# English Giant Poets in First World War
# Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and Keith Barnes (1934-1969)

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Poetry! The gift of God, Poetry is the best way of expressing oneself and when a soldier writes poetry in war by describing the realistic scene of war it becomes a master piece.

There are good reasons for looking at these two English poets together. Both died too young, Owen at 25 and Barnes at 34, both were great admirers of Keats who also died at the age of 25. The causes of these early deaths are not the same, but in each case are entirely in accord with their time. Keats died in Rome in 1821, of tuberculosis inaccurately described as 'romantic', Owen in 1918 in France, laid low by a hail of machine-gun fire in the attempt to cross the Sambre canal with his company exactly a week before the armistice, while Barnes, in Paris, was swept away in three weeks by unstoppable leukaemia.

And the silence of a poet who has died too soon is deafening in that anyone who has been touched by his voice can never accept that he is silent for ever and can never rest until it is heard. We can read Wilfred Owen today because Siegfried Sassoon — also an officer in the First World War, who returned from the front and was in the same hospital near Edinburgh as Owen in 1917, who became his friend and was also a poet, who had made the war and the horrors of war the subject for his poetry — opened the way for his work to be published, enabled the publication of four of his poems in *The Nation* in his lifetime and then ensured the publication of his work in 1920 and 1921.

The reason that Keith Barnes's voice is also heard today is that, not content with what was published in his lifetime (several poems in the United Kingdom, the United States and France, in *The Times Literary Supplement, The Observer, Time & Tide, Tribune, Ambit, New Republic, Mademoiselle, Les Lettres Nouvelles*, and also his first collection of poems, *Born to Flying Glass* (1967), published in New York by Harcourt, Brace & World), I have persisted both in translating his collected poetry and in seeking, in *K.B.* (published by Maurice Nadeau in 1987 in Paris), to restore his 'image', his life, our life, the sequence and development of his writing and, finally, it is because I am determined it make it heard and known.

Keith Barnes read Wilfred Owen and deeply appreciated his work, as one of the great sources of his inspiration — no doubt because what he had lived through in the London Blitz of 1940 and later, when the V2 rockets were hammering London once again, enabled him to understand and to feel deeply the experience and feelings of Owen, whose four months of 'active' war and five weeks in the front line had shaped his most fully developed poems. He also admired his straightforward and direct style.

But in addition, when we look more closely, we see that they have much in common. Owen was born in Shropshire, the county to which Barnes was evacuated, as were many London children, after the Blitz; both, although they demonstrated gifts and interest in music and the arts — all arts — attended technical schools, their fathers being, in Owen's case, a railway official and, in Barnes's case, a telephone technician. Owen's mother painted and Barnes as well with his grandfather, both loved life, neither of them foresaw an early death …

Both were totally committed to their poetic path and chose to use the language of everyday life to express what they had to give to the world. The subject of their writing, rising from the heart, was experience; it was also and above all the truth, held as the prime value. And both could have taken up the first line of Keats's *Endymion*: 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever'. Owen suffered terribly from the *ugliness* of the winter of cold, mud and sacrificed dead, some of them gassed as well. Barnes could not *put up with* the ugliness of England in those post-war years, of hasty reconstruction, privation, grief still raw, the feeling of depression.

Thus we find in each of these poets an acid reality, a biting irony and at the same time a sensuality which in Owen's case had no time to flourish and, for Barnes, formed the substance of the poems of his maturity. Owen's initial optimism was permanently transformed in the bitter reality of battle, of successive killings, of the dead in and around the trenches. He had already lost his faith, he did not recover it, questioning how it was possible to be Christian and to respect the commandment not to kill one's neighbour. Barnes, on this point, was never merely sarcastic. 'Normal' people too easily became murderers, so much is man's humanity also made of the too easy resurgence of his animal nature.

Clearly, there are always some human beings who will become the enemies of the killers. How effective is their action? At least their voice is heard, they create emotion, they do their duty: they *warn*, one of Owen's aims. And this is also what Barnes achieved: clear observations, warnings. And now, when what they described and denounced is arising once again in front of us, we remain stunned by the reality, the actuality of the vision of both men.

With Sassoon — who had after all already been decorated for his actions — Owen was one of the first to overturn the concept of hero. He took up arms (in his letters as much as in his poems) against the self-righteous attitude of comfortable civilians, always in favour of the war, with their sound conscience, while the butchery continued furiously. He defined himself as 'a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience'; his sensibilities were aroused and he had reached the point of seeing the war as absolute evil. Yet he was not a pacifist either. Nor was Barnes. Both expressed their feelings through bitter outcry, a tone of mingled anger and irony.

