

Isaac Rosenberg

Because of a chest complaint Rosenberg was on holiday in Africa in August 1914. When war was declared he wrote to his friend Edward Marsh, “By the time you get this the war will only just have begun, I’m afraid. Europe will have stepped into its bath of blood.”

Although he was unsuited to military service – being very small, very absent-minded and having weak lungs – he volunteered to fight at the end of October, 1915, two months before conscription was brought in.

His first attempt was to join the Royal Army Medical Corps as a stretcher bearer, but he was rejected because he was so tiny. In late December he wrote to Edward Marsh,

I never joined the army from patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over.

ON RECEIVING NEWS OF WAR

Snow is a strange white word.
No ice or frost
Has asked of bud or bird
For Winter’s cost.

Yet ice and frost and snow
From earth to sky
This Summer land doth know.
No man knows why.

In all men’s hearts it is.
Some spirit old
Hath turned with malign kiss
Our lives to mould.

Red fangs have torn His face.
God’s blood is shed.
He mourns from His lone place
His children dead.

O! ancient crimson curse!
Corrode, consume.
Give back this universe
Its pristine bloom.

Isaac Rosenberg, Capetown, 1914

Wilfred Owen – “My life is worth more than my death to Englishmen.”

When Owen, living in France, first mentioned the war in one of his letters it was near the end of August.

The war affects me less than it ought. . . I can do no service to anybody by agitating for news or making dole over the slaughter . . . I feel my own life all the more precious and more dear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe.

On 2nd December 1914 he wrote to his mother,

The *Daily Mail* speaks very, movingly about the “duties shirked” by English young men. I suffer a good deal of shame. But while those ten thousand lusty louts go on playing football I shall go on playing with my little axiom:- that my life is worth more than my death to Englishmen.

1914

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
 With perishing great darkness closes in.
 The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
 Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
 Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
 Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin
 Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
 The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
 And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
 An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
 A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
 But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
 Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.

Wilfred Owen

Drafted in southern France in late 1914.

Eventually, on 15th May 1915, Owen returned to England and encountered all the psychological pressures to enlist. His brother Harold, wrote of this experience:

being branded with lack of courage and the ostracism which would follow – this prospect and all its consequences he found appalling, and much more frightening than the horrid thought of army discipline.