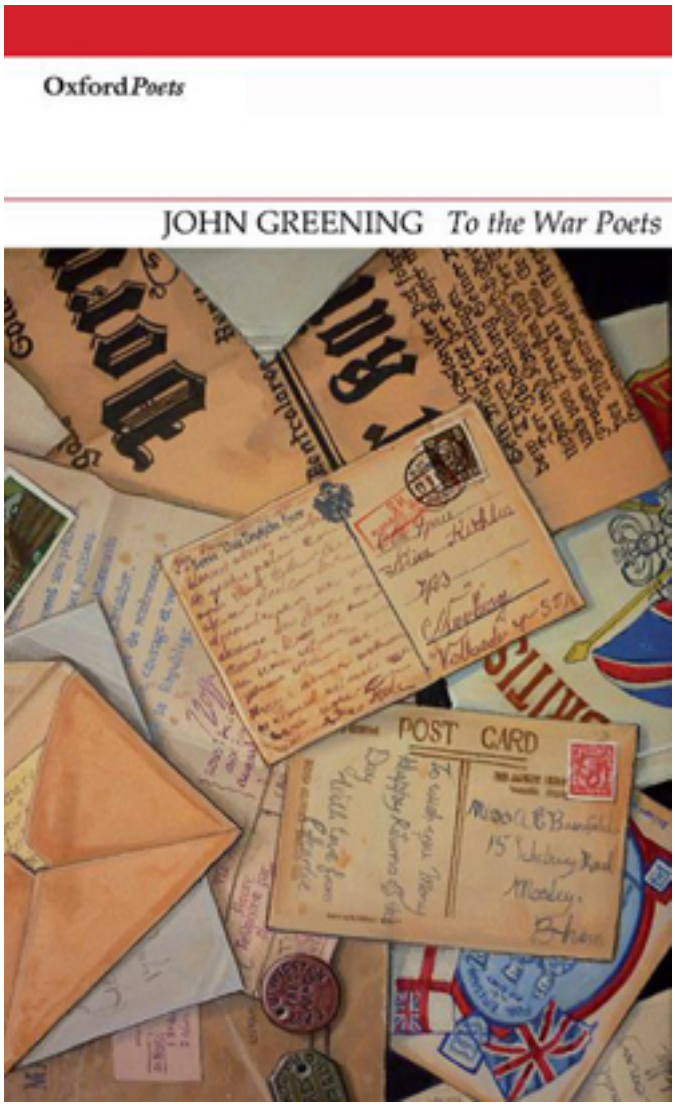

To The War Poets by John Greening

Published by Carcanet Press

Reviewed by Denis Joe December 2014

"*Something occurred in 1914 that makes it very challenging to grasp the century to come*."

Frank Furedi

“. . . the war’s going on still . . .”
To Edmund Blunden

We can easily find the theme of World War One in plenty of art forms: film and novels are two obvious examples. The theme tells us a straight forward story (***All Quiet on the Western Front***). We will have a clear idea of what is being conveyed to us. But poetry is different. Things are not as clear cut and we are made to suspend our conception of reality and meaning when we engage with a poem. Or at least that is how a poem should work. Even the poetry of **Owen** , **Sassoon** , **Rosenberg** , etc., is not as straight forward as it may appear. Though we can assume that those great men were trying to convey the everyday living of war, we can never be certain. One could just as well see the war as a metaphor for the latest stage of capitalism at that time: Mass war; mass production. In the same manner that the worker became a part of the mechanics of the factory the soldiers became a part of the machinery of war.

It is probably that which keeps the work of the War Poets alive: Their poetry spoke not to their comrades in the trenches, nor to the folks back home, but to the generations to come. This is captured wonderfully, in **Isaac Rosenberg**’s poem ***The Immortals***:

I killed them, but they would not die.
Yea! All the day and all the night
For them I could not rest nor sleep,
Nor guard from them nor hide in flight

The words could have been written about the horrors that were the Second World War. Too many poets, since, seem intent on trying to capture an idea of ‘what it was like’. To a certain extent we can see that approach even in **Andrew Motion**’s ***The Five Acts of Harry Patch 'The Last Fighting Tommy*** '. So it is refreshing to come across this volume of poems from John Greening. None of the poems in this volume make any pretence in attempting to capture some sort of feeling of the war, as one critic put it: “These are not poems as history lessons.” There is no *faux rage* about the slaughter of so many men, instead **Greening** takes us on a journey through the century still recovering from the upheaval of that war.

