

## Article – The Poetry of War

I am now on my second run of teaching this course to adults in my local area and I am really pleased with its progress. I begin with a brief history of how war has been dealt with in Literature, beginning with Homer and going as far as Kevin Powers' *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting* about the Iraq war, while taking in authors like Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, Earnest Hemingway, Robert Graves, Vera Brittain and Adrian Mitchell amongst others.

The driving force behind my idea for the course, however, is Carol Ann Duffy's book, *1914 Poetry Remembers*. This is a way of looking at war poetry in a new light, for what Duffy has done is asked modern poets to respond to letters, diaries and poems from the First World War with a poem of their own, so you get, for instance, Seamus Heaney responding to Edward Thomas's *As the Team's Head Brass* with a poem *In a Field* about a family member returning to rural Ireland having been demobbed from the war. Heaney had completed this two months before his death in August 2013.

One of my own favourites is American poet, Billy Collins, writing *Futility* in response to Owen's *Futility*. It uses three great images of the sun from Blake, Donne and Shakespeare to underline its power, yet acknowledges that even this cannot wake the dead soldier. We know, Collins indicates, that the 'fatuous sunbeams' will toil in vain to break this sleep of death.

There were also unexpected spinoffs. After looking at Deryn Rees-Jones's response to Helen Thomas's piece from her memoir, *World Without End*, about saying goodbye to her husband as he left for the Front, I contacted the poet herself and received a helpful response. Deryn told me about a book she has written called *And You Helen* which is about Helen Thomas and how she had become interested in

her. It contains a poem about Helen, some details of her life and is beautifully illustrated by artist, Charlotte Hodes.

The course then has so far been a real success. Students have brought their own experience and knowledge of poetry to it and I have learned almost as much from them as they have from me. This for me is the true spirit of adult education.

I am now looking forward to teaching it at The Settlement in the Spring Term.

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