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Some Poetic Voices of John Drinkwater

based on a talk given to the Friends of the Dymock Poets and the Autumn in Malvern Festival, 5 October 2013, by Wyn Hobson

Most or all of the poems of John Drinkwater that are currently in print are to be found in two publications: Linda Hart’s Dymock Poets Anthology, *Once They Lived in Gloucestershire*¹, and the Friends of the Dymock Poets pamphlet *Twelve Poems by John Drinkwater*². The main focus of both publications is on the period, just before the First World War, when the poets came together in rural Gloucestershire; naturally, therefore, most of the featured poems concern the rural or natural world in one way or another, even where the poems were written before or after that time.

But Drinkwater, like his colleagues, also addressed other subjects in his poetry throughout his creative life; and the object of this article is to draw attention to some of these other subjects, and to the variety of styles and approaches he used to explore them.

I’ll begin, though, with five of his poems on rural themes, starting with “The Broken Gate”, from the volume *Poems 1908–1914*.

I know a little broken gate
 Beneath the apple-boughs and pines,
The seasons lend it coloured state,
 And round its hinge the ivy twines—
The ivy and the bloomless rose,
 And autumn berries flaming red;
The pine its gracious scent bestows,
 The apple-boughs their treasure shed.

It opens on an orchard hung
 With heavy-laden boughs that spill
Their brown and yellow fruit among
 The withered stems of daffodil:
The river from its shallows freed
 Here falls upon a stirless peace,
The tides of time suspended lead
 The tired spirit to release.

A little land of mellowed ease
 I find beyond my broken gate,
I hear amid the laden trees

A magic song, and there elate
I pass along from sound and sight
Of men who fret the world away,—
I gather rich and rare delight
Where every day is holy day.

That poem illustrates several features that made Drinkwater's poetry both popular with the reading public of his day, and the target of a good deal of critical attack. The orchard is perceived as a sequestered place where the wearisome and endless pressures of urban life may be temporarily set aside — an aspiration that remains a common and potent one to this day. But while a certain realism of observation informs the detail of the descriptions, the reference to the hearing of “a magic song” suggests a lapse into fanciful escapism.

Some of Drinkwater's poetry on rural subjects has other limitations. For example, his portrayals of the lives of those who live and work in the countryside generally present them as being fulfilled and contented, and show little or no awareness of the realities of early 20th Century rural poverty — even when he was in a position to observe it at relatively close quarters, during the period from 1917 to 1921 when he left the urban environment in which he had been born and bred, to live in the village of Far Oakridge, near Stroud.

In revisiting Drinkwater's poetry, however, I've found that some of his best writing on rural subjects is found in poems where his responses to the rural world are interwoven with other preoccupations. For example, the poem “In Lady Street” (again from *Poems 1908–1914*) is built on an explicit contrast between the rural and the urban. It concerns a Gloucestershire man who works as a trader in fruit, vegetables and flowers in one of Birmingham's busiest shopping-streets in the early years of the last century. Though the sun, in the second paragraph of the following extract, is described by means of a rather hackneyed comparison with a god, the picture of the urban and rural environments is built up through precisely-observed sensory impressions. And the longed-for rural world is presented through the countryman's memories of it — not a poet's constructed fancies.

All day long the traffic goes
In Lady Street by dingy rows
Of sloven houses, tattered shops—
Fried fish, old clothes and fortune-tellers—
Tall trams on silver-shining rails,
With grinding wheels and swaying tops,
And lorries with their corded bales,
And screeching cars. “Buy, buy!” the sellers
Of rags and bones and sickening meat
Cry all day long in Lady Street.

And when the sunshine has its way
In Lady Street, then all the grey
Dull desolation grows in state
More dull and grey and desolate,
And the sun is a shamefast thing,
A lord not comely-housed, a god
Seeing what gods must blush to see,
A song where it is ill to sing,
And each gold ray despiteously
Lies like a gold ironic rod.

Yet one grey man in Lady Street
Looks for the sun. He never bent
Life to his will, his travelling feet
Have scaled no cloudy continent,
Nor has the sickle-hand been strong.
He lives in Lady Street; a bed,
Four cobwebbed walls.