To The War Poets contains a series of verse letters, addressed to the poets of the First World War; not only British poets, but also those who fought on the opposite side. ***To August Stramm***, ***George Trakl***, ***Ernst Stadler***, ***Georg Heym*** suggests the importance of these German poets. We are never quite sure where and when we are. One moment we are swiping our plastic card on the steel door to “get to sleep”. The next minute we are back on the battlefield:

Over forty thousand in this
square of earth, taped
as if for a crime scene.

The lines suggest a distaste for the War (or wars in general) and yet do so from the distance of the 21th century. Similarly with ***To Siegfried Sassoon***:

No need to fantasise a tank
coming down the stalls, it's all
on the hotel TV . . .

And yet the sound and fury of war runs through many of the poems:

The winter storm's mad organ playing
is like the Volk*'s dark fury,*

[On the Eastern Front]

The screams of the grown-not-old
They hover on the edge because

there is a centimetre of mud,
because the tunnels are scary,

[To Laurence Binyon]

In one group of poems, ***The Music Group***, **Greening** captures the celebration of the war at home:

. . . when you have conjured up a tune
that will knock 'em flat

[Elgar]

Greening realises that there is no need for dramatics to put across the *feel* of war; in this sense he displays a great deal of respect for his audience: allowing them to respond to his poetry in their own way and at their own time. In doing so he captures the humanity of the war poets, who, in their own way, also rejected hysteria in regards to their own work, and in many ways gave a feeling of ordinariness to their experience of the war (see my essay *The Sound of Distant Drums*).

Edward Thomas is usually grouped alongside the War Poets, though that is disputable. **Thomas** wrote very little poetry about the war. For example in his poem ***This is no Case of Petty Right and Wrong*** , we feel a disgust and utter contempt for the war, but that poem seems to be a response to newspaper articles rather than any participation in the War. But he did fight and he died in the War in 1917. He did leave a diary of his experience. In his last entry there were a few lines, which may well have developed into a poem; one that could very well have been a *War Poem* , in the sense of Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, etc.

Where any turn may lead to Heaven
Or any corner may hide Hell
Roads shining like river up hill after rain.

See Collected Poems, Faber and Faber, 2004. . 173]

In the poem ***To Edward Thomas***, **Greening** informs the poet that he is going to look for his grave “at Agny”, not expecting to find Thomas “at Tyne Cot or on the wall of names”. In two lines **Greening** captures the pathetic loss of Thomas (and perhaps the loss of all lives) thus:

You died at an observation post.
You looked and looked and saw the detail
we did not.

The Mound at Sutton Hoo is one of the best poems I have come across in years. It takes us through the past century, without heed to order. We flit from one decade to another and yet **Greening** ensures that we do not get lost. Like all of the poems in this collection, **Greening**'s artistry shines through, and the sheer gorgeousness of lines such as:

When Basil Brown, part sideshow novelty,
Part shaman, came prodding his Chaplincy

into a mound and found (to the whirr of a 30s
cine-camera) he could turn old rivets

into a longship –

or

‘They reconstructed me,’ says the acid that bites
behind the silver mask in the exhibition room

‘and chased into my surface the images of war . . .’

or

Do you hear the strings of something for harp
that could be Britten?

The play on names such as **Chaplin** and **Britten** is a fine example of the care and humour that **Greening**
puts into his work. As we near the end of the centenary of the start of World War One we wonder at what it all means to us today. There have been a good few publications and broadcasts on the War over the year. Although
Greening
’s collection was published on Armistice Day 2013, it had its place in 2014.

Yet ***To The War Poets*** is not a collection of poems *about* World War One, but takes as its theme the decades after the war. It is a volume of contemporary poetry in the truest sense that I hope will be read in many years to come, alongside the works of the War Poets.

There is a great line from **Sassoon**'s poem, ***Return of the Heroes***, that says much about the post WW1 years and echoes back to us now and says much about the decline of Britain and the Empire and its gradual impotency that we are made aware of every day by the so-called ‘ **War on Terror** ’:

They must *feel sad to know they can't win any more*
Great Victories!

Watch the video of Greening Greening on the speakers panel at the Manchester Salon discussion in October 2014 by clicking on this ' Writers and War ' link.