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# "While the shells crashed we were strong"

## The Life of War Poet "Toronto" Prewett

Andrew Coppolino

While convalescing in 1917 following his statement that "the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it," Siegfried Sassoon was trimming the roughly-cut pages of an octavo edition of Thomas Hardy when he met a young Canadian soldier only weeks out of action. The care he was giving to the Hardy book was gratifying work, but Sassoon wrote:

the greatest luck I had was in finding among my fellow convalescents one who wrote poetry. His name was Frank Prewett. Everyone called him "Toronto," that being his home town. He was a remarkable character, delightful when in a cheerful frame of mind, though liable to be moody and aloof....His alterations of dark depression and spiritual animation suggested a streak of genius.<sup>1</sup>

The name of Siegfried Sassoon is likely recognisable, and the most logical leap from Canadian to Canadian war poet seems to be John McCrae and his popular "In Flanders Fields." Who, then, is "Toronto" Prewett? One brief answer is provided by Virginia Woolf in her letter to Lytton Strachey:

*The [Times] Literary Supplement*, by the way, says that Prewett is a poet; perhaps a great one.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of Woolf's uncertain hunch and Sassoon's suggestion of "a streak of genius," Frank Prewett is not familiar to Canadian readers; he may be known to a few, however, as a shadowy figure who survived some of the worst fighting of the First World War and found himself, quite by accident, on the periphery of the highly recognisable and controversial Bloomsbury Group. This coterie of artists, writers, critics and philosophers began meeting in 1905 and

included Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, E.M. Forster, G.E. Moore, and Roger Fry. Although he was widely anthologised in British and American poetry collections of the period, it is as a footnote to the lives of these luminaries that Prewett appears. His poetry is characterised by his idiosyncratic voice, and reveals in its simple construction his love of farming and nature, but also his experiences in both world wars. His poem appropriately titled "The Survivor" is a good place to uncover and reclaim this unknown Canadian writer:

What this reptile worm or snake  
Creeps on its torpid scales, creeps  
Winding and lengthening its wake  
While God above it sleeps

Tempest crushes it, wind assails:  
On its bayonets gleam  
Lightnings, yet it prevails  
And filters through valley and stream

A thousand men to make a beast  
Than beast more cumbered each:  
Sodden and splintered to the feast,  
The muddied feast of death they reach

We are mad after thirty years  
We who live are mad in the peace.  
I left my life there, kept its fears:  
From the regiment is no release

While the shells crashed we were strong  
Grenade and sniper we defied:  
Now I am old, stay overlong  
For in those many men I died.

Here is Prewett's idiosyncratic style, the recurring images of war, and the tormented psyche "mad in the peace," filtered through "valley and stream." To promote Prewett from the footnotes of literary



*Private Frank Prewett, Eaton Machine Gun Battery, Spring 1916*

history to a position as an interesting and unique minor writer among the “canonical” writers of the First World War is a task of literary archaeology not possible here. But, by observing the details of Prewett’s life, by reading his poetry and his bitter, proud, and sometimes jingoistic comments about Canada, we can discover an individual who made his own literary mark as well an impression on those individuals he met. In doing so, he deserves some recognition.

Frank James Prewett was born on 24 August 1893 on the family farm in Kenilworth, Ontario, about 33 miles northwest of Guelph. Prewett’s father, Arthur, came to Canada in the 1880s, married Clara Hellyer in May 1888 and after a brief stay in the United States returned to the Hellyer homestead in Kenilworth which was built on land that had been given to a Hellyer ancestor for service in Wellington’s Army during the Napoleonic wars. There were a number of interesting connections regarding the family recorded in the popular press. An ancestor of Prewett’s mother perished in the “Black Hole of Calcutta” and Prewett’s father gained considerable success as a “pioneer gardener...known throughout the Dominion for his beautiful roses.”<sup>3</sup> Prewett’s uncle, Albert Hellyer, was elected to the provincial legislature in the October 1919 election, representing briefly the United Farmers of Ontario in the riding of Wellington east. Prewett’s sister married popular Toronto broadcaster Gordon Sinclair.