But all day long
A time is singing in his head
Of youth in Gloucester lanes. He hears
The wind among the barley-blades,
The tapping of the woodpeckers
On the smooth beeches, thistle-spades
Slicing the sinewy roots; he sees
The hooded filberts in the copse
Beyond the loaded orchard trees,
The netted avenues of hops;
He smells the honeysuckle thrown
Along the hedge. He lives alone,
Alone—yet not alone, for sweet
Are Gloucester lanes in Lady Street.

The idea of the sensations produced by such recollections “in lonely rooms, and ’mid the din/ Of towns and cities”³ is of course Wordsworthian — and Wordsworth was a poet Drinkwater evidently admired. Drinkwater’s poem “Water-meadows”, published in the volume *Summer Harvest* in 1933, explores the idea that, if the individual can achieve an appropriate receptiveness, the natural world can act as a releasing and restorative influence on his life.

Cool in the furnace of July
The water-meadows lie;
The green stalks of their grasses and their flowers
They still refresh at fountains never dry;

And in the parchéd hours,
Taking the burning beams as a caress,
Perpetually watered, they defy
The sun's excess.

So let my mind be watered at the springs
Of temperate things;
That when the fumes of passion, and the heat
Of intellectual pride
Menace my song, and threaten with defeat
The mood that lonely sings,
I may put all that vanity aside,
And keep my vision clear and cool as those
Good meadows, green
In the high summer day;
May tell what bright ascensions I have seen,
To be no less attentive in repose,
And fresh in heart as they.

However, an earlier poem, “Reciprocity”, published in the volume *Tides* in 1917, sounds a note of sceptical caution about the idea of the natural world's potential influence on mankind. The diction of the opening lines is deliberately plain, as Drinkwater succinctly, and with a hint of irony, demolishes the crude anthropomorphism that a careless reading of Wordsworth is liable to give rise to. He goes on to acknowledge that the qualities he himself sometimes ascribes to a landscape are in fact no more than projections of his own need for solace at the time — and that the landscape sometimes fails to provide it:

I do not think that skies and meadows are
Moral, or that the fixture of a star
Comes of a quiet spirit, or that trees
Have wisdom in their windless silences.
Yet these are things invested in my mood
With constancy, and peace, and fortitude,
That in my troubled season I can cry
Upon the wide composure of the sky,
And envy fields, and wish that I might be
As little daunted as a star or tree.

Drinkwater's poem “The Patriot”, published in the volume *Loyalties* in 1919, shows that for him, love of countryside was in part an aspect of the love of country, and that his love of country expressed itself in the love of specific rural places — a number of which the poem names.

In several poems written for great public occasions, by contrast, he contents himself with generalised expressions of a love of England, and a facile,

uncritical pride in her history and empire. Rennie Parker, in her British Council booklet on the Georgian Poets⁴, suggests that Drinkwater, being self-educated from the age of 15, and having escaped only with great effort from the life of an insurance clerk, felt less difficulty than most other poets in writing in this way for a popular market.

In “The Patriot”, though, the tone of voice is quite different: his country’s empire and its international repute are not what is truly important to him, and he quietly but explicitly rejects both hostility to the foreign, and the belief in the superiority of one’s own land:

Scarce is my life more dear to me,
Brief tutor of oblivion,
Than fields below the rookery
That comfortably looks upon
The little street of Piddington.

I never think of Avon’s meadows,
Ryton woods or Rydal mere,
Or moon-tide moulding Cotswold shadows,
But I know that half the fear
Of death’s indifference is here.

I love my land. No heart can know
The patriot’s mystery, until
It aches as mine for woods ablow
In Gloucestershire with daffodil,
Or Bicester brakes that violets fill.

No man can tell what passion surges
For the house of his nativity
In the patriot’s blood, until he purges
His grosser mood of jealousy,
And comes to meditate with me

Of gifts of earth that stamp his brain
As mine the pools of Ludlow mill,
The hazels fencing Trilly’s Lane,
And Forty Acres under Brill,
The ferry under Elsfield hill.

These are what England is to me,
Not empire, nor the name of her
Ranging from pole to tropic sea.
These are the soil in which I bear
All that I have of character.

That men my fellows near and far
 May live in like communion,
Is all I pray; all pastures are
 The best beloved beneath the sun;
I have my own; I envy none.

I want now to turn to some poems in which Drinkwater engages with religious experience, or expresses a religious viewpoint. As the reader may have noticed already, this is a subject on which he touches briefly in several of his poems. The number of poems in which it is the principal subject-matter, though, is small, and it's perhaps partly for that reason that this is an area that has received comparatively little attention in discussions of his work. Three poems will serve to illustrate something of the diversity of his approaches to it.

