GALLIPOLI TO MACEDONIA: LITERARY IMAGES
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GALLIPOLI AND THE AEGEAN

Rupert Brooke (1887 – 1915)

Brooke, already a well known poet before the war, joined the Royal Naval Division, Hood Battalion, and was on the way to Gallipoli when he fell ill, infected with sepsis by the bite of a mosquito, and died on board a hospital ship on 23 April 1915, two days before the Gallipoli landings. He was buried on the island of Skyros by a landing party including Patrick Shaw Stewart, the composer Denis Browne, and Oc Asquith, son of the prime minister H H Asquith. His five sonnets, I Peace, ii Safety, iii The Dead, iv The Dead, v The Soldier, were enormously popular.

THE DEAD

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!
There’s none of these so lonely and poor of old,
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.
These laid the world away; poured out the red Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unho ped serene,
That men call age, and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again,
And we have come into our heritage.

A P Herbert (1890 - 1971)

A P Herbert joined the Royal Naval Division and served at Gallipoli and later in France. He was author of the novel The Secret Battle, a sharply observed study of war at Gallipoli and the strains it places on a young officer who in the end breaks down and is court martialled for cowardice. The book, published in 1919, impressed Lloyd George and Churchill, who wrote an introduction to the 1928 edition. Herbert also wrote verses on Gallipoli for Punch, published as Half–Hours at Helles (Oxford, 1916). He went on to become a well known lawyer, humourist and writer, and served as independent MP for Oxford.
This is the Fourth of June.
Think not I never dream
The noise of that infernal noon,
   The stretchers’ endless stream,
The tales of triumph won,
   The night that found them lies,
The wounded wailing in the sun,
   The dead, the dust, the flies.

The flies! Oh God, the flies
   That soiled the sacred dead.
To see them swarm from dead men’s eyes
   And share the soldiers’ bread!
Nor think I now forget
   The filth and stench of war,
The corpses on the parapet,
   The maggots in the floor.

From *Half Hours at Helles*

**Vera Brittain (1893 – 1970)**

Vera Brittain was a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse during the war. She published a collection of poems, *Verses of a V.A.D.*, from which the following are taken. She came close to Gallipoli on a journey by troop ship via Mudros on Lemnos to Malta, when she wrote ‘The Sisters Buried at Lemnos’, an elegy for her fellow nurses. She is famous for her memoir of youth and the war years, *Testament of Youth*.

**THE TROOP TRAIN**
   (France, 1917)

As we came down from Amiens,
   And they went up the line,
They waved their careless hands to us,
   And cheered the Red Cross sign.

And often I have wondered since,
   Repicturing that train,
How many of those laughing souls
   Came down the line again.
THE SISTERS BURIED AT LEMNOS
   (‘Fidelis ad Extremum’)

O Golden Isle set in the deep blue Ocean,
   With purple shadows flitting o’er thy crest,
I kneel to thee in reverent devotion
   Of some who on thy bosom lie at rest!

Seldom they enter into song or story;
   Poets praise the soldier’s might and deeds of War,
But few exalt the Sisters, and the glory
   Of women dead beneath a distant star.

No armies threatened in that lonely station,
   They fought not fire or steel or ruthless foe,
But heat and hunger, sickness and privation,
   And Winter’s deathly chill and blinding snow.

Till mortal frailty could endure no longer
   Disease’s ravages and climate’s power,
In body weak, but spirit ever stronger,
   Courageously they stayed to meet their hour.

No blazing tribute through the wide world flying,
   No rich reward of sacrifice they craved,
The only meed of their victorious dying
   Lives in the hearts of humble men they saved.

Who when in light the Final Dawn is breaking
   Still faithful, though the world’s regard may cease,
Will honour, splendid in triumphant waking,
   The souls of women, lovely here at peace.

O golden Isle with purpose shadows falling
   Across thy rocky shore and sapphire sea,
I shall not picture these without recalling
   The Sisters sleeping on the heart of thee!
Rudyard Kipling (1865 – 1936)

V.A.D. (MEDITERRANEAN)

Ah, would swift ships had never been, for then we ne’er had found,
These harsh Aegean rocks between, this little virgin drowned,
Whom neither spouse nor child shall mourn, but men she nursed through pain
And – certain keels for whose return the heathen look in vain.

Hugh MacDiarmid (pen name – real name Christopher Murray Grieve) (1892-1978)

Extract from ‘A SALONIKAN STORM SONG’

Sing ho, for life in a tented field
On a night of storm and stress
Where chaos prevails and everything is
In the very deuce of a mess
And soaked and muddy and blown about
We still can laugh and sing
While the rain comes down in bucketfuls
And the wild fire has its fling!
    C.M.G., Salonika, 1st September 1916
Patrick Shaw Stewart (1888 – 1917)

Patrick Shaw Stewart was educated at Eton and Oxford. On the outbreak of war he enlisted in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, and then like Rupert Brooke joined the Hood battalion of the Royal Naval Division. A brilliant classicist, he welcomed the prospect of fighting at Gallipoli. ‘Think of fighting in the Chersonese ... or alternatively, if it’s the Asiatic side they want us on, on the plains of Troy itself! I am going to take my Herodotus as a guide-book.’ He led the party that buried Brooke on Skyros. He survived Gallipoli and was killed in France in December 1917. For Shaw-Stewart and this poem, the most celebrated of those written at Gallipoli, see Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford, 2010)

I saw a man this morning
  Who did not wish to die:
I ask and cannot answer
  If otherwise wish I.

Fair broke the day this morning
  Against the Dardanelles;
The breeze blew soft, the morn’s cheeks
  Were cold as cold sea-shells.

But other shells are waiting
  Across the Aegean Sea,
Shrapnel and high explosive,
  Shells and hells for me.