Remembering his Kenilworth background in a series of BBC radio lectures, Prewett called the farmers of rural Ontario at the turn of the century “peasants,” not in condescension, but in the sense of “a man who is the slave of his land and loves his servitude.”<sup>4</sup> This describes quite accurately the kind of “slavery” and “servitude” into which Prewett himself would withdraw following the First World War. It was within his own community of these “peasants” in the rough pioneering environment of his childhood – corduroy roads and fields spotted with tree stumps and boulders immovable even after four generations of work to clear them<sup>5</sup> – that Prewett fostered a life-long respect for the seasonal cycles, the labour of farming, and the extremes and nuances of climate. In turn, this respect was circumscribed by his grandfather’s “strict...puritan religious observance.”<sup>6</sup> But, while his broadcasts of “Farm Life in Ontario Fifty Years Ago” state that, “The community where I was born was mostly of English descent,” he claims that the homestead was surrounded by a “powerful nation” of Iroquois Indians. At some point, Prewett discovered (or created) a strong interest in native Indian culture to such an extent that he would later make more exaggerated claims that he was of an “exotic” Indian ancestry. It was to be a significant element in his developing personality. Like “Grey Owl” (British-born Archibald Belaney, 1888-1938) Prewett engaged in a deceptive self-romanticising by boasting to friends that he possessed either Iroquois, Sioux, Mohawk, or Algonquin blood, his mood determining the specific creed. According to Sassoon and others, Prewett made appearances at London parties in full “Indian” regalia, and with his dark complexion and jet black hair he was no doubt convincing.

The family moved to the Toronto area early in the 1900s, and Prewett attended Parkdale Collegiate and the University of Toronto, where he gained an appreciation for literature, cultivated an interest in political science and economics, joined the COTC and enlisted in February 1915. It is at this moment that we see Prewett’s pride in Canada complicated by doubt and uncertainty. Shortly following the outbreak of the war, Professor James Mavor requested all University of Toronto students to write to him explaining their reasons for enlisting. In a letter dated 11 February, the day before he enlisted, Prewett stated that:

Chiefly it has been a feeling of injured pride that has drawn me into the force. I have felt hurt to see that those very men who are Canadians, if there can be said to be any Canadian nationality yet, men who have received all the advantages and more of the hardships of this country, are yet the men who are remaining home and permitting those who have a less careful physical and mental development to represent their country in this great war that is changing the whole idea of the world, and which in its change is going to determine to the eyes of all nations whether this Canada of ours is a colony or a great and distinct people independent and confident in thought, feeling and action.<sup>7</sup>

A nascent Canadian patriotism is qualified by ambivalence and doubt. It is not yet the bitter rebuke that Prewett was to make later in his life, but for the young university student this was a crucial moment in Canada's history that, in his mind, might decide an evolution to sovereign nationhood or a stall in colonial infancy. In many respects, Prewett's early poems are similarly vehicles for a conventionally patriotic *cri de coeur*; as such they are typical of a mode of "war poetry" that attempted to inspire young men to fight for King and country. His "To Canada," a piece of juvenilia, exhibits this patriotism and is, indeed, a poetic rendering of his letter to Mavor:

And we who stand today,  
Forsaking homes, so jealous of thy pride,  
We gladly pledge stout hands and ready hearts  
To thee, thou right and faithful bride  
At thy birth-time like men to play our parts;  
Hear now our faith, and if thine hour be hard  
It is our greater glory that we guard.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, in February 1915, armed with a dose of wary patriotism, Prewett joined the Eaton Machine Gun Brigade. The Eaton was organised in January 1915 under the command of Major H.J. Morrison and with the patronage of Sir John Eaton who provided money for 15 armoured cars, machine guns and other equipment. The unit would later incorporate an outfit from the Yukon to form the Eaton Motor Machine Gun Brigade, and it left for overseas aboard the *S.S. Metagama* on 4 June 1915, arriving in England ten days later. Prewett was discharged from the Canadian forces on 25 November 1915 at Folkestone, having been granted a commission in the British army on 4 November; he was made a second lieutenant in 5B Reserve Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery stationed at Ballincollig, Ireland before moving to the front.<sup>9</sup>