In one of his earliest published poems, "A Prayer" (from *Poems 1908–1914*), the poet says that he does not ask for greater knowledge, understanding or insight: these have either been granted by God already, or will be granted in the fullness of time. What is painfully lacking is the human will to act on them:

Lord, not for light in darkness do we pray,
Not that the veil be lifted from our eyes,
Nor that the slow ascension of our day
 Be otherwise.

Not for a clearer vision of the things
Whereof the fashioning shall make us great,
Not for remission of the peril and stings
 Of time and fate.

Not for a fuller knowledge of the end
Whereto we travel, bruised yet unafraid,
Nor that the little healing that we lend
 Shall be repaid.

Not these, O Lord. We would not break the bars
Thy wisdom sets about us; we shall climb
Unfettered to the secrets of the stars
 In thy good time.

We do not crave the high perception swift
When to refrain were well, and when fulfil,
Nor yet the understanding strong to sift
 The good from ill.

Not these, O Lord. For these Thou hast revealed,

We know the golden season when to reap
The heavy-fruited treasure of the field,
The hour to sleep.

Not these. We know the hemlock from the rose,
The pure from stained, the noble from the base,
The tranquil holy light of truth that glows
On Pity's face.

We know the paths wherein our feet should press,
Across our hearts are written Thy decrees,
Yet now, O Lord, be merciful to bless
With more than these.

Grant us the will to fashion as we feel,
Grant us the strength to labour as we know,
Grant us the purpose, ribbed and edged with steel,
To strike the blow.

Knowledge we ask not—knowledge Thou hast lent,
But, Lord, the will—there lies our bitter need,
Give us to build above the deep intent
The deed, the deed.

A contrast to the pained meditateness of that poem can be found in one whose substance is satire: the standpoint is more outward-looking, and the tone ironic. The opening couplet of "Elizabeth Ann", another poem from the volume *Tides*, strikes a note of social censoriousness that is undercut by what follows — though the poem's Christian viewpoint is not fully revealed until the last line.

This is the tale of Elizabeth Ann,
Who went away with her fancy man.

Ann was a girl who hadn't a gown
As fine as the ladies who walk the town.

All day long from seven to six
Ann was polishing candlesticks,

For Bishops and crapulous Millionaires
To buy for their altars or bed-chambers.

And youth in a year and a year will pass,
But there's never an end of polishing brass.

All day long from seven to six—

Seventy thousand candlesticks.

So frail and lewd Elizabeth Ann
Went away with her fancy man.

You Bishops and crapulous Millionaires,
Give her your charity, give her your prayers.

The third poem in this group, "Dick Mapletoft's Christmas" is an uncollected piece included in the posthumously-published third volume of Drinkwater's *Collected Poems* in 1937. A narrative in ballad metre, it works a variant on the familiar gospel stories, placing the tale of a vision, experienced by an aged countryman, in a precisely-observed village and countryside setting in an English winter. Though it's humorously hinted that the experience may in part have been the result of slight festive overindulgence, the vision's spiritual authenticity is not doubted.

"I'll be a ghost come Christmas,"
 Dick Mapletoft he said,
"By Christmas Day in the morning
 I doubt I shall be dead."
But Christmas came and found him,
 In velveteen and cord,
Bright as a young saint chanting
 His service to the Lord.

For overnight his burden
 Of years had been put by.
And now at three and eighty
 He was too young to die;
Too young to heed the labours
 His travelling feet had trod,
For he had seen a marvel,
 And heard the voice of God.

Good ale was at the Seven Stars,
 As you may well believe;
Among his mates Methuselah
 Was Dick on Christmas Eve;
He drank a pint, he drank a quart,
 Until the logs burnt low,
Then for his home upon the hill
 He made across the snow.

The snow was deep upon the path,

And he would sometimes turn
To see the glowing window panes
With ebbing lustre burn;
And sometimes he would stop and stare
Upon the holly tree,
Shining with moonlit berries cold
As coral of the sea.

He saw the frozen stars above,
And stars upon the snow,
And on the naked apple boughs
The tufted mistletoe;
He saw great rings about the moon
A crown of throbbing light,
And icicles that from the thorn
Sparkled upon the night.

