



But is this right? Should our perception and understanding of the great conflicts of the twentieth century and beyond be shaped by a handful of poets who came from a very particular social milieu and who had very particular experiences and perspectives? Recently the poet Ian McMillan has asked “It is easy to assume that the powerful words of this young man from Shropshire captured the true experience of the war. But is that assumption right? Or has our focus on poems like Owen’s distorted our view of the war?” McMillan points to a plethora of poetry written from the trenches which shared Brooke’s more jingoistic vision, sometimes expressed through explicit anti-German feeling, as well as to poets such as Padre Woodbine Willie who wrote about everyday concerns such as where the next rum ration was coming from. There are also female poets from the period who wrote about the war and its impact on them individually and on the society they lived in such as Charlotte Mew.



Have we relied too much on the force and feeling of war poets such as Owen to be the barometer of our understanding of the war? Does this do justice to either our political insight or

the poetry written by those who experienced the war? Do we need to expand the canon of First World War poets to hear more voices and see more reflections and perspectives than we have? At the same time, how cautious should we be of demoting in importance some of the greatest, most moving poetry ever written?



And how should we approach poetry written about later wars, from 100 Poets Against the War to David Harsent's Legion? Can poets give us insight into war that political analysis and social commentary cannot? Is all contemporary poetry about war protest poetry? If so, is this the most valid way of arguing against war? From the First World War on, does the emotional and lyrical force of poetry drown out the cool-headed, political, social and economic analysis needed to understand the causes and consequences of war? What is the role of the First World War poets and later poets in reflecting and shaping our understanding of wars?

---

## Some background readings and viewing

[Has poetry distorted our view of World War One?](#) BBC iWonder series

[Reframing First World War poetry](#) , by Santanu Das, British Library

[We talk of the 'sacrifice' of the First World War, but we have lost our sense of what that word means](#) , by Daniel Hannan, The Telegraph 19 April 2014

---

Watch video of the speaker and audience comments below. Thanks to Dan Clayton the [documentary filmmaker](#) from Leeds for this.

---

## Discussion Partners

# Rochdale Literature & Ideas Festival

Expand your mind

The [Rochdale Literature and Ideas Festival](#) is possible because of the generous bequest of **Mr and Mrs Maskew**

. A truly inspirational couple, Annie Cockcroft and Frank Maskew met in Rochdale Library in the early 1950s. The couple shared a profound love of literature and philosophy and inspired others through knowledge and learning. They were a happy and complementary team who enjoyed 26 years together before Frank died in 1981. When Annie herself passed away in 2006 a bequest was made for the purchase of literature and philosophy resources.

The Maskew's relationship and progressive thinking formed the basis of their legacy - **The Maskew Collection**

- left to the people of Rochdale to inspire future generations in the joy of reading and thinking. The bequest is was used to help establish the Rochdale Literature and Ideas Festival in 2013 and is being used to support it in 2014.



This discussion is a satellite event of the prestigious [Battle of Ideas](#) 2014 weekend festival of ideas being held on 18 and 19 October 2014, hosted by the Barbican, London. Now in its tenth year, the Battle of Ideas festival comprises 350 speakers at 75 debates and satellite discussions confronting society's big issues and unresolved questions. It affords the opportunity for some clear thinking, rational debate and agenda-setting - above all, it's future-orientated, whilst retaining a healthy regard for the past achievements of humanity.