



# John Allen Wyeth: Soldier Poet

The remarkable poetry of John Allan Wyeth nearly vanished for a simple reason. The author published only one book, *This Man's Army* (1928), and then abandoned the practice of poetry. The book received excellent reviews and sold well enough to be reprinted in 1929 just as the Depression brought the great decade of American Modernism to an end. Wyeth headed to Europe where he studied painting. He enjoyed some success as an artist. He even composed music, but he never published another poem.

Obscurity is not an unusual outcome for poets. Few writers escape oblivion. What makes Wyeth's case unusual is that after eighty years of total neglect, he came back to serious attention in 2008 with the republication of his *This Man's Army* in the University of South Carolina's "Great War Series". The volume convinced everyone involved in the project that Wyeth was the most notable American poet of the First World War.

## Poetry and the Great War

The First World War changed European literature forever. The horror of modern mechanized warfare and the slaughter of nineteen million young men and innocent civilians traumatized the European imagination. For poets, the unprecedented scale of violence annihilated the classic traditions of war literature—individual heroism, military glory, and virtuous leadership. Writers struggled for a new idiom commensurate with their apocalyptic personal experience. European Modernism emerged from the trenches of the Western Front.

British poetry especially was transformed



by the trauma of trench warfare and indiscriminate massacre. The "War Poets" constitute an imperative presence in modern British literature with significant writers such as Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, David Jones, Ivor Gurney, Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, and Isaac Rosenberg. Their work, which combined stark realism and bitter irony with a sense of tragic futility, altered the history of English literature.

Similar cohorts of war poets occupy im-

portant positions in other European literatures. French literature has Charles Peguy, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Blaise Cendrars (who lost his right arm in the Second Battle of Champagne). Italian poetry has Eugenio Montale, Giuseppe Ungaretti, and Gabriella D'Annunzio. German poetry has Georg Trakl, August Stramm, and Gottfried Benn.

These scarred survivors reshaped the sensibility of modern verse. The Great War also changed literature in another brutal way; it killed countless young writers.

The War did not have the same impact on American literature because our national experience of the conflict was less prolonged and devastating. The United States was at war for less than two years, and actual combat lasted only a few months. Our poetic legacy from the Great War is negligible in comparison to the British or French. Most of the work by American soldier poets was conventional—traditional sentiments expressed in flowery language and old-fashioned forms. The work of our soldier poets feels remote from the horrific reality.

The two best known U.S. soldier poets, Joyce Kilmer and Alan Seeger, were both killed in battle. They brought a generalized and old-fashioned approach to their small body of war poems. Seeger, who died at 28, is remembered for one short poem, his romantic self-elegy, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death". Kilmer, who died at 31, was the young star of American Catholic letters, but his gentle, populist style was unsuited for the brutality of the modern battlefield. None of Kilmer's wartime verses are read today; his reputation survives on poems written before he enlisted. As war

poets, Seeger and Kilmer are minor figures by even the most generous standards.

The best American writing about the Great War is odd in two ways. First, it arrived years after the war, mostly as prose fiction from writers such as Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, E. E. Cummings, and Willa Cather. Second, none of the major writers were actual combatants, though Hemingway was wounded in Italy while running a mobile canteen as a Red Cross ambulance driver. Likewise poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who spent the war years in London, reflected the War's impact mostly indirectly in the dark vision of their postwar poems.

### An American War Poet

The importance of John Allan Wyeth's work is that it fills a gap in American literature. Here at last was a soldier poet who could be read on equal terms with the best of his British contemporaries. Wyeth's work is memorable, innovative, and distinctive. There is nothing quite like it in American literature. As Jon Stallworthy, editor of *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* and biographer of Wilfred Owen, declared, "At long last, marking the ninetieth anniversary of the Armistice, an American poet takes his place with the front rank of the War Poet's parade."

John Allen Wyeth Jr. was the privileged son of an affluent and talented family. Born in New York City in 1894, he was the third and last child of a noted surgeon, Civil War veteran, and poet. Wyeth grew up in a cultured household and attended the Lawrenceville School before entering Princeton in 1911 (from which his older brother, the celebrated architect Marion Sims Wyeth, had just graduated). At Princeton the young Wyeth studied literature and languages. He wrote for the *Nassau Literary Magazine* and became friends with fellow students, including Edmund Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald. His yearbook declared him "undecided about his future occupation".