It may be that his mind was on
The iterated tale,
Maybe his revelation came
From frost and English ale,—
But on him, as he trod the snow
His homeward way along,
Descended in authority
The vision and the song.

For sudden on a wintry hill,
Husht in the clear moonlight,
Behold! he saw the Shepherds there
Who watched their flocks by night;
And on the instant as he stood
In wonder of the thing,
He heard across the spangling sky
The Herald Angels sing.

He heard Hosannas on the frost,
He heard Goodwill, Goodwill,
He scented myrrh and frankincense
Upon his homeland hill;
And to the Shepherds' company,
Out of the eastern wold,
He saw three sceptred Kings come down,
With tidings to be told.

He saw the Shepherds rise and go
Over the hills and far

Away with those most mighty Kings;
He saw the guiding star.
And as the Herald Angels sang
He followed on and on,—
And when within his cot he woke
His burdened age had gone.

And so on Christmas morning,
A yeoman in his pew,
He knew, as neither parson
Nor congregation knew,
That verily upon that hour
The flower of David's stem
Had blossomed in a manger
Of Holy Bethlehem.

From the essential simplicity of that conception, it's interesting to turn, for both comparison and contrast, to a small selection of the poems in which Drinkwater attempts to draw upon the inner world of a child. The first of these is only partly addressed to children, in point of fact. From beneath a whimsical tone that at moments echoes Lewis Carroll, there emerges a perfectly serious statement of his preference for, and almost religious wonderment at, the actualities of the physical world around him. Published in 1924 (in the volume *From an Unknown Isle*), this is "The Heresy of an Elder on Not Believing in Fairies".

I don't believe in fairies;—
I've something else to do,
Believing that behind the clouds
The sky is always blue,
That every day at half-past one
It's nearly half past two.

I don't believe in fairies,
Because my Uncle James
Transcendentalised about them,
And told me of their games,
While he never saw the flying birds,
And didn't know their names.

I don't believe in fairies;
I think that lazy men
Who think the sunshine commonplace
Invented them, and then
Forgot that it is wonderful
That five and five make ten.

I saw the lambs at Whitsuntide,
 And a bullfinch in a tree,
I saw a mushroom in the mist
 And the dolphins in the sea,—
I don't believe in fairies,
 But these are faith for me.

Clear are the stars and the thrushes' eggs
 For tidy hearts to find,
And I think that fays and leprechauns
 Are slatterns of the mind,
And if I ever meet one
 I shall know that I am blind.

Drinkwater published two books of verse for children: *All About Me: Poems for a Child* in 1928, and *More About Me: Poems for a Child* in 1929. It has to be acknowledged that not a few of these poems suffer from a characteristic shortcoming of early-20th Century writing for the young — namely the lingering Victorian tendency to portray children's feelings and impulses as being those that adults would like them to be. Moreover, the social milieu portrayed is a very narrow one: the voice that speaks in the poems often *is* the voice of a child — but a child of a very literate upper-middle class family.

However, there are a few of these poems in which Drinkwater does succeed in getting inside the way a young child thinks. In the poem "I Want to Know—" from *All About Me*, for example, he makes a good stab at presenting a child's puzzlement and wistful exasperation at the bewildering array of adult standards to which she is expected to conform:

I want to know why when I'm late
For school, they get into a state,
But if invited out to tea
I mustn't ever early be.

Why, if I'm eating nice and slow,
It's "Slow-coach, hurry up, you know!"
But if I'm eating nice and quick
It's "Gobble-gobble, you'll be sick!"

Why, when I'm walking in the street
My clothes must always be complete,
While at the seaside I can call
It right with nothing on at all.

Why I must always go to bed

When other people don't instead,
And why I have to say good-night
Always before I'm ready, quite.

Why seeds grow up instead of down,
Why sixpence isn't half a crown,
Why kittens are so quickly cats,
And why the angels have no hats.

It seems, however hard they try,
That nobody can tell me why,
So I know really, I suppose,
As much as anybody knows.

In the poem "Tiptoe Night", from *More About Me*, Drinkwater leaves specific social milieu behind, and enters the speculative world of an imaginative child more completely (though the diction, paradoxically, is rather less childlike).

Tiptoe Night comes down the lane,
All alone, without a word,
Taking for his own again
Every little flower and bird.

Not a footfall, not a sigh,
Not a ripple of the air,
Not a sound to reckon by,
Yet I know that he is there.