Prewett saw some heavy action, although some sources record simply that he injured his spine by being thrown from a horse.<sup>10</sup> Sassoon notes in his autobiography that Prewett was injured while serving "in the Ypres Salient, from the horrors of which he had been delivered by a huge shell bursting near him." Prewett spent most of 1916 in hospital and returned to the front as an officer with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (not the Royal *Welch* Fusiliers in which Robert Graves and Sassoon served) where it became apparent that, regardless of his physical injuries, Prewett suffered considerable psychological trauma. Eventually he came under the care of Dr. W.H.R. Rivers who diagnosed him as "neurasthenic" and unfit for active service. Following treatment at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Slateford, Scotland, Prewett was sent to "Lennels," the country home of Lady Clementine and Major Walter Waring in the Cheviots near Coldstream which they had converted into a convalescent home for officers. Here Sassoon and Prewett met, and shortly before the Armistice, Sassoon introduced "Toronto" to Lady Ottoline Morrell and her literary salon at Garsington in Oxfordshire. Lady Ottoline was gathering aspiring young writers and artists and within weeks Frank Prewett was a fixture.

The shock to the young man from rural Ontario must have been significant – suddenly, he found himself in a group of prominent and often notorious British writers, intellectuals, activists and society members, including T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Lytton Strachey, Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Bertrand Russell, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Evan Morgan (Viscount Tredegar), and the Ranee of Sarawak (Dorothy Brooke). Lady Ottoline wrote to Graves that she was arranging a "debating society and dining club with Frank Prewett, [John] Masefield, [Edward] Marsh, Lytton Strachey, [Karl] Liebknecht and Trotsky as honorary members."<sup>11</sup> Clearly, Prewett made an immediate impression on Lady Ottoline and vice versa: between 1918 and 1926, he wrote approximately 65 letters to her.<sup>12</sup> His "ascent" was rapid, and he soon became one of her favourites. With the combination of these new literary friends, the influence and tutelage of Sassoon, and his enrolment at Christ Church, Oxford, Prewett began to write poetry seriously until his stay in England came to an end in 1919 when he was repatriated.

Prewett returned to Canada a changed man. Suffering from the physical and psychological effects of the war, his repatriation only exacerbated his condition. In 1915, he had written with a guarded pride to James Mavor that he saw the war as a phase in the evolution of Canada from colony to great nation; four years later, he was harshly critical and bitter. He wrote to Lady Ottoline in the autumn of 1919 that in Canada, although it is of "unsurpassed beauty," he fears he will be "a venerated barbarian" in a land where there is "nothing but business, selling motor cars, land stock, anything" and where "everyone becomes married and a bank clerk with slicked hair." He felt exiled in an "intellectual Siberia...man cannot live by bread alone, and Canada offers only the bread."<sup>13</sup> His earlier theoretical opinions now seemed to have a practical reality. The torment and isolation Prewett was experiencing was manifest in a growing ambiguity modulating to a virulent disgust he now expressed toward the country of his birth. His letters reveal an alternation from glowing appraisals of the healthy climate, to harsh criticism of Canada's spiritual deadness and its American "suburbanism."

In these fluctuations we witness a young man at once relieved to be back on Canadian soil, and yet mourning the loss of his adopted English home and compatriots; a young man suddenly exiled from literary mentors and inspiration, and yet wracked frequently by war memories. In a postscript to a letter, Prewett scribbled, "just a moment ago there was a crash somewhere in the distance, and instantaneously I was in a dug-out, and the roof had been blown in. It is dreadful, how these war experiences cling to one."<sup>14</sup> Another haunting letter, so often apparent in war narratives, describes Prewett meeting a fellow soldier on the street:

He was with me during the worst despair of madness at the front...I longed to speak with him, but had a subconscious sense it would be better not. It would not have meant any sort of outburst, but I felt it was something beyond recall, and which would lose its present comfortable oblivion and become an ugly and distorted reality if rediscussed. It was a most peculiar thing. I passed him three times before I could compel myself to go away. He all the while continued talking.<sup>15</sup>

