

SIEGFRIED SASSOON

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Sam outlined the origins of the Sassoon family, wealthy Sephardic Jewish merchants in the Middle East, dealing in silks and opium. David Sassoon, born in 1792, had 8 sons and was the first Sassoon to adopt European dress, coming to London in 1858. His family followed and he became fabulously rich, providing Indian cotton for the Lancashire mills when the American Civil War (1861-1865) prevented any imports arriving from the USA.

David's son Alfred (1861-1895), a gifted musician (possessing two Stradivarius violins), married a High Church Gentile, Theresa Thornycroft, and, consequently, was cut off from his family. Having met and fallen in love with her at a sculpture class, he became a sculptor. Their marital home was 'Weirleigh' (built by a Mr Weir), close to Matfield and Brenchley, described by Siegfried as 'the background to all my dreams both pleasant and unpleasant'. Siegfried was the middle son, Michael being the eldest and Hamo (killed at Gallipoli in 1915) the youngest. Alfred left his wife in 1890, dying, aged 34, at Eastbourne in 1895.

Theresa had her boys taught at home, unsatisfactorily, from 1895 to 1899, then at New Beacon Preparatory School, Sevenoaks. Siegfried was placed in a class with younger boys, and, even on his going up to Marlborough in 1892, he was working alongside 13-year-olds. Cricket, organ playing, and poetry were his true passions, as he grew away from his engineering-focused brothers, preferring nature, poetry, and horseriding. Back home, Tom Richardson, a groom (and captain of the Matfield CC XI) became a father figure to Siegfried, turning the young man into a very good cricketer, rider, and huntsman. After attending a 'crammer', Siegfried went up to Clare College, Cambridge, but, trying Law, then History, left without taking a degree.

Choosing the life of a country squire, he rode with the West Kent Hounds, and won point-to-point prizes with his mount, Cockbird. He played cricket avidly, including matches at The Nevill for the Blue Mantles in 1910 and 1911, averaging 19 runs in 51 innings, quite decent 'for a poet'. At Marlborough, his bowling prowess had once returned 7 wickets for 18 runs, and he was to continue playing cricket well into his 60s down in Wiltshire.

On 4 August 1914, as the Great War began, he was in khaki as a Trooper in 'C' Coy, Sussex Yeomanry, at Lewes. Soon transferring to the Royal Welch Fusiliers as a 2nd Lieutenant, he rejoined his cricketing pal, Bobby Hanmer, and met Robert Graves. His old Cambridge pal, David Thomas, also in the regiment, was

killed in action in March 1916. Siegfried's cricketing skills proved useful on 'bombing' missions (forays using hand grenades), where he became known as 'Mad Jack' for his daredevil exploits, expecting (hoping?) to die a good death. In June 1916, for bravery and devotion to duty, he was awarded the Military Cross, but became ill soon after the Somme offensive of July 1916, being sent off to Oxford. In 1917, he was back, in Rouen (where he contracted measles), then up to Arras. His war poetry was now developing, as was his anger about the conduct of the War and, in particular, the perceived incompetence of those in high command. Hit in the chest by a sniper, he arrived at Chapelwood Manor, Nutley, the seat of Lady Brassey and now an auxiliary hospital, as a recuperating wounded officer. He penned a protest against war and death, which he sent to his CO, but was ordered, by telegram, to report back for duty. He sent his protest to his MP and it was printed in *The Times*. Since the public took heed of Siegfried's writings, he came dangerously close to being court-martialled, but Robert Graves, using influence, got him before a Medical Board, which despatched him to Craiglockhart War Hospital (dubbed 'Dottyville' by Siegfried), suffering from neurasthenia (shell-shock, or PTSD as it is now known). There, Wilfred Owen, a fellow patient, approached him, receiving most welcome constructive criticism of his own poetry, such that Owen (killed 4 November 1918) has emerged as a considerably more renowned war poet than Sassoon. Passed fit, Siegfried was posted to Ireland, then Palestine, before returning to France early in 1918, just as the Germans were making their final Spring Push. Sassoon, mistaken for an enemy soldier on his return (without a helmet) from a patrol, received a scalp graze when shot by his own Sergeant in July 1918. Thus ended his war, his poetry caught the popular mood, and the end of hostilities saw his 1919 poem record that 'Everyone suddenly burst out singing'.

Sam Gray brought along a fine display of photographs and excerpts of Sassoon's poetry, while, during his talk, he quoted from several poems, including *Haunted by a Sad Spirit*, *For Mamsie*, *The Extra Inch* (on a cricketing theme), *The General*, *The Rearguard*, and *The Dugout*.

Stefan Gatward