And I count them as I wait,
Step by tiptoe step, until—
Hush! he's at the garden-gate,
Hush! he's at the window-sill.

Even a partial survey of the poetic voices employed in John Drinkwater's poetry would be incomplete without including examples of his dramatic poetry, as found in the verse plays with which his career as a dramatist began.

It's true that these plays are open to one of the principal criticisms levelled at the English poetic drama of the 20th Century, namely that their dramatic movement is comparatively static. In the 19th Century, as the romantic ethos strengthened its grip on the literary imagination, poetry became more and more concerned with the exploration of individual inner feeling and states of mind, so that by the early 20th Century the language of verse drama was less grounded in action and the propulsive energy of conflict than it had been between the Elizabethan period and the time of Dryden.

That, however, is perhaps a little less true of Drinkwater's second play, *Rebellion*, first performed in 1914, than it was of his subsequent essays in the genre; and one of its speeches will serve to suggest what might have been, had he not decided to adopt prose as his dramatic medium from 1918 onwards.

Rebellion concerns an insurrection against Phane, the tyrannical king of an imaginary kingdom in an unspecified ancient time; and its second scene includes a confrontation between him and his queen, Shubia. She has little interest in matters of policy or affairs of state: she married Phane because she believed him to be an adventurous free spirit, who would break through conventions to find a new strength and intensity of living. In reality, he is a man who is reluctant to depart from what he thinks of as 'the appointed way', and who relies rigidly on what he calls 'armoured law'. Shubia challenges him to try to understand why some of his subjects are rebelling over an issue of tithes and tribute. "I know not why they are rebellious," he replies. "I know that they rebel." This is Shubia's response:

They question your blind government, and so
They err beyond all pardon; they have dared
Dispute upon the throne-steps, and for that
Death only has due answer. Phane, you king,
You favoured of heaven, you story among men,—
Blind wonder on earth, O very king of kings,
Not yet is suffered your birth-agony.
What was it? But some loaves at harvest-time?
A tax of yoke-beasts? How was the council manned?
Some quarrel of right or plea or privilege,
And straight the mind in you goes out. You king,
You chartered god on earth, did you then say
What matter it be thus or thus,—if thus,
Will sleep be less beneficent in the night,
Will the fruits of earth be ruder to the lips,
Will the colours of day be jeopardised,
Or the builders and the weavers lose their craft,
The passion falter in the songman's song?
Were you so wise, my king? And did you say
This that they ask is but a little thing,
No more than a move of pieces on the board
When the game's over? No. You cried aloud
Like a mazed prophet that the evil ones
Were in the holy sheep-fields. All the land
Must arm for this. Was the great state not wronged,
The sacred state—was it not mocked in question,
And must not every threshold stand ajar
Against the still home-coming of the dead?

It's true that even here, the accumulation of metaphoric and descriptive detail in the passage from "Will sleep be less beneficent..." to "...falter in the songman's song" temporarily slows down the dramatic evolution of the discourse. Nonetheless, in the extract as a whole, the number of changes of tone — that is, the way language manifests both the speaker's attitude to the person she is talking to and her attitude to what she is talking about — is striking. From a blunt statement of Shubia's own understanding of what the people feel, she shifts to an ironic expression of what she takes to be Phane's attitude, strongly suggesting its inhumanity. The tone changes again as she piles up honorifics apparently denoting admiration of his royal status — before deflating it with the assertion that his understanding is less than that of a child.

A series of ironic rhetorical questions suggests that the grounds of the dispute are trivial, and that the king's counsellors are incompetent. Another directly-stated criticism ("...straight the mind in you goes out") is followed by a further series of rhetorical questions laying bare Phane's lack of wisdom. After the last of these, the single word "No", on the central stressed syllable of the line, is a crushing comment on Phane's lack of a sense of proportion. Then Shubia switches once again to angrily ironic expressions of Phane's intemperate reactions, culminating in a statement of the price he appears determined shall be paid in lost lives. With the partial exception of the more static passage referred to above, the overall sense is of a passionate voice attacking a human target from a multiplicity of viewpoints in face-to-face confrontation.

The most popular of Drinkwater's verse plays was *The Storm*, first performed in 1915. Its story of three women waiting for the return of a man who has gone out in a ferocious blizzard struck a chord with audiences who were beginning to realise that the continental war was not going to be a short-lived affair, and who were having to come to terms with large and ever-lengthening casualty-lists.

