



## **The Poet's Brother, or 'A death in the family': the experience of mourning and commemoration in the Sassoon family**

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### **Introduction**

Almost fifty years after his death<sup>[1]</sup> Siegfried Sassoon continues to exert a powerful influence on British viewpoints of the history of the Great War. As a chronic post-war '*revenant*' he established, especially via his prose reconstructions of his fictionalised and real self, an unbreakable link with that cataclysmic event. But it was his earlier poetic output as a soldier-participant, variously condemning the failures of politics and religion and highly critical of military incompetence, which has proved particularly influential in spreading a, by now, well received orthodoxy. A view of the conflict as one which was as futile as it was inhumane and disastrous. Anger is naturally accepted as a crucial ingredient informing his 'art?', but relatively little reference has been made to the effect of an intimate personal tragedy which, in part, pre-disposed him to this attitude of rage and protest: the impact of the death, just over 100 years ago, of his younger brother, who saw and fully experienced the reality of 'war' well before Siegfried had ever reached the firing line.

### **The death**

At the beginning of November 1915 an official telegram<sup>[2]</sup> was received by Mrs Theresa Sassoon at her home, '*Weirleigh?*', near Paddock Wood, in Kent. The contents informed her, in the tersest War Office prose, that the youngest of her three sons had been wounded whilst on active service in Gallipoli. Though clearly the cause for distress, the communication contained a glimmer of hope; the extent of the injuries was not stated. In the absence of precise details Theresa may have conjectured at least the possibility of her damaged son's survival. But any such hopes were dashed a mere two days later. Hard on the heels of the first telegram a second had been despatched, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1915, which informed Mrs Sassoon that Hamo had died on board the hospital ship '*Kildonan Castle*'. This deeply upsetting message also provided brutal details of the nature of Hamo's injuries: '*gunshot wound, left leg, compound fracture & tibia and fibia.*'<sup>[3]</sup> Hamo had in fact died on the very day that Theresa had learnt he had been wounded.

### **Hamo**

The youngest of the three Sassoon brothers, Hamo was born on 4 August 1887<sup>[4]</sup>. Educated privately then at Marlborough and Clare College, Cambridge, he developed a flair for mathematics and for all things mechanical, creative and scientific. Inclined at first to architecture in the end he opted for civil engineering as a career and, following his degree, worked first for the family firm of Thornycrofts before journeying to Argentina to build breakwaters and bridges in the area of the River Plate with the engineering and construction firm Messrs Walker

& Company. Following the outbreak of war in 1914, like hundreds of other British professionals working abroad, he abandoned his career and returned to England to enlist. He joined the Royal Engineers, and obtained his commission in June 1915. He left for Gallipoli with the 1/1<sup>st</sup> West Riding Field Company on 17 August and landed on the Peninsula in early October, when the campaign to force the Straits and '*knock Turkey out of the war*' was in a state of disastrous inertia following the failure of the Suvla offensives in August. His active service career was very short. On the night of 28<sup>th</sup> October, during wiring operations in front of the British positions, Hamo was shot in the leg ' an incident that was recorded starkly in the unit's War Diary: '*Casualties: 2/Lt. H Sassoon wounded; 6 sick.*'[\[5\]](#) Though gravely damaged, Hamo managed to crawl back into a frontline trench. After having his wound dressed he was moved back, first to the Field Ambulance (where his wound was deemed to be very serious) then to a Casualty Clearing Station. He was transferred to the '*Kildonan Castle*' on 1<sup>st</sup> November, and died on board that vessel following the amputation of his leg; he was buried at sea that same evening.

