



## War Horse Poetry

by **Tim Kendall**

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Poetry of the First World War mentions horses rarely. Hardy's 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"' and Thomas's 'As the team's head-brass' describe horses ploughing the English countryside, and there are passing references to horses at the Front in Hardy's "'And There Was a Great Calm'", Borden's 'At the Somme', Grenfell's 'Into Battle' and Gurney's 'Pain'. The last of these is particularly powerful:

Seeing the pitiful eyes of men foredone,  
Or horses shot, too tired merely to stir,  
Dying in shell-holes both, slain by the mud.

The story which comes closest to full-blown Spielbergian sentimentality, however, is told by Charlotte Fyfe in *The Tears of War*, an account of the doomed love affair between May Wedderburn Cannan and Bevil Quiller-Couch (son of Q). In August 1918, Cannan was working for a branch of M15 in the War Office Department in Paris. Two days after the Armistice, she became engaged to Bevil Quiller-Couch, who had come to Paris on leave to propose. Having survived the War and won the Military Cross, Quiller-Couch rejoined his battery in Germany early in 1919, but became ill in early February, and died of pneumonia following flu. The poems in Cannan's second book, *The Splendid Days*, chart the descent from the exhilaration of the Armistice and reciprocated love, to the devastation caused by her fianc's death.

Q acquired his son's warhorse, Peggy, at auction, and brought her back to Fowey where she lived out her remaining years. On first meeting her, Q felt the bond: 'Whether or not she detected something familiar in my footstep when I went into the loose box, she was waiting for me. Took no notice of the stableman, but came straight to me, snuffled me all over the chest and then bent down her neck like "Royal Egypt". While I stroked her, she nuzzled my wrist and back of my other hand... It sounds silly, but it seemed as if the creature really did know something and was trying to say it.'

May remained close to her would-have-been father-in-law, and rode Peggy on her visits to Fowey. She wrote a 32-line poem called 'Riding', which is published only in *The Tears of War*:

The roads are narrow in Cornwall and set between  
Stiff wind-cropped hedges that shelter as you ride;  
They were sadder roads and bare that he knew in France  
The poplars on each side...

He must have ridden her often, felt the lilt

Of the sure swift strength moving between his knees,  
And I came near him a second, riding so,  
Dreams, but Love lives by these.

Any other horses?

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