

Reflections on two visits to Mametz Wood 1916 & 1984

Shattered trees and tortured earth
The acrid stench of decay
Of mangled bodies lying around
The battle not far away.
This man made devastation
Does man have no regrets?
Does he pause to ask the question?
Will the birds sing again in Mametz?

This Welsh lad lying near my feet
With blood matted auburn hair,
Was his father proud when he went to the war?
Did his mother shed a tear?
Did he leave a girl behind him?
Did he leave a girl behind him?
Awaiting the postman's knock,
Oh, the sadness when they learn of his death,
Dear God, help them to bear the shock.

That German boy, his bowels astrew
Fought for his Fatherland,
That he fought to the end is obvious
A stick bomb is still in his hand.
Did he hate us as much as we thought?
Was our enmity so just,
On his belt an insignia, 'GOD MIT UNS',
Did not the same God favour us?

As far as the eye can see
Dead bodies cover the earth,
The death of a generation
Condemned to die at birth,

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

When comes the day of reckoning
Who will carry the can?
For this awful condemnation,
Of man's inhumanity to man!

.....

What a wondrous pleasant sight
Unfolds before my eyes,
A panoply of magnificent trees
Stretching upwards to the skies,
Did someone help Dame Nature?
The sins of man to forget,
Where once there was war, now peace reigns supreme,
And the birds sing again in Mametz.

Harry Fellows

THE CAPTURE OF *MAMETZ* WOODS.

'Twas a glorious July morning,
And one I shall never forget,
When, with but a few hours' warning,
We were told the wood to get.

That night we slept out in the open,
Our thoughts went to those at home:
To mothers and fathers and brothers,
And loved ones far over the foam.
At daybreak that beautiful morning
Our troops advanced to the fray,
Just as the light was dawning-
The light of another day.
We charged the wood like madmen;
My God! what a charge we made;
The observers who watched behind us
Said 'twas better than on parade.
There was many a Garw boy felt that morn,
With never a thought of fear.
It never seemed to cross their minds
That for them the end was near.
There are plenty of names I could mention,
But one I shall always revere,
And that's brave Captain Lawrence,
The tired old Fusilier.

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

You have heard of the deeds of others-
Deeds that have never been hid,
But why so very little of what The *Welsh* Division did?

Pte. SYDNEY HATHERELL, 1 Lower Church St., Pontycymmer:

25 August 1916

The Glamorgan Gazette

Information for teachers

MAMETZ WOOD

We reached that dread inferno. And stormed the gates of hell.
Why wonder when I tell you, we all went, sort of mad.
But yet took pity on the Huns, crying 'Mercy, karmerad,"
For tho' we all remembered the brutal deeds they'd done.
We deigned to show them mercy, tho' they had shown us none.
We fought as Britons always do, the only way we know.
A clean, fair fight, with right as might, no matter who the foe.
So we battered them. and shattered them, until the wood was won,

The Cambria Daily Reader

17 July 1917

MAMETZ WOOD

Y CYMRU YN CYMERYD Y COED

Daeth adre'n y plygain o faes y gyflafan,
A'i gallon mor gynnes a bu hi erioed,
Daeth adre i'w frodir o waew'r Cyfandir,
Daeth adre'n ddiangol o "Frwydr y Coed."

O lawnder ei galon adroddodd yr hanes,
Am frwydr galetaf ymladdwyd erioed,
Am fechgyn o Gymru yn codi tan ganu
I ymlid y gelyn o'i ffau yn y coed.

Daeth atom i'r ffosydd frysneges Maeslywydd
I hwylio ein harfau ar frys, yn ddioed,
Ac ebe'r gorchymyn, "Rhaid symud y gelyn,
A'i erlid o'i loches, draw acw'n y Coed."

Y nos a enciliodd, a'r bore a wawriodd,
Y bore rhyfeddaf a welsom erioed,
A ni yn y ffosydd yn disgwyl yn eofn
Y gair i ymosod a chymryd y Coed.

"Chwi fechgyn o Gymru," medd Swyddog y gadlu,
"Rhaid heddyw ymdrechu'n fwy chwyrn nag erioed,
Aed pob un i weddi ar Dduw ei rieni,
Rhaid ymladd hyd farw, rhaid cymryd y Ceed."

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Ar hyn dyma'r bechgyn yn tarro hen emyn
Ar alw Gymreigaidd, mor ber ac erioed,
A'r canu rhyfeddaf, ie'r canu dwyfolaf,
Oedd canu y bechgyn cyn myned i'r Coed.

Yn swm taranfolltau, ergydion magnelau,
Cychwynodd y Gatrawd mor ddewr ac erioed,
A thân y gelynion ddisgynai yn greulon,
A'r glewion lu'n syrthio cyn cyrraedd y Coed.