## First reactions

The shock of Hamo's death to Theresa Sassoon was intense and only added to her anxieties about Siegfried who was just about to leave England for service on the Western Front with the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Siegfried himself attempted to resolve his feelings about the loss of his brother via poetry but his subsequent effort, dated 18 December 1915, entitled '*Brothers*' displayed, by all accounts, nothing more than a competence in formally restrained and entirely conventional commemoration. [\[6\]](#)

It was only following Sassoon's experience of active service life in France, in the early part of 1916, and the distressing arbitrary loss, in the normal weekly 'wastage' of trench warfare, of his close friend David Thomas (the '*Dick Tiltwood*' of '*Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*'?[\[7\]](#)), that he determined to allow his accumulated grief a physical outlet in vindictive violence (i.e. 'killing Germans?') and channel his writing towards the poetry of angry protest. The death of 'Tommy' (who died on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1916) was also a means of re-experiencing and acknowledging the death of Hamo, as a chance encounter, a week later, with a Royal Engineers officer (called Sisson) who knew Hamo well and who shared fond reminiscences about him only compounded Siegfried's misery.[\[8\]](#)

## Spiritualism

Meanwhile at home, especially following the return of Hamo's personal effects (see *Appendix*), Theresa, an isolated figure at the best of times, retreated into a state of morbid introspection and grief. She turned her dead son's room into a shrine and became increasingly drawn to the dubious consolations of Spiritualism, which at the time (and especially after the publication of Sir Arthur Lodge's '*Raymond: or life and death*' in 1916) enjoyed something of a boom as countless numbers of bereft parents sought to make sense of the sudden and painful loss of their loved ones. A loss made more difficult to bear in many instances by the absence of a grave at which to mourn. Theresa's commitment to psychic communication with her dead son deeply depressed Siegfried and indirectly became the cause of a much later, post-war, rift between himself and his fellow ex-Royal Welch Fusilier and war poet friend, Robert Graves. This occurred in late 1929, on the publication of Graves' autobiography, '*Good Bye to All That*'. This notorious work included a remarkable though unattributed description of his stay with Sassoon at 'Weirleigh' during the late summer of 1916 during which Graves claimed to have experienced a particularly uncomfortable and sleepless first night, being several times disturbed by unaccountably diabolic shrieks and loud bumps.[\[9\]](#) It would appear that he had been allocated a bedroom near Hamo's old room, which had been so carefully preserved by Theresa and fitted out with her son's old kit. Graves's lively description of his temporary accommodation (barely disguised as that of the home of an anonymous '*First Battalion friend*'?) also depicted a mother besotted by grief and clearly obsessed with making contact with the spirit of her dead soldier son. This breach of decorum and caricature of his mother (who by 1929 was fragile and unwell) so upset Siegfried that he confronted Graves's publisher, Jonathan Cape, with a

view to getting the offending passages removed; it also was the cause of a falling-out between Sassoon and Graves that lasted many years.<sup>[10]</sup> By then of course Siegfried may have forgotten how personally distasteful he found his mother's wartime refuge in spiritualism; certainly his diary entry for 23 January 1917 pulled no punches, as he fixes upon on what he sees as a weakness among many women, including his mother, who try to forget the horrors of war by 'clinging to the dead'.<sup>[11]</sup>

## **Marlborough College and John Bain**

Hamo's loss was also felt and acknowledged outside the family ' notably by his old school, Marlborough College, of which he was one of 749<sup>[12]</sup> old boys and staff who were killed between 1914 and 1918. After the war a large sum of money was collected to build a Memorial Hall, while during its course a ritual was established to pay individual tributes to the school's war dead by publishing poems celebrating their characters, virtues and sacrifice.<sup>[13]</sup> John Bain, former form master of the Army Class was the most prolific author of these.<sup>[14]</sup> In the June 1917 edition of '*The Marlburian*' Bain included a poem in memory of Hamo Sassoon.<sup>[15]</sup>

Prior to its publication, Siegfried was sent a draft of Bain's tribute and a critical appraisal of the poem was included in his reply (dated 12 May 1917) which now forms part of the Sassoon papers in the IWM's Department of Documents.<sup>[16]</sup> It is in this letter, far more than in the conventional lines of his poem '*Brothers?*', that Siegfried conveyed not only a deeply affectionate character study of his late brother but a far more accessible and humane sense of love and sorrow for the loss of a single life amidst the vast impersonal destructiveness of the Great War.