The Second World War was the natural consequence of the first: once the problems were ill concluded, each side made preparations by drawing on the lessons of their own past experience. Across the Rhine, preparations were made, amongst others, for rapid offensives, a sweeping onslaught, a psychological war designed to avoid, in the initial stages, the bloody impasse situations of the Somme and Passchendaele. In Britain, full note was taken of the states of shock suffered in these places and treated in several hospitals – including Craiglockhart, to which Owen was transferred and where he met Sassoon.

When the Blitz struck London, and in particular the East End, the young Keith Barnes was six years old, the very recent experience and the studies of cases of prostration and neurasthenia resulting entirely from terrible trauma suffered during the First World War meant that the civilian population was to some extent prepared. Faced with fire from the skies, the population — in other words, that Cockney population which was Barnes's origin — reacted with sang-froid, courage, determination, even a degree of humour, which were renowned, a triumph for the whole of Great Britain.

The young Barnes reacted like many children throughout the world when war strikes; witnesses (when they are not direct victims) and also wanting to play with everything around them, even with fragments of shrapnel still hot from their explosion. The reaction of a child is not necessarily the fear of danger and trauma, it may be one of excitement at the novelty of the circumstances. Yet he was marked for ever by the experience. *Born to Flying Glass* is the title of his first collection of poems. And he knew how to resist, as, when necessary, 'his' people had done when faced with the unacceptable.

Whatever the circumstances, and although each generation proved itself overall to be entirely heroic, the feeling that prevailed — the feeling of poets such as Sassoon and Owen, then Barnes — was that the notion of 'hero' itself was no longer valid. A metal disc round the neck of a corpse had not become a desirable end, bathed in general admiration. The sound of the bugle was no longer perceived as a musical note to stir souls, leading into battle with a song, banners floating in the wind were no longer necessarily overwhelming symbols. The notion that some wars could be avoided was born. The very idea of war became wholly detestable, even if some wars remain justified, necessary, inevitable.

In 1956 the Suez campaign provoked in Barnes a sense of panic for which he felt no shame. The possibility that it should perhaps 'be put off', the feeling of revolt, the gut-reaction of rejection, swept him away to the extent of looking with disgust at any form of militant engagement. His national service passed in torpor, a state described about himself by Owen, and with the idea that he had more fruitful seeds to sow. As poets, Owen and Barnes were only too well aware of their lost futures, their potential destroyed; the music unwritten, the books never to be printed, the projects doomed to remain unfulfilled, the children never to be born. In this, both echoed the feelings already expressed by Stephen Crane (1871-1900) in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), a book written when he was 24; and he too died in the fullness of his youth.

Barnes lived longer than Owen. He had the time to develop the themes that worried him and/or inspired him. One of these they had in common as we see appearing in Owen — the concept of social conscience and unacceptable injustice. Owen would no doubt have taken this up and amplified it. His feeling of sympathy for 'the other', individual or a group, was intense, profound. Owen was sensitive and tender, he radiated understanding. This as also true of Barnes. Both men, of course, were loved in return.

But in the case of Barnes, who had the time to observe, to live and to describe all the facets of social reality in the post-war years and the 1960s, the result was an acerbic and biting poetry, which did not please everyone. For example his second collection of poems, *The Thick Skin* was considered 'exaggerated' by his publisher's new reader. 'You are hard on your readers' was the accusation put to him. This book was published in Berkeley in 1971, in an edition that remained private (The Koala Press) and he had no time to finish his third collection *Ain't Hung Yet*, the title which he had chosen himself.

As for the theme of love, dear to all poets, Owen had only experienced the beginnings; we can feel something hatching within him, but his earliest poems are academic in style, inspired by the Ancients (however glorious they may be) and remain platonic. With Barnes it is entirely otherwise, who at least had the opportunity to foster the flourishing of his sensuality. Some of his love poems are among the finest. Love, in all its stages: meetings, flowerings, boredom, separations, jealousies, joys, tenderness, happiness, fulfilment …

Thanks to decisive encounters, both men had the previously undreamed of opportunity to succeed with their writing, then of being published and recognised, this second phase being in progress for Keith Barnes. Siegfried Sassoon gave Owen the encouragement which he needed, the recognition of the quality of his writing, he introduced him to his equals: Robert Graves, Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells. After his death, it was Sassoon who gathered the collection of his war poems and had them published. For Keith Barnes, France and now Belgium have played, and still play, an essential role. He also received support and recognition. However, in contrast to Owen, Keith Barnes had no doubt of the value of his work. At his innermost heart was a rock of certainty.

All Keith Barnes's poems have been translated into French, a selection from his three collections accompanies the narrative *K.B.;* virtually all his poetic work has appeared in French journals and the bilingual complete works is planned for editions d'ecarts in Paris, in the spring of 2003. Wilfred Owen's poems have mostly been translated into French and published, but not yet in full.

Owen and Barnes loved France and both died there, and we may quote in reference to them *The Soldier* by Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), one of the most famous poets of the First World War, who lies' in an island in the Aegean Sea:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.