Ar ol brwydr gwlaedlyd, ac ymladd dychrynlyd,
Enillwyd y frwydr galetaf erioed,
Ond beth am yr ingoedd pan gofier am gannoedd
O feddau dienw wrth odre y Coed.

Os canu yr emyn a ddarfu i'r bechgyn
Cyn marw'n y frwydr galetaf erioed,
Yn Seion yn canu yn rhydd o'i treialon,
Mae'r bechgyn "Aeth Adref" o frwydr y Coed.

Yng Nghymru mae mamau a briw eu calonnau,
Sydd heddyw yn ddyfnach, mwy llym nag erioed,
Eu bechgyn glân, tirion, a sail eu gobeithion,
Mewn beddau estronol – pris ennill y Coed.

O Walia deg, wyla, a than wylo cofia

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Dy feibion fu'n harddu dyn hanes erioed,
I oesoedd diderfyn clodforer dy fechgyn
Fu'n ymladd, fu farw, ym mrwydr y Coed.

Dinesydd Cymreig, dydd Mercher, Medi 25, 1918

Information for teachers

Brwydr y Coed

Daeth atom i'r ffosydd frysneges Maeslywydd

I hwylio ein harfau ar frys – yn ddi-oed,

Ac ebr y gorchymyn: 'Rhaid symud y gelyn,

A'i erlid o'i loches, draw acw'n y Coed.'

Y nos a enciliodd, a'r bore a wawriodd,

Y bore rhyfeddaf a welsom erioed,

A ni yn y ffosydd yn disgwyl am rybudd

Sef gair i ymosod a chymryd y coed.

'Chwi fechgyn o Gymru,' medd swyddog y gadlu,

'Rhaid heddiw ymdrechu yn fwy nag erioed;

Aed pob un i weddi ar Dduw ei rieni:

Rhaid ymladd hyd farw – rhaid cymryd y coed.'

Ar hyn dyma'r bechgyn yn taro hen emyn

A'r alw Gymreigaidd mor bêr ag erioed,

A'r canu rhyfeddaf, ie'r canu dwyfolaf,

Oedd canu y bechgyn cyn cymryd y coed.

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Ar ôl brwydr gwaedlyd ac ymladd dychrynlyd

Enillwyd y frwydr galetaf erioed:

Ond rhwygwyd ein rhengoedd, a llanwyd yn lluoedd

Y beddau dienw wrth odre y coed.

'Un o'r Ffogydd'

'Un o'r Ffogydd' is a pseudonym. This version appeared in *Y Cymro* on 7 August 1918, but I've copied it from the anthology: Alan Llwyd & Elwyn Edwards (ed.) *Gwaedd y Bechgyn* (Cyhoeddiadau Barddas, 1989), p. 91.

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

A Dead Boche

To you who'd read my songs of War

And only hear of blood and fame,

I'll say (you've heard it said before)

"War's Hell!" and if you doubt the same,

Today I found in Mametz Wood

A certain cure for lust of blood:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,

In a great mess of things unclean,

Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk

With clothes and face a sodden green,

Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,

Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

Robert Graves

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Sospan Fach

(The Little Saucepan)

Four collier lads from Ebbw Vale
Took shelter from a shower of hail,
And there beneath a spreading tree
Attuned their mouths to harmony.

With smiling joy on every face
Two warbled tenor, two sang bass,
And while the leaves above them hissed with
Rough hail, they started 'Aberystwyth'.

Old Parry's hymn, triumphant, rich,
They chanted through with even pitch,
Till at the end of their grand noise
I called: 'Give us the "Sospan" boys!'

Who knows a tune so soft, so strong,
So pitiful as that 'Saucepan' song
For exiled hope, despaired desire
Of lost souls for their cottage fire?

Then low at first with gathering sound
Rose their four voices, smooth and round,
Till back went Time: once more I stood
With Fusiliers in Mametz Wood.

Fierce burned the sun, yet cheeks were pale,
For ice hail they had leaden hail;
In that fine forest, green and big,
There stayed unbroken not one twig.

They sang, they swore, they plunged in haste,
Stumbling and shouting through the waste;
The little 'Saucepan' flamed on high,
Emblem of hope and ease gone by.

Information for teachers

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Rough pit-boys from the coaly South,
They sang, even in the cannon's mouth;
Like Sunday's chapel, Monday's inn,
The death-trap sounded with their din.

* * * * *

The storm blows over, Sun comes out,
The choir breaks up with jest and shout,
With what relief I watch them part---
Another note would break my heart!

Robert Graves

The following poems
were written sometime
after the Battle of
Mametz

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Aftermath

Have you forgotten yet?...

For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged days,
Like traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways:
And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow
Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you're a man reprieved to go,
Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.

But the past is just the same--and War's a bloody game...

Have you forgotten yet?...

Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz--
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on parapets?