In his letter he acknowledges that the poem touched him deeply, and comments on how well it captures Hamo's essential nature. He suggests his brother would have liked the idea of being buried at sea, and offers a couple of suggestions for how the poem could be changed to reflect this.

John Bain absorbed these suggestions but the final lines of his poem were definitely his own:

O rest you well, young mountaineer,  
Tomb'd by the lonely, wine-dark sea!

Commemorations to Hamo crop up at odd times in Siegfried's continual prose re-workings of his own life; very notably a reference to his brother's death comes, entirely out of context, in the first volume of his 'real' autobiography, '*The Old Century*' (published 1938), when musing on a blissful Norfolk summer holiday in the 1890s, Sassoon ramblingly transports his readers into the future and allows himself an opportunity to express his continuing anger for Hamo's untimely death (and all the injustices of the war) after chancing upon (in 1937) a memorial inscription on the lych-gate at Edington Church, commemorating a soldier 'who went down in the torpedoed Transport Royal Edward in the Aegean Sea, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1915.'<sup>[17]</sup> The lych-gate becomes for him yet another portal to the past and thoughts of Hamo being mortally wounded on Gallipoli, stirred by the coincidental reference to drowning in the Aegean, re-awaken all the old anger about '*The donkeys who made the Great War?*'<sup>[18]</sup>

## **Resting places**

Hamo Sassoon was lost in a campaign little regarded in this country and one seemingly doomed to failure. His quiet exit within the context of a classic military tragedy was in huge contrast to the dramatic upheavals marking the service life of Siegfried. Hamo's death, from which his mother never really recovered, at first

contributed to his brother's powerful urge for vengeful action, manifested in displays of foolhardy daring in the trenches, and fuelled the ironic protests of his intimidating verse. Their contrasting lives and war experiences are in a sense mirrored by the physical memorials commemorating their deaths. Siegfried, having trod a complex and often unhappy path to self-acceptance, spiritual reconciliation[19] and personal peace, died, an aged and respected figure, on 1 September 1967. He lies buried, amidst the great and the good, in the quintessentially English churchyard at Mells in Somerset. Dying young, virtually unknown, and unobtrusively buried at sea, Hamo's name, together with those of over 21,000 other combatants with no known grave, is recorded simply on the *Helles Memorial to the Missing*, a gaunt 30 metre-high obelisk, at the windblown southernmost tip of the far off Gallipoli peninsula.

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## **Postscript**

July 2010 marked the dedication of the Spiritualists' first memorial to members that have served in the UK armed forces, which was unveiled at the National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, Staffordshire. Proposed and funded by the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU), it followed a number of unsuccessful attempts to have Spiritualists represented at the Cenotaph and Remembrance Day parade and the SNU's determination to create a lasting memorial to all Spiritualists who have served and continue to serve.[20]

## **APPENDIX**

National Archives file FO 917/1767 includes a list of Hamo's personal effects 'as presented by the Committee of Adjustment Malta, 10 November 1915'. The items (listed as articles 'of sentimental value' and presumably returned, with other items of kit, to his mother) were:

2 pipes; 1 safety razor in case; 2 pocket books; 1 leather case; 1 compass; 1 whistle; 2 leather straps; 2 stars; 3 RE buttons; 1 silver tobacco box; 1 purse containing 4d; 1 cheque book; 1 wrist watch.

## **SOURCES**

Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, catalogue number Documents.1610: letters from Siegfried Sassoon to John Bain, former master at Marlborough College, held by the IWM's,

National Archives document reference: WO 95/4309, War Diary of the 1/1 West Riding Field Company Royal Engineers (later became 455 Field Coy RE), 29th Division, Feb 1915 - Feb 1916

National Archives document reference WO 339/45966, Hamo Sassoon's service papers (includes copies of the 2 telegrams sent to his mother

National Archives document reference FO 917/1767, re. the estate of Hamo Sassoon; includes list of personal effects.

