

**THE MUSE IN ARMS. A COLLECTION OF  
WAR POEMS, FOR THE MOST PART  
WRITTEN IN THE FIELD OF ACTION BY  
SEAMEN, SOLDIERS, AND FLYING MEN  
WHO ARE SERVING, OR HAVE SERVED,  
IN THE GREAT WAR. [LONDON-1917]**

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**E. B. OSBORN**

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EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION,  
BY E. B. OSBORN

LONDON  
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

1917

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TO  
BRUCE LYTTTELTON RICHMOND  
WHOSE UNSELFISH DEVOTION  
HAS SO GREATLY SERVED  
THE CAUSE OF LITERATURE  
FOR SO MANY YEARS

## INTRODUCTION

THE object of this Anthology is to show what passes in the British warrior's soul when, in moments of aspiration or inspiration, before or after action or in the busy days of self-preparation for self-sacrifice, he has glimpses of the ultimate significance of warfare. To some extent the selection (which can claim to be fairly representative of the verses written by those who are serving, or have served, in the present world-war) presents a picture of the visible imagery of battle as mirrored in his mind. As such it illustrates his singular capacity for remembering the splendour and forgetting the squalor of the dreadful vocation in which he was so suddenly engaged—a capacity at the root of that infinite cheerfulness which was such a priceless military asset in the early days of disillusion and disaster. This all-important point is brought home by the following story which was told by a visitor to the west front—one who had lived all his life with soldiers, though not a soldier himself—during the final preparations for the Battle of Arras. He was watching a division moving up to the fighting line, in company with one of our Generals, to whom he propounded the question: "How is it that nothing can break the spirit of these men, whereas the rule used to be that a regiment which had suffered 20 to 30 per cent. of casualties could no longer be relied on?" "Look at their faces, and you'll



see why," answered the General. And, looking at the faces of those who passed by, the other saw in each one of them that open and sunny joyousness which is eternally expressed in the wonderful lines entitled "Into Battle" by Julian Grenfell—concerning which Mr. Rudyard Kipling said: "His lips must have been touched." They were not merely unafraid; they all gloried in the thought of the great ordeal to come. And so they went up in sunshine and with singing to win undying fame and deathless gratitude in the valleys of decision where—

The thundering line of battle stands,  
And in the air Death moans and sings.

They had inherited the blithe, unconquerable courage of the little professional Army which saved the civilised world and England's honour in the still-victorious retreat from Mons to the Marne. For, as the General said, in further explanation of what must seem to the enemy a military miracle, something altogether above and beyond scientific expectation, "The Old Army was the nation in miniature. The New Army is the nation itself."

The poems here collected give, it is true, a stirring picture of the outward and visible semblance of modern scientific warfare. But modern battles are so vast and so extended in both space and time that composed battle-pieces, such as have come down to us from the far-off centuries of archery and ballad-making, may no longer be looked for. The thread on which all such pictures are strung—the new impressions such as "The Assault" and old ballads such as "Agincourt, or the English Bowman's Glory"—is the insular conception of fighting as the greatest of all great games, that which is the most shrewdly spiced with deadly danger. The Germans, and

even our Allies, cannot understand why this stout old nation persists in thinking of war as a sport; they do not know that sportsmanship is our new homely name, derived from a racial predilection for comparing great things with small, for the *chevalerie* of the Middle Ages. In "The English Bowman's Glory," written before any of our co-operative pastimes were thought of, the fine idea is veiled in this homely term:

Agincourt, Agincourt !  
 Know ye not Agincourt ?  
 Oh, it was noble sport !  
     Then did we owe men ;  
 Men, who a victory won us  
 'Gainst any odds among us :  
     Such were our bowmen.

Light is thrown on this phase of the British soldier's mentality by the verse (examples of which I have selected) he writes in honour of the games and field-sports in which he acquired the basal elements of all true discipline—confidence in his companions and readiness to sacrifice the desire for personal distinction to the common interest of his team, which is, of course, a mimic army in being.

But it is as an efflorescence of the spirit that this collection of war poetry by those who know war from within is most engrossing. There has been nothing like it before in the history of English literature, nor, indeed, of any other literature. Even the long agony of the Napoleonic Wars, so fertile in picturesque episodes which stand out in the flux of indistinguishable incident, gave us only two or three poems by soldier poets. The celebration of its great days and personalities was left to the professional poets, who wove out of hearsay their gleaming webs of poetical rhetoric. At school we learn their well-made songs and odes by heart and find them the provender of

patriotism; but, later on, when we happen upon such crude and half-forgotten balladry, much prefer Sergeant Grant's "Battle of Waterloo," with its quaint twelfth stanza:

Here's a health to George our Royal King, and long may he govern,  
Likewise the Duke of Wellington, that noble son of Erin!  
Two years they added to our time for pay and pension too,  
And now we are recorded as men of Waterloo.

or "Sahagun," that "Song of the 15th Hussars sung every December 21st," which begins:

It was in quarters we lay as you quickly shall hear,  
Lord Paget came to us and bid us prepare,  
Saying, "Saddle your horses, for we must march soon,  
For the French they are lying in the town of Sahagun."

In the older wars soldiers' songs sometimes—the more often, the further you go back—came into being much as folk-songs are supposed to have been evolved out of the communal consciousness. The old process was not unknown in the ranks of the Old Army in the first year of the present war, when, to give an example, the following chaffing ditty was sung up and down the trenches, by Territorials as well as by Regulars, when it seemed to them that Kitchener's Army would never arrive after all:

Who are the boys that fighting's for,  
Who are the boys to win the war?  
It's good old Kitchener's Army,  
And every man of them's *très bon*,  
They never lost a trench since Mons,  
Because they never saw one.

But in these days, more's the pity, the popular music-hall song has put such spontaneous minstrelsy more or less out of court. It is the tune which counts; hosts have marched to it, and since it is memory-laden and a spell to conjure up sudden visions of the French country-side