

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 January 2017

# Sassoon, Siegfried Loraine

By [Scott Ortolano](#)

Sassoon, *Siegfried* Loraine (Authorial Pseudonyms: Christian Mount, Cyprian Oyde, Pinchbeck Lyre, S. Perides, Saul Kain, Sigma Sashun, Simeon Hart, Soldier Nicknames: Mad Jack, Kangar, Fictionalized Personas: George Sherston)  
British Soldier, Poet, Novelist  
Born 08 September 1886 in Brenchley, England  
Died 01 September 1967 in Heytesbury, England

**Siegfried Loraine Sassoon was a British soldier, poet and novelist. His work bitterly exposes the horrors of the First World War and offers a soldier's account of the conflict.**

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## Before the War

Siegfried Loraine Sassoon (1886-1967) was the child of [Alfred Ezra Sassoon \(1862-1895\)](#), the son of a prominent and wealthy Jewish family, and [Theresa Thornycroft \(1853-1947\)](#), the daughter of a well-to-do Catholic family historically known for their skill as sculptors and artists. A child of leisure, he grew up living the life of a country gentleman, devoting his time to literary pursuits, foxhunting and golfing. His early poetry is very much a product of this culture, functioning in the tradition of the Pre-Raphaelites and imitative of other Georgian poetry of the era. The poems are marked by romantic

visions of natural spaces and medieval allusions. Their imitation of convention, romantic idealism and objective distance stand in marked contrast to Sassoon's later work.

## The First World War

### The Early Years (1914-1916)

Sassoon enlisted with British forces before war was officially declared and joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers in [France](#) in November 1915. During his time with the regiment, he met [Robert Graves \(1895-1985\)](#), another well-known war poet, and was given the nickname "Mad Jack" for his daring in combat. His bravery earned him the Military Cross as well as a recommendation for the Victoria Cross. His poetry from these early years contains romantic images of soldiers, war and the ideal of dying for one's country. For example, "Absolution" (1915), his first war poem, describes soldiers who are made "wise" and "free" fighting for freedom and who, despite the dangers, remain "a happy legion." The poem concludes by positioning the lot of the soldier as a romantic burden, an honor that they bear only too happily, and self-reflexively asks, "What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?"

In "To My Brother," a poem that followed the death of his younger brother, [Hamo Watts Sassoon \(1888-1915\)](#), in August of 1915, Sassoon mourns the loss but does so as a means of inspiring his own heroic actions: "in the gloom I see your laurell'd head / And through your victory I shall win the light." The naïve romanticism of these works would later prove embarrassing to Sassoon.

### The Later Years (1916-1918)

Sassoon's poetry became darker as he experienced the horrors of the conflict. The death of his close friend [David Cuthbert Thomas \(1895-1916\)](#) in May 1916 imbued his poetry with an ironic tone that would become a hallmark of his later work. Events reached a breaking point during the opening salvo of the [Battle of the Somme](#) (July 1916). During this battle, British infantrymen charged what they believed to be decimated German trenches only to be mowed down by [machine gunners](#), suffering the heaviest casualties any army experienced on a single day during the war. The battle served as a turning point for the poet as well as for Britain as a whole.

The war poetry for which Sassoon is known is bitter, laconic and ironic, describing the horrific lot of soldiers victimized by the war and all those who drive it. Irony plays an essential role in these poems as the outcomes of events run counter to what would normally expect. Religious figures are often blamed for becoming de facto propagandists and scenes of prayer and redemption are turned on their head. In "Christ and the Soldier" (1916), a soldier encounters and has a conversation with Jesus. When he is asked to bear witness to Christ's wounds, a moment that should be full of spiritual revelation, the soldier, who has seen far worse, is unmoved and enviously replies, "wounds like these would shift a bloke to Blighty just a treat!"

Women are often depicted as well-intentioned but ignorant of the realities of war. Even sympathetic portrayals emphasize this divide. For example, the poem “The Hero” (1916) tells of a mother’s reaction to a letter notifying her of her son’s death. While she is saddened by the loss, she is comforted by the letter’s portrayal of her son’s heroic actions because he had “been so brave, her glorious boy.” The final stanza of the poem undercuts and reverses the previous material as a colonel bitterly reflects on the actual cowardice of the boy who was overwhelmed by the conflict and died ignominiously, leaving no impact on his peers or the war itself.

Military leadership is also shown as being out of touch with the common soldier. Even good-hearted senior officers are only responsible for the continued suffering of soldiers. In “The General” (1917), a good-natured general and his staff are cursed as “incompetent swine” after his “plan of attack” results in the death of everyone he greeted so warmly two weeks earlier. The poem transforms the general’s easy niceties into something grotesque by highlighting his ignorance of how his orders will impact the men. Throughout all of these poems run universal threads: images of bodies, muck, rats, traumatized soldiers, the horrific effects of the [weapons](#) of [modern warfare](#) and soldiers’ struggle to physically and mentally survive the conflict.

While he was widely read by soldiers on the front, many at home found Sassoon’s work offensive and unpatriotic. In July 1917, having become friends with a well-known group of [pacifists](#), including [Bertrand Russell \(1872-1970\)](#), Lady [Ottoline Morrell \(1873-1938\)](#), and [Henry Massingham \(1860-1924\)](#), Sassoon wrote a public declaration against the conflict (*Finished with the War. A Soldier’s Declaration*) which casts the conflict as an amoral act of “aggression and conquest” that was being needlessly perpetuated by those in power. Sassoon concludes the letter by calling for an immediate end to the conflict and refusing to return to the battlefield as a form of public protest. Fearing for his friend, Robert Graves intervened and successfully argued that Sassoon was suffering from [shell shock](#) and therefore not responsible for his actions. Sassoon was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital where he encountered fellow war poet [Wilfred Owen \(1893-1918\)](#), whose work he would publish and popularize after Owen’s death. The guilt of not being with his comrades ultimately drove Sassoon to re-enter the war where he remained until a head wound rendered him unfit for duty in June 1918.

## After the War

During the years following the conflict, Sassoon became an established literary figure and continued to popularize his poetry and attempt to show readers the horrors of war. He also became more involved in politics and published a number of fictional and non-fictional works about his war experiences. His semi-autobiographical Sherston trilogy, which includes *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and *Sherston’s Progress* (1936), follows the experiences of a man named George Sherston as he moves from an idyllic youth through the horrors of the First World War. Sassoon later added official autobiographies: *The Weald of Youth* (1942) and *Siegfried’s Journey* (1945). Although these works are not as well-known as his poetry, they offer insight into the experiences of soldiers during the First World War and also provide

invaluable context for his wartime poetry.

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### **Citation**

Ortolano, Scott: Sassoon, Siegfried Loraine , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.10648](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10648).

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