Do you remember the rats; and the stench

Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench--

And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?

Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going to happen again?'

Do you remember that hour of din before the attack--

And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you then

As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men?

Do you remember the stretcher-cases lurching back

With dying eyes and lolling heads--those ashen-grey

Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind and gay?

Have you forgotten yet?...

Look up, and swear by the green of the spring that you'll never forget.

Siegfried Sassoon, March 1919. *Picture Show* (Heinemann, 1919)

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Mametz Wood

For years afterwards the farmers found them –
the wasted young, turning up under their plough blades
as they tended the land back into itself.

A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade,
the relic of a finger, the blown
and broken bird's egg of a skull,

all mimicked now in flint, breaking blue in white
across this field where they were told to walk, not run,
towards the wood and its nesting machine guns.

And even now the earth stands sentinel,
reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened
like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin.

This morning, twenty men buried in one long grave,
a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm,
their skeletons paused mid dance-macabre

in boots that outlasted them,
their socketed heads tilted back at an angle
and their jaws, those that have them, dropped open.

As if the notes they had sung
have only now, with this unearthing,
slipped from their absent tongues.

Owen Sheers, 2005

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

'In Parenthesis' by David Jones

Faber and Faber

(2014). First published in 1937

p. 30

'Far thuddings faintly heard in the stranger-world: where the road leads, where no man goes, where the straight road leads; where the straight road leads; where the road had led old men asleep on wagons beneath the green, girls with baskets, linen-palled, children dawdling from the Mysteries on a Sunday morning.'

p.42

'Lance-Corporal Lewis sings where he walks, yet in a low voice, because of the Disciplines of the Wars. He sings of the hills about Jerusalem, and of David of the White Stone.'

p.46

'Metalled eyelet hole in waterproof pall hanging glides cold across your upward tilted cheek with that carrying party's unseen passing – the smell of iodine hangs about when it's used so freely.'

p.67

'His eyes turned again to where the wood thinned to separate broken trees; to where great strippings-off hanged from tenuous fibres swaying, whitened to decay – as swung immolations...'

p.98

'No-man's-land whitened rigid: all its contours silver filigreed, as damascened. With the coming dark, ground-mist creeps back to regain the hollow places; across the rare atmosphere you could hear foreign men cough, and stamp with foreign feet.'

p.139

'They talked of ordinary things. Of each one's friends at home; those friends unknown to either of the other two. Of the possible duration of the war. Of how they would meet and in what good places afterwards. Of the dissimilar merits of Welshmen and Cockneys. Of the diverse virtues of Regular and Temporary Officers.'

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Information for teachers

Poetry and Literature

The First World War inspired an outpouring of literature and poetry. Through writing soldiers expressed their emotions, whether patriotism, heroism and admiration or horror, anger and sadness. Writing was also a means of recording eye-witness accounts.

The Capture of Mametz Wood, a poem by an ordinary soldier, Private Sydney Hatherell of Pontycymmer, appeared in the *Glamorgan Gazette* on the 25th of August 1916, only a few weeks after the battle.

There were also a number of recognised writers who served with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in and around Mametz Wood and recorded their experience. These include Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Robert Graves (1895-1985), David Jones (1895-1974) and Llewelyn Wyn Griffith (1890-1977).

One of the most famous Welsh-language poets Hedd Wyn (Ellis Humphrey Evans; 1887-1917) also served in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers but was not at Mametz Wood. He posthumously won the chair at the National Eisteddfod in 1917 for his poem *Yr Arwr* (The Hero). At the ceremony, held in Birkenhead, a black sheet was draped over the chair, and Hedd Wyn is still known today as *Bardd y Gadair Ddu* – Poet of the Black Chair.

That the prose of war should prove the truth of poetry's tale of man's feeling – that it should now be easy to believe that some of those magic lines were indeed a reflection of the real thoughts of real men and women – that was an astonishing discovery.

(Llewelyn Wyn Griffith)

Robert Graves (1895-1985)

Robert Graves joined the army as soon as war was declared. He was staying in Harlech, north Wales, having finished school and joined the nearby Royal Welch Fusiliers at Wrexham. He was training with them by August 11th 1914 and served until 1918.

Although initially very supportive of the war effort, Graves soon used his poetry to write candidly about the sheer horror of trench warfare that he witnessed when fighting in France. He also questioned the war propaganda of the time. He met and became friends with another war poet and fellow Royal Welch Fusilier soldier, Siegfried Sassoon. The poem *A Dead Boche* was published in 1917. It refers directly to his experience of the Battle of Mametz Wood. 'Boche' was a disparaging word used in the First World War to describe a German soldier.

On July 19th 1916 Graves was badly wounded in the chest and lung and pronounced dead by a surgeon. Graves recovered and was able to read the report of his own death in *The Times*. His autobiography *Goodbye to All That* was published to great acclaim in 1919. In it Graves gives a damning description of his experiences in the First World War.