Trapped between the poles of a "subconscious sense it would be better not to speak" and feeling that it was necessary to "compel [him]self" to leave the mumbling man, Prewett struggled to control the volatile images of war that threatened to emerge from below a "comfortable oblivion." His sense of isolation was both physical and one of imagination. Eventually Prewett gave these repressed images a poetic shape. It was a therapeutic process Robert Graves himself experienced in his autobiography *Goodbye To All That* (1929) and which he described in his introduction to Prewett's posthumously published *Collected Poems* as his old friend's "duty to write at the orders of the daemon who rode him."<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, "daemons" and repatriation helped Prewett regain his equilibrium after the trauma of war. As he again observed the rugged, vast expanses of wilderness, and the harsh Canadian weather, Prewett seemed to gain confidence and assurance. Sailing the St. Lawrence, he wrote that "Canada renews itself in me with every succeeding hour. The colours are bright and yet soft; the eye is invited to the speculation of infinite distances; there is a dispassionate cold and gloom in the atmosphere, as though nature were oblivious of man's existence."<sup>17</sup> After a few months, and with the arrival of another hopeful spring, "Canada," he writes, "has done me good...My views have widened..."<sup>18</sup> For this young man of "peasant" stock recuperating from the war, having hobnobbed with a literary elite and now back in the "intellectual Siberia" of Canada, we can only smile, perhaps, at the irony in the literal and figurative comment "My views have widened."

While in the Toronto area, a location his letters often refer to as "Humber Bay," Prewett found further solace in music which helped him control the trauma of war. He spent many hours studying the organ under the tutelage of Healey Willan (1880-1968) who was at the Toronto Conservatory, and he wrote that "the music made me ample returns for my study; it has stabilised my mind, and made me forget the injustice of war, the greed and incredible callousness of it."<sup>19</sup> Supporting this process of stabilization was the arrival of a former front-line comrade. Siegfried Sassoon arrived in Toronto as part of a reading tour of North America and organisers asked him for a considerably more elaborate lecture than

the informal chat he was expecting to give. Somewhat distressed, Sassoon wrote:

At this juncture, however, a helping hand arrived in the shape of my friend "Toronto" Prewett, who had returned to his native place for a time after studying English literature at Oxford during 1919. I explained the plight I was in, and between us we vamped up a superficial conspectus of living bards – Toronto's providential collaboration converting what had previously appeared an inevitable catastrophe into a light-hearted *tour de force*. I went to Convocation Hall rather queasily sustained by his assurance that I should "get away with it" more successfully by being bright and chatty than if I had composed a serious academic discourse. Fortunately for me, the audience was indulgent, and my impudently unconsidered remarks were accepted as "Toronto" had predicted.<sup>20</sup>

It is the cynical side of his attitude toward Canada which has here prevailed. However, Prewett's time was also spent in decidedly less productive ways. Alcohol had its claw in Prewett. The artist Mark Gertler had noted earlier that "Toronto" enjoyed going on drinking bouts with him, and "He could drink ever so much without getting drunk."<sup>21</sup> Now, Prewett boasted of prodigious drinking episodes and describes a Hollywood-style escape from a Toronto speak-easy: "...it is dreadful to pass months in dull, unrelaxed and absolute sobriety. For a while I patronized the 'bootleggers'...but finally found myself in a place that was being surrounded by the police. My escape was a miracle of quick wit and luck. It would have been dreadful for father and mother, whose ideas are somewhat limited and intolerant, to have had their son hauled into court, with all the vulgar publicity in which this country, being smug and self-righteous, rejoices."<sup>22</sup> Prewett adds that in a final act of nose-thumbing, "at the very moment of escaping, I put a bottle in my pocket. I simply could not resist stealing from these rascally bootleggers, whose profit is never less than four hundred percent." In these gestures and his re-casting of them, Prewett has embellished his parents' understandable "limitations" and "intolerances" in prohibition Ontario into a generalised lampooning of "smug and self-righteous" Canada.

