
The War Poets Collection at Craiglockhart

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Edinburgh Napier is a modern, vibrant university with around 17,000 students who are taught over three main campuses located in different parts of the city. However, one campus in particular, Craiglockhart, has a unique place in local and national history and a fascinating story to tell.

When the university purchased the former Craiglockhart College of Education in 1984, we did more than just accommodate expanding academic needs: we also acquired a piece of history. The building first opened in 1880 as a hydropathic establishment but, more importantly, it had been requisitioned for use as a hospital during the First World War, between 1916 and 1919. It was here in Craiglockhart War Hospital during the summer of 1917 that the two most celebrated soldier-poets of the Great War, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, met and worked together. Within these walls, some of their greatest war poetry was conceived and written and their resulting friend-

ship was to have a significant and lasting effect on literature, ultimately influencing our view of the war.

Familiar poems taught in schools around the country, such as 'Dulce et decorum est' and 'Anthem for doomed youth', were written by Wilfred Owen during his time as a patient. Sassoon, already a published poet, realised the talents of his young friend and encouraged Owen to 'sweat your guts out' writing poetry. Continuing interest in Craiglockhart's place in literary history made it evident that the university has a responsibility and an opportunity to preserve, protect and promote its unique history. To this end, the university's Information Services were tasked with developing the War Poets Collection, which was established on 11 November 1988, the 70th anniversary of the armistice.

The acquisitions policy was initially concerned only with first editions and significant works by or relating to Owen and Sassoon and selected historical and sociological materials providing a context for their poetry. Robert Graves also played a part in the Craiglockhart story, as he was detailed to escort Sassoon to Edinburgh but unfortunately missed the train! Happily, Graves did subsequently visit his friend in hospital, so his works are represented too. Over the next three years a small special collection comprising around three hundred selected purchases and generous donations gradually took shape. It was housed in a modest wooden bookcase in the campus library and a small exhibition case in the main corridor. Visitors were generally individuals with an interest in the poets themselves. However, all this was about to change following the publication of Pat Barker's novel, *Regeneration*, in 1991.

The work of the doctors dealing with the shell-shocked officers at Craiglockhart was important and ground-breaking at the time. Significant advances were made in the treatment and understanding of neurasthenia (shell-shock) and in the development of military psychiatry. The theme of Pat Barker's novel was the enduring friendship between Sassoon and his doctor, the eminent anthropologist and psychiatrist Dr William H. R. Rivers. *Regeneration* was a huge success, both in print and on the big screen, bringing Craiglockhart to the attention of the contemporary generation. Although the collection had been used as a source of information for academics and enthusiasts for some years, interest increased and the questions diversified to encompass many other aspects of Craiglockhart's past, particularly the



medical staff and the early days of the hydro-pathic hospital. Our collection development policy had to be enhanced to include information covering these aspects of Craiglockhart and the problem of basic, insecure housing for an expanding collection addressed. In 2001, the Craiglockhart campus was scheduled to close in order to undergo a major redevelopment, thus enhancing facilities to fit the demands of modern teaching methods. Although there were only 34 visitors to the collection that year, the development project

presented the perfect opportunity for Information Services to consider how best to display the collection in expectation of increasing interest.

When the campus re-opened in 2005, the new library was located in the modern part of the building, which was not the most appropriate place for this special collection: it had always been located in the original building, and the historic location was vital for visitors. The original entrance and exit area of the 1880 building offered





a better space in which to develop a totally new exhibition, as it has a strong sense of history, with its original marble-tiled floor and huge wooden front doors. The generous support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and individual donors raised £125,000. This meant that it was possible to create a purpose-built exhibition area to house the items themselves, with museum-grade display cases and the potential to include audio-visual information. University staff worked closely with designers Studio SP and multi-media specialists CMC Associates to create an exhibition that provides a glimpse into the many facets of Craiglockhart's history. Dedicated web pages were developed, including information aimed at school students and other potential visitors (www.napier.ac.uk/warpoets/). We do hope that the exhibition and materials in the collection will offer the visitor a unique insight into the motivations of Sassoon and Owen and promote a greater understanding of the important personal, social and medical achievements that occurred within these walls.

The BBC's Special Correspondent, Allan Little, opened the dedicated exhibition area in November 2005. There has been a huge increase in visitor numbers since the fledgling collection of 1988: from just 34 in 2001–2002 to 349 in 2012 – a ten-fold increase. Individual visits remain popular, but now a significant proportion is as part of an arranged group visit with a talk, usually ending with a question-and-answer session. Literary societies, schools and university students from the UK and all over the world make the pilgrimage to hear the poetry, listen to the stories and stand in the footprints of giants. The media takes an interest in Craiglockhart's history and the dedicated exhibition has proved to be invaluable as a focus for conversations about the literature and medical treatments during WW1.

The university is planning to stage plays and host events throughout the four-year period of centenary commemorations of the First World War. We are hoping to raise funds so that we can enhance not only the physical exhibition space but also investigate better ways of self-guiding, perhaps developing a War Poets Collection App that would help promote wider access.

The staff and the treatments developed and employed at Craiglockhart War Hospital were important, and changed the lives of many of the officers who became overwhelmed by the events they had witnessed during the war.

As 2014 approaches, we are reminded of a line from Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an infantry officer*: 'It was all in a day's work – an exhausted Division returning from the Somme offensive – but for me it was as though I had seen an army of ghosts. It was as though I had seen the War as it might be envisioned by the mind of some epic poet a hundred years hence.'¹

Beyond 2018 the collection will continue to serve as a reminder of Craiglockhart's significant history. To quote Sassoon: '*Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget*'.²

SOURCES

- 1 Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an infantry officer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) p 76
- 2 Siegfried Sassoon, 'Aftermath'