After graduation, Wyeth drifted—unlike his diligent and pragmatic father and brother. He taught French in Arizona, then returned to graduate school at Princeton. When the U.S. entered the Great War, he enlisted as a Second Lieutenant in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division of the American Expeditionary Force. His fluency in French secured him a position in the Interpreters Corps. On May 16, 1918 Wyeth's division boarded the USS Mount Vernon in Hoboken, New Jersey and sailed to France.

*This Man's Army: A War in Fifty-Odd Sonnets* tells the story of what happened to Wyeth and the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division. The volume is a linear narrative told through fifty-five lyric moments each cast in sonnet form. The originality of the book is impressive. There is nothing like it in American literature—either in terms of the individual sonnets or the design of the total sequence. *This Man's Army* is not simply a narrative; it is a poetic documentary chronicling the journey of Wyeth's National Guard division, place by place, through wartime France toward the German border. Each poem describes an actual event in a real place. The poems are so specific that military historian B. J. Omandson was able to confirm the location

and provide dates for nearly every event described in the book.

Wyeth adds to the documentary feel of the poems by experimenting with language. He mixes English, French, and German with Army slang. Wyeth may have borrowed the notion of a polyglot poem from Pound and Eliot, but he uses the technique in a less intimidating way. The poems have the quality of reportage heightened into lyric form. They capture the odd experience of an English-speaking army surrounded by foreign landscape and languages.

Here is one sonnet in which the narrator on horseback comes to one of the ruined forts of Verdun, the site of the longest battle of the War in which over 300,000 French

### WAR IN HEAVEN

A reek of steam—the bath-house rang with cries.

“Come across with the soap.”

“Like hell, what makes you think  
it's yours?”

“Don't turn *off the water*, that ain't fair  
I'm all *covered* with soap.”

“Hurry up, get out of the way.”

“Thank God you're takin' a bath.”

“He wants to surprise  
us.”

“Oh is that so, well anyway I don't stink  
like you.”

“*Air raid!*”

We ran out into the square,  
naked and cold like souls on Judgment Day.  
Over us, white clouds blazoned on blue skies,  
and a green balloon on fire—we watched it shrink  
into flame and a fall of smoke. Around us, brute  
guns belching puffs of shrapnel in the air,  
where one plane swooping like a bird of prey  
spat fire into a dangling parachute.

—John Allen Wyeth

and Germans were killed. The poem begins as reportage but ends in a momentary vision of resurrection as the fort itself cries out in French “Let the dead rise”:

PORT DE LANDRECOURT:  
ABOVE VERDUN

An autumn ridge of dust and rust and  
slate—  
and low green banks along a wet grey  
sky.  
Deep walls and bastions in a moat of  
grass.  
S'ENSEVELIR SOUS LES RUINES  
DU FORT  
LUTOUT QUE DE SE RENDRE  
above the gate.  
My horse clatters on to the drawbridge,  
and a shy  
young sentry smiles and will not let me  
pass,  
“on ne visite pas?”  
“Sans permission?—alors,  
Je le regrette”—we grin and separate.  
Verdun below—where all those ruins  
lie.  
And in my heart a love, that almost  
kills  
to see her, gashed and militant—a  
mass  
of wreckage crying out, “Debout les  
morts”  
to all the souls that haunt her tragic  
hills.

Even in this single sonnet, Wyeth demonstrates his dexterous originality in both sound and typography. He uses capital letters to replicate the French military patriotic sign: “BURY YOURSELF IN THE RUINS OF THE FORT RATHER THAN SURRENDER.” The tragic irony of that statement would not have been lost on the poet. He likewise uses punctuation to create subtle effects. Though rhymed and metrical, the sonnet incorporates the visual effects of modernism.

The attentive reader will also notice that his Verdun poem is not a standard sonnet in either the English or Italian tradition. For *This Man's Army*, Wyeth invented a new rhyme scheme—ABCD ABCD ABE CDE—unlike any other in the form's seven hundred year history. He also omits the conventional stanza breaks common to the printed forms of both Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets. Instead, he arranges the lines differently from poem to poem as the individual piece dictates.



Wyeth also experiments with the meter of the sonnet. He combines the two most common metrical systems of English verse—traditional lines of iambic pentameter and loose five stress most commonly used in popular spoken verse.

The effect is perfect. It allows Wyeth to tighten or loosen the lines as he sees fit.

Few literary “experiments” work. *This Man's Army* did. The shifting rhythms allow Wyeth to make sudden jumps of tone or perspective without ever losing the reader.