With this growing and at times unjustified acrimony accompanied by a strong attraction to British life feeding his "love-hate" stance toward Canada, Prewett was back in England by early 1921. He would immediately resume both his

studies at Christ Church and his relationship with the Garsington group. There was also a strong proclamation to avoid Canada. Prewett wrote to Lady Ottoline that his plans were to arrive in England – "*to get home to Europe*" – so poor that I shall never be able to return to Canada."<sup>23</sup> Later, however, the very part of his Canadian past – farming and rural life – which was so deeply a part of him would send him back to Canada as part of his professional research. Until then, the Garsington literary salon that Prewett would return to was increasingly characterised by its own inner tensions, caustic tongues, and personal animosities. Petty jealousies ran rampant, individuals fought and bickered frequently, and artistic differences grew into violent rows.<sup>24</sup> All of these tensions were set amid Ottoline and Philip Morrell's concerns over their serious financial situation. Not surprisingly, Prewett himself was often at the centre of these quarrels as his moods offended someone or as he was caught in a struggle for his affections. Mark Gertler, himself no innocent when it came to organising his own secret personal relationships at Garsington, wrote that "Toronto...is always trying to gain the ladies' sympathy by his grumblings" and "mooches about like a faded Hamlet."<sup>25</sup> Although the facts of the incident have not made themselves entirely clear, Prewett's relationship with Lady Ottoline, already strained by a betrayal of trust, was irreparably damaged when Prewett, having the responsibility of overseeing milk production at one of Philip Morrell's farms, became embroiled in a dispute over receipts and was given his marching orders. Even less clear is Prewett's motivation for admitting his culpability to Sassoon in a letter, especially when he knew of the very close friendship between Sassoon and Ottoline: "I have swindled Philip [Morrell] beyond the dreams of avarice."<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of the rivalries at Garsington, Lady Ottoline had always maintained a special relationship with Prewett and was quite diligent about corresponding with him, especially while he was in Canada, sending him newspapers, books, and juicy gossip. Prewett reciprocated and included with the letters he sent to Ottoline were the poems she had always encouraged him to write, and upon his return to England, he saw that they were published.<sup>27</sup> Discussing with her the details of the poems and their preparation for print, he describes a balance of practical

concerns against his characteristic self-doubt: "I suppose I had better plunge into print, even with rather undeveloped work, at once, since at some time the plunge must be made."<sup>28</sup>

Prewett's poetry – those he sent to Lady Ottoline from "Humber Bay" and those composed in England – can be grouped roughly as war poems, love poems, and nature poems. However, no matter what the division, much of his early verse is evidence of a young poet struggling with a style, attempting to find a voice, and paying tribute (with, perhaps, too great a poetic cost) to writers who had influenced him (Donne, Hopkins, and of course Hardy). Many of these poems are flawed in some way. Archaic diction (to one reviewer, "the fag-ends of a romantic vocabulary") convoluted syntax, laboured rhyme, awkward expression, and sentimentality. These are all, perhaps, common faults with later Georgian poetry. Even Sassoon regarded some of Prewett's work as "crocus-crowded lyrics," but to his credit, Prewett recognised this in himself. While he struggled with his ambivalent feelings toward Canada, Prewett also struggled with the medium of his art. Words, he wrote, "are not the means but the obstacles to expression." However, in the same letter he also expressed feelings of anguish and alienation caused by the war: "I cannot write, simply because I experience no deep emotion. I stand still, and the world spins around me."<sup>29</sup>

The two or three years immediately following the Armistice seemed to be the most difficult for Prewett, as it no doubt was for many other soldiers. As he recuperated, he spent his time writing, travelling in Europe, and brushing elbows at Garsington. In more physical pursuits, Prewett also worked his own land at Tubney Farm, Abingdon, in a doomed attempt to emulate Graves and John Masefield. For the moment, his literary output was slowed while he saw to his agrarian concerns. His graduation from Christ Church in 1922 seemed to open a few doors; in January 1925, Prewett was appointed to Oxford University's Agricultural Economics Institute and was given three small holdings on which to conduct experiments with dairy farming.<sup>30</sup> As a result, in the next few years, Prewett's written work assumed a very different complexion: he published for the Clarendon Press nine public lectures, six pamphlets and monographs, and 13 technical articles on topics such as wool

marketing and milk production. These articles are quite distinctive from his literary efforts and given that his farm experience in Ontario many years earlier was limited, it is interesting to speculate how he accomplished such a wide variety of tasks. But, like the Prewett who was able to convince friends of his "Indian" heritage, this agricultural endeavour was not beyond his capacity.

