The strange diminution of Thornton Tyrrell

by Margaret Moran

Siegfried Sassoon's Long Journey: Selections from the Sherston Memoirs. Edited by Paul Fussell. A Giniger Book. London: Faber and Faber; New York and Toronto: Oxford U.P., 1983. Pp. xx, 180. Many photographs. £11.95.

IN *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, Siegfried Sassoon had his persona say: "While composing these apparently interminable memoirs there have been moments when my main problem was what to select from the 'long littleness'—or large untidiness—of life."[1] Evidently, Paul Fussell has decided that the method of selection Sassoon used for his three-volume fictionalized autobiography lacked sufficient rigour. For Fussell is so determined to make the long story shorter that he reduces the trilogy to approximately one-quarter its original size in the abridgment he still finds reason to call *Siegfried Sassoon's Long Journey*. Not the least result of the severe cutting is that Bertrand Russell, under the name of Thornton Tyrrell, almost vanishes from the text. (His role in Sassoon's life is explained cursorily in the introduction.) In Sassoon's account, Tyrrell made a brief but decisive appearance at the time when Sherston's aversion to the waging of the First World War had grown intolerable. By offering advice, Tyrrell contributed to Sherston's anti-war protest that created the acute moral dilemma at the end of the central volume, *The Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*.

Having enlisted at the outbreak of the war, Sassoon showed bravery in combat. But after being wounded at the Somme, he returned to England in the summer of 1917 so appalled by the exploitation of the courage of the troops that he threw his Military Cross into the sea and decided to make his outrage public. Russell helped, first by warning of the probable consequences of his action, and then by assisting with the revision of his statement. Since Sassoon was by no means "an out-and-out pacifist", Russell believed that "it would be a pity"[2] if he became inextricably connected in the popular perception with those who were. For this reason, Russell was cautious about becoming too visibly a part of Sassoon's crusade. Still, he brought Sassoon's problem to the attention of a Member of Parliament, H. B. Lees-Smith, and prepared also to solicit the aid of the Garsington circle. "*We* have to see that there *is* 'scandal' and no 'hushing-up'", he told Lady Ottoline Morrell (no. 1,464, 21 July 1917). For all these services, Sassoon felt genuine gratitude.

[1] London: Faber and Faber, 1983, p. 528.

[2] Letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, no. 1,463, pmk. 15 July 1917.

Aside from changes in very trivial details and some unavoidable omissions, his portrayal of Thornton Tyrrell is an accurate rendering of Russell's intervention on his behalf.[3] Indeed, his report of their conversation early in July 1917 seems to come very close to a verbatim transcription. Sassoon put these words into the mouth of Thornton Tyrrell:

> I have always regarded all wars as acts of criminal folly, and my hatred of this one has often made my life seem almost unendurable. But hatred makes one vital, and without it one loses energy. "Keep vital" is a more important axiom than "love your neighbour". This act of yours, if you stick to it, will probably land you in prison. Don't let that discourage you. You will be more alive in prison than you would be in the trenches. (*Complete Memoirs*, p. 479)

A year later, when Russell's own pacifist activities landed him in prison, he exhorted himself by repeating the message in a letter to Lady Ottoline:

> Hatred of some sort is quite necessary—it needn't be towards people. But without some admixture of hate one becomes too soft and loses energy. "Keep vital" is the first and great commandment, greater even than loving one's neighbour—and a great deal that thinks it is love is only lack of vitality leading to lack of combativeness. (1 Aug. 1918)

Even the large expansiveness of Sassoon's *Memoirs* did not allow for a description of all aspects of Russell's concern for his well-being. There was no scope for mentioning the philosopher's interest in Sassoon's circumstances at the convalescent homes where Lady Ottoline later visited and wrote to him.[4] Nor could there be a place to record Russell's vehement reaction when he read a critical review of Sassoon's poetry. Russsell rushed into print under the pseudonym "Philalethes" with a defence of the veracity of his descriptions.[5] And he asked Lady Ottoline

[3] For further details, see Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), pp. 320–4, and S. P. Rosenbaum, "The Logic of a Literary Symbol" in *Russell in Review*, ed. J. E. Thomas and Kenneth Blackwell (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hakkert, 1976), pp. 80–1.

[4] See Lady Ottoline Morrell's letters to Russell of 4 and 25 August 1918.

[5] *The Nation*, 23 (27 July 1918): 446. The review of Sassoon's *Counter-Attack* was by J. Middleton Murry.

to convey to their author his admiration for their capacity to convince him about "the authentic truth of war. I like the absence of ultimate reconciliation of discords" (25 July 1918). Since Sassoon confined Sherston to a portrayal of himself *qua* sportsman and officer, he ruled out any opportunity to acknowledge Russell's interest in his poetic achievement. Still, Sassoon's characterization of Bertrand Russell as Thornton Tyrrell was an honest and gracious representation of a person whose advice he respected but could not completely follow.

If Sassoon valued Russell's support in 1917, he found himself much more susceptible to those who counselled a totally different course of action. Persuaded by Robert Graves, he agreed to appear before a medical board. When the board decided that he had suffered shell-shock so that he could not be held responsible for his behaviour, he was sent to a hospital in Scotland to recover. Sassoon's highest praises were reserved for W. H. R. Rivers, the psychiatrist who rehabilitated him there for the further military service described in *Sherston's Progress*.

Although the dramatic protest Sassoon had been encouraged by Russell to make was thereby muted, the treatment of the episode in Fussell's edition cannot be justified. Its presentation betrays Fussell's general tendency to gloss over the ambivalent attitudes in Sassoon's story. Fussell's wish to emphasize Sassoon's undeniable merits as a soldier and a chronicler of experience in the trenches is achieved at the expense of the anguished uncertainty that accompanied his efforts in peace and war to conduct himself heroically. Fussell's edition will attract attention for the sake of its splendid design and its extraordinary photographs, but it is a book that is better to look at than to read. In comparison, the unadorned and unexpurgated text Sassoon actually wrote proves he was right to "prefer a good story to be told slowly" (*Complete Memoirs*, p. 551).

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