Most of the play's discourse concerns the contrasting ways in which the women confront the possibility that the man is now dead; and the principal event is the sudden arrival of a young stranger who has been travelling through the storm. For Alice, the missing man's wife, the storm is a symbol of inhuman savagery, madness, and betrayal; the stranger's view of it is in striking contrast. His first words describe the storm as "beauty trampling men like crumpled leaves", and he continues:

I set
Every sinew taut against this power,
This supple torrent of might that suddenly rose
Out of the fallen dusk and sang and leapt
Like an athlete of the gods frenzied with wine.
It seemed to rear challenging against me,

As though the master from Valhalla's tables,
Grown heady in his revels, had cried out—
Behold me now crashing across the earth
To shake the colonies of antic men
Into a fear shall be a jest, my fellows!
And I measured myself against this bragging pride,
Climbing step by step through the blinding riot
Of frozen flakes swung on the cataract wind,
My veins praising the tyranny that was matched
Against this poor ambitious body of mine.

After dialogue consisting largely of extended, rather choric and slightly repetitive reflection by the women, the stranger's entrance is an eruption of language connoting movement and force — “torrent of might”, “sang and leapt”, “like an athlete... frenzied”, “to rear challenging”, “crashing across the earth”, “climbing... through the blinding riot”, “swung on the cataract wind”. What Alice sees as evil, the young man glories in.

What is being evoked here? Is this to be understood as a romantic celebration of unfettered energy — or was Drinkwater giving expression to the sense some people had, at the war's outset, that it provided an opportunity, in Rupert Brooke's words, “To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,/ Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary”⁵ ?

As we mark the centenary of the First World War, it's timely and fitting to conclude by looking at eight of Drinkwater's poems on the conflict, which again employ a variety of poetic voices.

Drinkwater did not serve in the armed forces. A pacifist by inclination, he was able to avail himself of the fact that married men were exempt from conscription. However, love of his country produced in him a strong sense of obligation to help resist external aggression, and an eagerness to make a contribution to the war effort; accordingly, he and his male colleagues at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre devoted their Sundays to the manufacturing of shell-cases at a nearby metal foundry. His war poetry thus provides an interesting insight into the evolving responses of a troubled, sensitive and patriotic observer from the home front.

His first poetic thoughts on the war were published in 1915 in the volume *Swords and Ploughshares*. In the poem “We Willed it Not”, apparently addressed to Kaiser Wilhelm, Drinkwater places the glories of German and English culture side by side as pillars of European civilisation, which the Kaiser has betrayed. The British are seen as having been forced into the forthcoming conflict — but their going to war is viewed as an exercising of justice. Here are the poem's last four stanzas:

Beethoven speaks with Milton on this day,

And Shakespeare's song with Goethe's beats the sky,
In witness of the birthright you betray,
In witness of the vision you deny.

We love the hearth, the quiet hills, the song,
The friendly gossip come from every land,
And very peace were now a nameless wrong,—
You thrust this bitter quarrel to our hand.

For this your pride the tragic armies go,
And the grim navies watch along the seas;
You trade in death, you mock at life, you throw
To God the tumult of your blasphemies.

You rob us of our love-right. It is said.
In treason to the world you are enthroned;
We rise, and, by the yet ungathered dead,
Not lightly shall the treason be atoned.

By the time he writes the poem “England to Belgium”, however, Drinkwater's tone has subtly altered. In a time of mobilisation following the German invasion of Belgium, the nationalistic impulse and a propagandist intent have come to the fore. The anti-jingoistic impartiality of his poem “The Patriot” is still four years in the future — in the aftermath of war — and what we hear in this poem is what Adrian Barlow, in his lecture on Drinkwater's poetry to the Friends of the Dymock Poets in 2008⁶, termed ‘the high rhetoric of 1914’. Here are the second and fourth stanzas:

Because your Belgian fields are dear,
And now they suffer black despite,
Because your womanhood can hear
The menace on the lips of night,
Because you are a little clan
Of brothers, and because there comes
The thief among you, to a man
You take the challenge of your drums.

...

We will be comrades at your side,
Your battle and our battle one
To turn again this monstrous pride
That veils but does not know the sun;
Our blood and thews with yours are set
Against this creed of bar and goad,
The Ironside is in us yet
As when the ranks of Cromwell rode.