**Wyeth and Catholicism**

Wyeth was raised as an Episcopalian and

attended a Presbyterian prep school, but he died a committed Catholic. So little documentation has survived from his post-war life that it is impossible at present to date his conversion. In his later years he composed sacred music. When his *Missa Prima* was premiered in 1974 by a 65-voice choir for the centenary of St. Edward's Church in Providence, Rhode Island, Wyeth told the Providence Journal-Bulletin that he had begun the work twenty years earlier. That remark suggests he was already a Catholic by the early 1950s. It seems clear, however, that his attraction to Catholicism was nurtured by France where he fought as a soldier and later studied painting.

*This Man's Army* describes the landscape of war, but the narrator is nonetheless alert to ubiquitous presence of French Catholicism. It may be that Wyeth himself was not fully conscious of his fascination with the faith, which he rarely expressed as overtly as in the visionary Verdun sonnet. Still, he is constantly drawn to the sacred. From the troop train he watches “the black cathedral spires / of Chartres against a low-hung lazy moon”. He laments the destruction of the churches he visits on the Western Front.

Two small episodes suggest the quiet force of Catholicism in the apocalyptic landscape of wartime France. In “MOLLIENS-AU-BOIS: THE VILLAGE ROAD”, Wyeth makes his way alone down a dark country road while an artillery battle rages in the distance. Coming upon a roadside shrine, he bares his head to “the shrine / that hallows all this stretch of road for me”.

In another poem, Wyeth meets two soldiers carrying a gas victim through the battlefield. He describes the scene tellingly, “We passed / two soldiers, pain-white, and a man they bore / between, blind twisting head and drunken knees— / like Christ.” The sonnet's title, “CHIPPILY RIDGET: THROUGH THE VALLEY”, which alludes to Psalm 23, shows Wyeth's intent to frame the documentary sonnet in religious terms as a journey through the land of death.

What these details suggest is not that Wyeth converted as a young man, only that his experiences in France began a process that eventually led him to the Roman Church. The journey must have been complicated. Wyeth was almost certainly gay, although no documentation survives concerning his sexual orientation. What we do know is that by late middle age, he was a serious Catholic. His personal journey resembles that of another war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, who was homosexual in his early



years, but eventually married and converted to Catholicism (prompted by Father Ronald Knox). Sassoon's biography is lavishly documented; Wyeth's is not. We will probably never know the details of his inner life.

### The Missing Years

There is little documentation on Wyeth after Armistice. He returned to Princeton to do graduate work in Romance Languages. He soon won a traveling fellowship to study in Belgium. After a brief return to Princeton, he returned to Europe. He disappears for several years. In 1926 he wrote his academic advisor from Rapallo, Italy to drop his doctoral studies. "I have always desired above all things", he wrote, "to try my hand at literature." It was surely no coincidence that Rapallo's most famous American resident was Ezra Pound. Wyeth's modernist revision of the sonnet suggests he learned from Pound to "make it new".

In 1932 Wyeth studied art briefly with the

Scottish painter Duncan Grant, a member of the Bloomsbury Group, and then for six years he undertook formal instruction with Jean Marchand at the Academie Moderne in Paris. Working in a post-impressionist style, Wyeth achieved modest success as a painter. He exhibited his work in Paris in the 1930s and later participated in three biennials of contemporary American paintings at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. He sold paintings through a New York gallery, but he often received financial help from his well-to-do brother.

Wyeth returned to the U.S. when World War II broke out and served in the U.S. Coast Guard. After the War, he had an itinerant existence in Europe and America. In 1974 he was living in Providence where his *Missa Prima* was performed. By then he had also joined a small circle of Rhode Island Catholic artists and intellectuals. In 1979 he moved into a family house in Skillman, New Jersey. He died there in 1981 at the age of

eighty-six. His obituaries recognized him as a noted artist; none mentioned his poetry.

"Unique" is a word mostly misused in literary criticism, but the term precisely describes Wyeth's position in American poetry. His was the one truly contemporary voice among the soldier poets of the Great War. Wyeth is not a major author—his literary career was too short. But his innovative collection, *This Man's Army*, nonetheless stands as the major work of American World War I poetry. Perhaps unpublished work by Wyeth will surface in the future to expand his legacy. In the meantime, the life of this polymathic artist provides a singular episode in the history of modern Catholic letters.

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## New Voices      New Poetry in English

Greg Lobas



### Peter in Chains

Coarse-robed and manacled.  
Heavy links drag  
On a damp stone floor,  
The simple clinking  
music of sacrifice.  
Truth is chained.  
Contrivance walks free.

The body is made of earth and water.  
Dreams, of water and wind.  
Angels, wind and fire.  
Peter awakens to the patter  
of his footsteps on the piazza,  
blinks himself aware  
for today he's been spared.