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)

Siegfried Sassoon joined the army in August 1914, on the day Britain declared war on Germany. He transferred into the 3rd Battalion (special reserve) Royal Welch Fusiliers as a second lieutenant in May 1915.

His battalion fought in and around Mametz Wood. Sassoon was considered an extremely brave and courageous soldier. He carried out a single-handed attack on a German position in an attempt to dislodge a sniper and was awarded the Military Cross in 1916.

Sassoon's early style of poetry, described as lucid and graceful, changed after his experiences of the brutality of war. He began to write about the grim reality - of the rotting corpses and filth - that surrounded the soldiers. He often used sarcasm and was not afraid to use very blunt language in his poetry, as in the poem *Aftermath* (1919) which references Sassoon's experience at Mametz Wood. In his autobiography *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* he conveyed the horrific and savage scenes that he witnessed, in order to challenge public perceptions of soldiers' experiences on the battlefield.

David Jones (1895-1974)

On 2 January 1915 David Jones enlisted as a private in the 15th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers. Jones had spent four years studying at the Camberwell School of Art. His Welsh father had written directly to David Lloyd George about signing up his son. Lloyd George (then Secretary of State for War), was trying to raise a Welsh Army Corps.

David Jones fought at the Battle of Mametz Wood. When advancing in darkness through the wood he was shot in the leg. Unable to walk he crawled back towards the British trenches, having discarded his rifle as it became tangled in the undergrowth and impeded his progress. He was eventually found by a stretcher bearer and taken to a casualty clearing station ten miles behind the line. He returned to Britain on the hospital ship *St David* and was taken to a hospital in Birmingham. He later returned to France but was invalided home with severe trench fever in 1918.

David Jones drew sketches whilst he was in France, observing the people and places around him. His poem inspired by his experience, *In Parenthesis*, was begun in about 1927 and completed in 1932. As well as drawing on the trauma of his experiences in the trenches, Jones incorporated references from mythology, history and literature, including the Mabinogion.

After the war Jones became one of the 20th-century's most important modernist artists and poets. His experience of the First World War, of life in the trenches and in particular his experience at Mametz Wood, proved to be one of the principle influences on his complex and intricate work.

Llewellyn Wyn Griffith (1890-1977)

Llewellyn Wyn Griffith was born in Landrillo yn Rhos, north Wales. He joined the army in September 1914, accepting a commission in the 15th (1st London Welsh) Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

He wrote an account of his experience in the First World War in his memoir, *Up to Mametz*, which he wrote in the early 1920s and published in 1931. His vivid descriptions of his experiences and observations at the battle of Mametz Wood are an important and evocative historical resource.

Griffith recalls the death at Mametz of his nineteen-year-old brother Watcyn. Griffith was acting brigade major and had ordered the signals officer to get a message through to get the position of the artillery moved. The message was sent via a runner, his brother. The message got through but he was killed by a shell on his way back.

'So I had sent him to his death, bearing a message from my own hand, in an endeavour to save other men's brothers.'

Harry Fellows (1896 – 1987)

Harry Fellows was not a soldier with the 38th (Welsh) Division. He was one of the Northumberland Fusiliers who entered Mametz Wood after the fighting, witnessed the devastation and had to bury some of the dead soldiers from the Welsh Division. His poem *Mametz Wood 1916 and 1984* is his response to the battle scene both at the time of the battle and many years afterwards in 1984.

Owen Sheers (1974-)

Owen Sheers is an award-winning poet, novelist and playwright and Professor in Creativity at Swansea University. He was born in Fiji and brought up in south Wales. In 1998 Sheers came across the book *Up to Mametz* by Llewelyn Wyn Griffith. He went on to travel to the site of the battle to explore the writings of Llewelyn Wyn Griffith further and the writings of David Jones, one an officer and the other a private. Sheers considers David Jones's *In Parenthesis* to be the most interesting piece of writing to come out of the First World War. As a result of this visit he wrote the poem *Mametz Wood* (2005), describing how farmers today still plough up the remains of the gunned-down soldiers.

In 2014 in an ancient woodland near Usk, Monmouthshire, the National Theatre of Wales staged a largescale site-specific production performance of *Mametz*, a play written by Sheers. It draws on the written material of those who fought or witnessed the battle first-hand. The play received wonderful reviews and brought the story of some of the soldiers who fought at Mametz to a new, contemporary audience.

'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art

Information for teachers

The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood

About 1917 Oil on canvas

Given by Sir and Lady A. Mitchelson



Christopher Williams, *Study for 'The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood'*



'War's Hell!' the Battle of Mametz Wood in Art



Christopher Williams, *Study for 'The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood'*



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