However, those two poems, along with five other war-related poems from *Swords and Ploughshares*, were omitted by Drinkwater from the first two volumes of his *Collected Poems* in 1923. It's evident that as the realities of the national blood-sacrifice began to become clear, he began to experience doubts as to the validity of his initial stance. These can be clearly detected in his poem "Nineteen-Fifteen", which was published in the volume *Olton Pools* in 1916 — though, interestingly, this poem too would be omitted from the *Collected Poems*. Against an English rural backdrop, personified Time challenges the basis of what is going on:

On a ploughland hill against the sky,
Over the barley, over the rye,
Time, which is now a black pine tree,
Holds out his arms and mocks at me—

'In the year of your Lord nineteen-fifteen
The acres are ploughed and the acres are green,
And the calves and the lambs and the foals are born,
But man the angel is all forlorn.

'The cropping cattle, the swallow's wing,
The wagon team and the pasture spring,
Move in their seasons and are most wise,
But man, whose image is in the skies,

'Who is master of all, whose hand achieves
The church and the barn and the homestead eaves—
How are the works of his wisdom seen
In the year of your Lord nineteen-fifteen?'

A war poem from *Swords and Ploughshares* that Drinkwater *didn't* omit from the *Collected Poems* is "Eclipse". To the scale of the carnage and destruction, he here responds with a horror, confusion and dejection that take his thoughts to the limits of coherence — and sometimes beyond. To that extent, the poem can't be numbered among his best; but it deserves a place in any survey of the way Drinkwater's poetic voice reflects the pressure of the impulse that prompts it to speech.

The occasion of the poem appears to be Christmas Day 1914 — but there is no reference to that day's brief spontaneous armistice between the soldiers of the two sides on the Western Front. The poet, hearing the bells of local festive celebration, deplores an apparent lack of awareness of the slaughter, and of how it violates Christian loving-kindness. The best of man's thought no longer has any efficacy; death is carrying away huge numbers; and what the eventual upshot will be is unforeseeable. What is the onlooker to do — simply try to

keep his own small space ordered? Die? Grieve for the dead? Better perhaps to bury the dead deep, and destroy all means of livelihood in despair. In the closing lines, the poet asks whether Christ's redemptive sacrifice is completely forgotten.

A man is dead . . . another dead . . .
God! can you count the companies
Of stars across dear heaven spread?
They are numbered even as these.

Blind brain of the world! And is the day
Moving about its Christmas bells?
Poor spinning brain, and wellaway . . .
Christ . . . Christ? But no man tells.

The thoughts of men are kings. They keep
The crown, the sepulchre, the song.
The thoughts of men are kings. They sleep
The thrones are empty overlong.

So rebel death a million-fold
Of lamentable service takes.
The prophesying heart is cold . . .
Is cold . . . or breaks.

What now were best? Some little thing?
To trim the dock-weed, cleanse the floor,
To die, to grieve on death, to bring
The pitcher to the door?

Dig deep the grave, hew down the tree,
Shatter the millstones, break the plough.
And was there once a Calvary?
And thorns upon His brow?

Drinkwater's most powerful evocation of the futile wastefulness of war was in his one-act verse play $x = 0$, first performed in 1917. After "Eclipse", however, he seems to have decided that his poetry should aim to bring comfort to the bereaved, by paying dignified tribute to the fallen. An example is his poem "The Man Who Won the War", which concerns the Unknown Warrior. Dated November 11th 1920, it was published in the volume *Seeds of Time* in 1921. This is a poem of public sentiment — albeit comparatively restrained in expression — and both the warrior and his death are idealised; but the second line contains an expression of the growing resentment against those whose rhetoric had sent millions to their deaths.

Whoever sinned in this, it was not he,

While warriors of the tongue defiled our name,
His was no casual service, nor shall be
A casual fame.

To-day let all philosophies be dumb.
And every ardour paused a moment thus,
To say of him, who back from death has come,—
“He died for us.”

Not lonely, though unnamed. Battalions deep
With you are ghostly multitudes, who tell
Nothing, nor claim. Together to your sleep
Pass, and farewell.