Early in 1929, Prewett suffered an attack of influenza and was advised to rest. Following a convalescent sea voyage, he was, by 1930, back to work on a "two months' tour of Canada and the United States, to study recent developments in agricultural co-operation, with the aid of a grant from the Horace Plunkett Foundation."<sup>31</sup> Out of this agrarian research came his next series of literary work which seems to be a reflection of the socio-economic concerns he encountered. In 1931 he delivered a series of BBC broadcasts on "Country Life" (published in 1954 as "Farm Life in Ontario Fifty Years Ago"), and in 1933 he published a novel, *The Chazzey Tragedy*, a socialist discussion of the severe changes in rural England in the enclosures in the early 1800s. A contemporary reviewer called the novel a "powerful revelation...of what actually made the tragedy of rural England after the Napoleonic wars." The novel "illustrates by social evolution the present crisis in rural England [that] no matter how desperate things may be now those of 1825 were frightfully worse."<sup>32</sup> Earlier, Prewett had written to *The Countryman*

that State control could be made a very great source of economy both to producer and consumer....On his own account the English farmer can do little for himself since his market is largely supplied and ruled from abroad...the system of land tenure is worn out and prevents capital going into the land. The only remedy is State control.<sup>33</sup>

Given the depressed and harsh conditions that Prewett must have witnessed in his research travels in the early 1930s, the *Toronto Star* reviewer seems to have adopted a blindness to a present reality which is, in fact, the purview of Prewett's fiction. In addition to its concerns with "producers and consumers," *The Chazzey Tragedy* is also a work of imaginative literature that shows Prewett as a creative story-teller, agrarian analyst, and chronicler of myth and folklore who captured the local ambience with a

*The grave of Frank Prewett in Tomnahurich Cemetery.*

keen ear for the regional dialect of the Berkshire countryside.

Prewett always resided within the agrarian ambience of that folklore. In April 1934, Prewett, who now lived at Henley-on-Thames, resigned from the Oxford Institute when he was appointed editor of a new agricultural journal, *The Farmer's Weekly*. Prewett could rarely agree with the journal's editorial direction, although, as an associate noted, "Frank made [it] into a lively readable paper, not devoted entirely to farming...[He embellished] it with articles and photos of country life, past and present."<sup>34</sup> His editorial patience ran out as well as his employment, and shortly afterwards he began a stormy tenure as editor of *The Countryman* only to become the centre of yet another controversy as was so often the case in his business and personal affairs. By 1937 he had moved on yet again to start his own journal which, in turn, then had its own controversy. As a colleague, who calls Prewett "half Indian," notes:

Following some sort of disagreement with the [publishers], Prewett [and several others] walked out and set up an oppositional periodical, *Country Scene and Topic*, with headquarters at Bourton-on-the-Water, four miles away. The locals called it "Adultery House." The periodical [lasted three issues]. My guess is that they did not have the tenacity, discipline or know-how to make a success of it.<sup>35</sup>

Some 17 years after he first arrived in England, Prewett still enjoyed assuming the identity of a Mohawk or Iroquois, but amid the trials and tribulations of his erratic editing and failed publishing career, he had always written poetry and tended to his gardening.

We can only imagine that the increased global tensions of the late 1930s and the outbreak of the Second World War must have sent Prewett's mind reeling with painful memories of the First World War. Regardless, and for reasons we can only surmise, he enlisted. Prewett, although he would have been 46 years old, was considered fit enough to become a superintendent of an ammunition dump in Birmingham, and he later became an "advisor" to an Operational Research Section of Air Force Fighter Command in



southern England. Painful though it must have been to enter a new war emotionally scarred from an earlier one, from an artistic perspective Prewett drew on his experiences. The results are some of his best poetry now free from much of its youthful awkwardness.

After having served in southeast Asia, Prewett was retired from the Air Force due to illness in 1954. He spent his last days in failing health in the Cotswold hamlet of Fifield doing a bit of farming and a little writing, striving always, as he stated poignantly to an old Garsington friend Dorothy Brett, "to translate the man to the fields and the fields to the man...I have been a good deal abroad, but my isolation even so is largely my own doing. I am sufficient in digging, reading and writing."<sup>36</sup> The final verse in *Poems*, written some 30 years earlier, is a testament to the simple requirements of Prewett's "sufficiency":

If I might have two rows of trees  
And a quiet space between,  
Where stirred none, or the faintest, breeze  
And the grass stood thick and green;

If there the sunshine might come through  
In dappled shadow dots,  
With yellow flowers, and pink, and blue  
Orderly set in plots;

Then would I take my days in ease  
And watch the butterflies  
Pensive between the rows of trees  
Parade their newest dyes.