O hell of ships and cities
  Hell of men like me
Fatal second Helen,
  Why must I follow thee?

Achilles came to Troyland
  And I to Chersonese:
He turned from wrath to battle,
  And I from three days’ peace.

Was it so hard, Achilles,
  So very hard to die?
Thou knewest, and I know not –
  So much the happier I.

I will go back this morning
  From Imbros over the sea;
Stand in the trench, Achilles,
  Flame-capped, and shout for me.
MACEDONIA

Rudyard Kipling (1865 – 1936)

Kipling, the greatest of the poets represented here, did not visit Gallipoli or Macedonia, but made up for this through the strength of his imagination. *Salonikan Grave* is one of the many epitaphs he wrote, which include the moving poem *My Boy Jack*, which may have been written in memory of his son John, killed in the battle of Loos in September 1915.

*Salonikan Grave*

I have watched a thousand days
Push out and crawl into night
Slowly as tortoises.
Now I, too, follow these.
It is fever, and not fight -
Time, not battle – that slays.

Owen Rutter (1889-1944)

A prolific historian, novelist and travel writer, Rutter served as Lieutenant, later Captain, in the 7th battalion the Wiltshire Regiment in France and Macedonia. His *The Song of Tiadatha*, a parody of Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, was published in instalment in the *Balkan News*, and proved very popular. It tells the story of the maturing of a dandyish young man (Tiadatha, i.e. Tired Arthur), through the experience of war.

Extract from *The Song of Tiadatha*

Had you been there when the dawn broke,
Had you looked from out the trenches,
You’d have seen that Serbian hillside,
Seen the aftermath of battle.
Seen the scattered picks and shovels,
Seen the scraps of stray equipment,
Here and there a lonely rifle,
Or a Lewis gun all twisted.
Ween the little heaps of khaki
Lying huddled on the hillside,
Huddled by the Bulgar trenches
Very still and very silent,
Nothing stirring, nothing moving,
Save a very gallant doctor
And his band of stretcher bearers
Working fearless in the open,
Giving water to the dying, 
Bringing in those broken soldiers. 
You’d have seen the sunlight streaming, 
And perhaps you would have wondered 
How the sun could still be shining, 
How the birds could still be singing...

**Gustav Holst (1874 – 1934)**

Holst, composer of *The Planets*, combined composition with teaching music at St Paul’s School for girls. He was a great friend and admirer of Ralph Vaughan Williams. In December 1918 – March 1919 he was sent by the YMCA to Salonika as their musical organiser for the Near East, lecturing, conducting choral music and teaching music to all who would take part, including servicemen and women. He laid down two rules: 1) Any pupil finding me having tea with an officer is to desturn me without fail! 2) Every man entering my room will half turn to the right and help himself to the cigarette tin. (The YMCA gave him 100 free cigarettes per week, so he was forced to introduce this second rule!) Writing home to his wife Isobel, he mentioned ‘Macedonian mending ...I wish you could see my socks that have been Macedonianly Mended. The holes have been pulled together by a single black thread that wanders from side to side rather like a river on a map.’ Holst described a weekend visiting the Struma area:

‘I was lent a continental touring car...I took a fair amount of luggage – about 50 lbs of music, a sleeping bag, two blankets, four tins of biscuits, four packets of chocolate, a Thermos flask of tea, any amount of extra clothes and a box of piano repairing instruments. The driver had a primus stove, a pistol and a bottle labelled Jamaica rum...At various camps I got out and interviewed people about lectures and choirs and so on, and in the afternoon we got right up into the mountains, and spent the night at a camp overlooking the Struma battlefield. I lectured from 6 to 7, and then be request we had a sort of sing-song plus piano recital from 8 to 9.

On Saturday we went straight over the battlefield, and the driver showed me the trenches, machine gun pits, sniping posts and all the other horrors. And then we came to where the ground had been cleared, and there we found peasants with their oxen ploughing the battlefield, and I realised I was witnessing the greatest sight on earth.

After crossing the Struma we soon got to our destination – Seres...I like it better than Salonica...We met a real live ideal Greek shepherd boy. A really beautiful lad of about 12, dressed in an embroidered coat and kilt with a red sash round his waist and beautifully worked stockings and sandals on his feet. Over all this he had his father’s goatskin coat, several sizes too big for him. We had a ‘talk in dumb show’, and I think he explained that the Bulgars had taken all their flocks, which was probably true ...’

From letter to Isobel Holst, 27 January 1919

The first all-British concert was on the 18th ...Never, never have I seen such an audience. They sat on seats, on the ground, on petrol tins, on instrument cases (the double bass one held five men and a dog), they sat among the orchestra, behind the choir and in the green
rooms, and all round the theatre people were standing from four to six deep, besides the crowd outside.
Moreover so many people had to be refused, that we were forced to repeat the concert last night.
So that about 3000 people here are at last aware that a) soldiers are prepared to take music seriously b) there is such a thing as British music.
In fact, they come and tell me so!

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Holst’s friend Vaughan Williams, the greater composer, joined the Royal Army Medical Corps, 60th Division. He served in a field ambulance group in France, near Arras, and later at the Macedonian front in 1916-17. The war had a profound effect on his music.

SHORT READING LIST

There are many anthologies of British war poetry. One of the best, containing works by most of those cited above, is Tim Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*, OUP World Classics 2014.

*Verses of a V.A.D.*, London 1918.

A P Herbert *Half-Hours at Helles*, Oxford 1916.  

Compton Mackenzie *Gallipoli Memories*, London 1929.


Sakis Serefas ‘Den upirxan Iroes edo...’: (Logotechnika Keimena kai Martyries)  
[‘There were no heroes here’: (Literary texts and testimonies), Thessaloniki, University Studio Press 1915.]