But in the poem “1914–1918: The Dead Speak”, published in *From an Unknown Isle* in 1924, the apparent idealisation becomes a weapon. The dead here disavow any desire for tributes and ceremonies; but they also claim they are not bitter, that they blame no-one, that they do not resent the years of life that have been granted to the living, and that they do not forget how the living grieved for them. But just as the denials of reality reach the point of intolerability for a modern reader, Drinkwater administers the sting in the tail that reveals the poem’s ironic intent.

In the earth, in the seas, we remember;
We dead, we are awake;
But bitterness we know not
Who died for beauty’s sake;
We have no need of honour,
No quarrel we recall,
The lies, the little angers—
We have forgiven all.

In the earth, in the seas, we remember;
We dead, a myriad name;
But not among our legions
Is any word of blame;
We gave, and there an ending
Of covenants gone by,
We ask no funeral splendour
Who were content to die.

In the earth, in the seas, we remember;
We dead, your length of days;
But still the stealth of darkness
Makes one of all delays—
A year, or ten, or twenty,

How little then the cost—
Fear not, we have forgiven
The little years we lost.

In the earth, in the seas, we remember;
We dead, your daily debt;
The old heart-break is over,
But we remember yet—
Is earth a sweeter temple
Because we let you live?
Or do you still betray us,
That we may not forgive?

Drinkwater's angriest and most direct denunciation of those who defended or advocated war, however, came in a poem he wrote in 1931, in response to a statement made by Sir Arthur Keith, an eminent anthropologist of the day, during his Rectorial Address to the students of Aberdeen University. The statement — "War is Nature's Pruning-hook" — forms the poem's title; and Drinkwater's censure is lethal:

Sir Arthur Keith of Scotland, there is judgement set between
Your Science and the Souls of certain boys in Aberdeen;
They took you for their Rector, and they asked you for your rule
That should be a thing remembered when they came no more to school.
And you told them that the Nature of your scientific ken
Made war a bloody pruning-hook to prune the earth of men.
Did you know, my lord, that Nature has the nature that we seek,
Takes her bent, her cue, her bias, from the very word we speak?
You said this thing and, saying, you gave it fearful breath,
For each word for peace is life, and each word for war is death.
You bade your boys, Lord Rector, count this evil as a good,
And the bidding has engendered the evil in their blood.
If you have no better gospel for salvation of the young,
Then, in the name of Science, for God's sake hold your tongue.

I conclude, however, with another of the poems published in 1924: "We Mothers Know". Here once more, Drinkwater adopts the collective voice of others, and expresses their grief and their sense of betrayal by those "warriors of the tongue" who are again fanning the flames of international resentment. And though one reads the poem today in the sad knowledge that the hopes of the bereaved for the world's future, in the wake of the Great War, were not to be realised, John Drinkwater's poetic expression of those hopes, and of the quiet anguish and determination out of which they grew, remains a voice for all times.

"Peace," they have said.

Though the sad profit of our pain
We grieve till time is gone,
We shall not learn to build again
The bricks of Babylon—
Our sons are dead.

Stilled are the guns.
Good-will, they say, shall heal, shall bless
The lands now, year by year—
But though the merciful possess
The earth, they shall not hear
Our little sons.

They were our friends;
Our thought, our breath, our blood we gave
To make them so;
They bought us peace, and in the grave
Is all the peace they know,
To make amends.

Leaders and lords,
Who in your pride decree that thus
Or thus shall scores be paid,
An age is building when with us
Your reckoning shall be made,
Who have no swords.

We mothers know;
By the world's hearths we sit and dream;
Again we watch them die;
They willed the peace that you blaspheme,
And, though you still deny,
It shall be so.

¹ Linda Hart (ed.), *Once They Lived in Gloucestershire: A Dymock Poets Anthology*, Lechlade, Green Branch Press, 1995

² Jonathan Lumby (ed.), *Twelve Poems by John Drinkwater*, Ledbury, The Friends of the Dymock Poets, 2008

³ William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, ll.25–6

⁴ Rennie Parker, *The Georgian Poets: Abercrombie, Brooke, Drinkwater, Gibson and Thomas*, Plymouth, Northcote House Publishers in association with the British Council, 1999, p.49

⁵ Rupert Brooke (ed. Geoffrey Keynes), *The Poetical Works*, London, Faber and Faber, 1946/1970, p.19

⁶ Adrian Barlow, ‘‘The Word is Said’’: Re-reading the Poetry of John Drinkwater’, *Dymock Poets and Friends* No.8, Blackburn, The Friends of the Dymock Poets, 2009, p.24