*The Marlburian*, Vol LII, No.775, 21 June 1917, pp. 89-90

*Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves, Jonathan Cape, 1929, pp. 289-90

?*Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918?*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber & Faber, 1983.

?*The Sassoons?*, Stanley Jackson, Heinemann, London, 1968, pp. 133 and 160

?*Siegfried Sassoon. The Making of a War Poet. A biography 1886-1918?*, Jean Moorcroft Wilson, Duckworth & Co, 1998

*The Great War and the Missing Muse. The Early Writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon*, Patrick J Quinn, Susquehanna University Press, (Associated University Presses), 1994

?*Siegfried Sassoon and the Art of Autobiography?*, thesis submitted for the Degree of Bachelor of Letters in the University of Oxford by Hilary B Reid, 1970

?*Siegfried Sassoon?*, John Stuart Roberts, Richard Cohen Books, London, 1999.

?*The Old Century and Seven More Years?*, Siegfried Sassoon, Faber & Faber, 1938, pp. 92-93; pp. 125-127; p. 252.

?*Robert Graves ' His Life and Work?*, Robert Seymour Smith, Paladin, 1982.

?*Two Fusiliers: the First World War friendship of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon?*, Martin Taylor (Imperial War Museum Review No7, c.1992)

?*Siegfried Sassoon. The Making of a War Poet. (A Biography 1886-1918?*, Jean Moorcroft Wilson, Duckworth, 1998

'*Spiritualists commemorated*', in 'The Legion Magazine', Royal British Legion, September 2010, p.14

## **FOOTNOTES**

[1] 1<sup>st</sup> September 1967

[2] Copy held by the National Archives, under WO 339/45966

[3] Copy held by the National Archives under WO 339/45966

[4] Siegfried Sassoon. *The Making of a War Poet. A Biography (1886-1918)*, Jean Moorcroft Wilson, Duckworth, 1998, p.38. The birth date, '4 August 1887' is also confirmed by the Marlborough College 'Roll of Honour'. The year of birth given for Hamo's entry in De Ruvigny's 'Roll of Honour' (Part 2, p.269) is '1888'.

[5] WO 95/4309: War Diary of the 1/1 West Riding Field Company Royal Engineers, 29th Division, Feb 1915 - Feb 1916; held by the National Archives

[6] Published in the Saturday Review 26 Feb 1916; later re-titled '*To my Brother?*'

[7] *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*, Siegfried Sassoon, Faber & Faber, 1929 illustrated edition, pp287-88

[8] *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber & Faber, 1983, p46

[9] *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves, Jonathan Cape, 1929, pp. 289-90

[10] *The Great War and the Missing Muse?*, Patrick J Quinn, Susquehanna University Press, 1994, pp 25-6

[11] Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918, op cit., p. 125 Digital image at <http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-09852-00001-00008/66>

[12] <http://archive.marlboroughcollege.org/>

[13] Letter to author from Dr T E Rogers, Archivist, Marlborough College, 23 January 2004. A particular debt of gratitude is owed to Dr Rogers for his generous assistance.

[14] John Bain, scholar of Winchester and New College Oxford; taught at Marlborough from 1879-1913, with a short absence from 1883-6. He died in 1929. (Letter from Dr T E Rogers, ibid)

[15] 'The Marlburian?', Vol LII, No. 775, 21 June 1917, pp. 89-90

[16] Letters from SS to John Bain, former master at Marlborough College, held by the IWM's Department of Documents, Catalogue number: Documents.1610

[17] The Old Century and seven more years?, Siegfried Sassoon, Faber and Faber, 1938, pp. 125-126

[18] Ibid, p.127

[19] He was received into the Catholic Church at Downside Abbey on 14 August 1957

[20] 'The Legion?', journal of the Royal British Legion, September 2010, p.14

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