While visiting a friend in Inverness, Prewett became seriously ill and died at Raigmore Hospital on 16 February 1962 and was buried in Tomnahurich Cemetery. Resting thousands of miles from the land of his birth, Prewett is virtually unknown as a Canadian writer.



Similarly, his literary output has long remained unacknowledged. Of that body of work, only a handful of Prewett's war poems share qualities with the canonised works of war – specifically, those by Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Sassoon. His “Card Game,” however, is a poem in the tradition of those better-known war poems and is conspicuous by its absence from *The Collected Poems of Frank Prewett*. Arguably, from a Canadian perspective, “Card Game” should be both as notable as McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields,” and as valued as many of the more familiar “great” war poems. Its irony, its understated horror, its verbal economy, its emotionally numbed soldiers, and its grimly incongruous elements all contribute to the rejection of the myth – *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* – that war is ennobling. Unfortunately, it has been ignored:

Hearing the whine and crash  
We hastened out  
And found a few poor men  
Lying about.

I put my hand in the breast  
Of the first met.  
His heart thumped, stopped, and I drew  
My hand out wet.

Another, he seemed a boy,  
Rolled in the mud  
Screaming, “my legs, my legs,”  
And he poured out his blood.

We bandaged the rest  
And went in,  
And started again at our cards  
Where we had been.

Ultimately, concerns of poetic value are perhaps secondary to our appreciation of a Canadian writer and soldier who persevered through two cataclysmic world wars and struggled to survive mentally and emotionally in their aftermath. Regardless of the trauma, by sheer force of personality and charisma, “Toronto” Prewett touched the lives of many notable figures in the British artistic community of his time. That same personality and charisma is a source of interest for us today. In this aspect, if in no other, Frank Prewett is an intriguing and yet unrecognised figure within a rich Canadian literary and military history.

## Notes

1. Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920* (London: Faber, n.d.), pp.75-76.
2. Virginia Woolf, *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman. Vol.II, 1912-1922 (London: Hogarth), p.479.
3. *Toronto Star*, 20 September 1947; 4 November 1937.
4. Robert Graves, ed., *The Collected Poems of Frank Prewett* (London: Cassell, 1964), p.51.
5. *Collected Poems*, p.50.
6. *Collected Poems*, p.52.
7. James Mavor Collection, “Notes From the Seat of War,” Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto Manuscript Collections, MS.119, Box 47.
8. Bruce Meyer, ed., *Selected Poems of Frank Prewett* (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1987), p.4.
9. National Archives of Canada, Record Group 9, III Vol. 731, m-16-2.
10. University of Toronto Archives A73-0026, box 368, File 41.
11. Paul O'Prey, *Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914-1926* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p.105.
12. Lady Ottoline's letters are housed in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin [HRC].
13. HRC, 19 December 1919.
14. HRC, 15 July 1920.
15. HRC, 15 March 1922.
16. *Collected Poems*, viii.
17. HRC, 19 September 1919.
18. HRC, 15 July 1920.
19. HRC, 14 April 1920.
20. Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey*, p.199.
21. Noel Carrington, ed., *Selected Letters of Mark Gertler* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1965), p.197.
22. HRC, 14 April 1920.
23. HRC, 14 April 1920; author's emphasis.
24. See Sandra Jobson Darroch, *Ottoline: The Life of Lady Ottoline Morrell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976).
25. Gertler, *Selected Letters*, p.209.
26. HRC, 4 August 1923.
27. *Poems* (1921); *The Rural Scene* (1924).
28. HRC, 30 January 1921.
29. HRC, 17 October 1919.
30. Oxford University Archives, *Institute of Agricultural Economics*, Director's Memorandum, 1927.
31. *Institute of Agricultural Economics*, Director's Report, 30 September 1930.
32. *Toronto Star*, 23 May 1933.
33. *The Countryman*, July 1929, p.240.
34. Letter to me from Victor Bonham-Carter, 26 July 1986.
35. Letter to me from Thirza West, 27 June 1986.
36. HRC, 24 March 1954.

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