, flaming like a god.

High sat white Helen, lonely and serene.
He had not remembered that she was so fair
And that her neck curved down in such a way;
And he felt tired. He flung the sword away,
And kissed her feet, and knelt before her there,
The perfect Knight before the perfect Queen.

II

So far the poet. How should he behold
That journey home, the long connubial years?
He does not tell you how white Helen bears
Child on legitimate child, becomes a scold,
Haggard with virtue. Menelaus bold
Waxed garrulous, and sacked a hundred Troys
'Twi'xt noon and supper. And her golden voice
Got shrill as he grew deafer. And both were old.

Often he wonders why on earth he went
Troyward, or why poor Paris ever came.
Oft she weeps, gummy-eyed and impotent;
Her dry shanks twitch at Paris' mumbled name.

So Menelaus nagged; and Helen cried;
And Paris slept on by Scamander side.

Tiare Tahiti

Rupert Brooke

Mamua, when our laughter ends,
And hearts and bodies, brown as white,
Are dust about the doors of friends,
Or scent ablowing down the night,
Then, oh! then, the wise agree,
Comes our immortality.

Mamua, there waits a land
Hard for us to understand.
Out of time, beyond the sun,
All are one in Paradise,
You and Pupure are one,
And Tau, and the ungainly wise.
There the Eternals are, and there
The Good, the Lovely, and the True,
And Types, whose earthly copies were
The foolish broken things we knew;
There is the Face, whose ghosts we are;
The real, the never-setting Star;
And the Flower, of which we love
Faint and fading shadows here;
Never a tear, but only Grief;
Dance, but not the limbs that move;
Songs in Song shall disappear;
Instead of lovers, Love shall be;
For hearts, Immutability;
And there, on the Ideal Reef,
Thunders the Everlasting Sea!

And my laughter, and my pain,
Shall home to the Eternal Brain.
And all lovely things, they say,
Meet in Loveliness again;
Miri's laugh, Teipo's feet,
And the hands of Matua,

Stars and sunlight there shall meet,
 Coral's hues and rainbows there,
 And Teura's braided hair;
 And with the starred `tiare's' white,
 And white birds in the dark ravine,
 And `flamboyants' ablaze at night,
 And jewels, and evening's after-green,
 And dawns of pearl and gold and red,
 Mamua, your lovelier head!
 And there'll no more be one who dreams
 Under the ferns, of crumbling stuff,
 Eyes of illusion, mouth that seems,
 All time-entangled human love.
 And you'll no longer swing and sway
 Divinely down the scented shade,
 Where feet to Ambulation fade,
 And moons are lost in endless Day.
 How shall we wind these wreaths of ours,
 Where there are neither heads nor flowers?
 Oh, Heaven's Heaven! but we'll be missing
 The palms, and sunlight, and the south;
 And there's an end, I think, of kissing,
 When our mouths are one with Mouth. . . .

`*Taii here*', Mamua,
 Crown the hair, and come away!
 Hear the calling of the moon,
 And the whispering scents that stray
 About the idle warm lagoon.
 Hasten, hand in human hand,
 Down the dark, the flowered way,
 Along the whiteness of the sand,
 And in the water's soft caress,
 Wash the mind of foolishness,
 Mamua, until the day.
 Spend the glittering moonlight there
 Pursuing down the soundless deep

Limbs that gleam and shadowy hair,
Or floating lazy, half-asleep.
Dive and double and follow after,
Snare in flowers, and kiss, and call,
With lips that fade, and human laughter
And faces individual,
Well this side of Paradise! . . .
There's little comfort in the wise.

Papeete, *February* 1914