



THE TWO OWENS

by Gertrude White

They were as different as chalk and cheese, those two brothers. And their destinies were different. They were born in Shropshire, in western England on the Welsh border of a cultivated but impoverished middle class provincial family. One of them would come to be among the most important English language poets of the Twentieth Century. The elder one, died in battle at the age of twenty-five in the closing days of World War I. The younger survived the perils of merchant marine service and sea warfare and lived into old age to tell their story.

Tom Owen, their father, was a railroad official, a post of considerable responsibility and authority but badly paid. The family lived in crippling poverty, always one jump ahead of a descent to the dirty little houses and mean smelly streets. They were “classless” and so isolated and thrown back on one another and their own resources.

Tom Owen was devoted to his wife but Mrs. Owen appears to have found in her children and particularly in her eldest son Wilfred her own center of attention. Her daughter Mary, second-born, she trained up in all the household arts and particularly those which pertained to her own care. Her son Harold, speaking in old age, tells us that his mother believed a daughter’s true vocation lay in the care of her mother. No thought was given to Mary’s education or preparation for

any role outside the household. Mary seems to have accepted her portion placidly and became the servant of the rest of the family. Her brothers were attached to her and from time to time tried to include her in their activities but for the most part her life lay in domestic duties.

Wilfred was another story. From the time of his birth, his mother set out to attach him to herself exclusively. This not only established an early bond with his mother, but separated him from the rest of the family and made him mature beyond his years from an early age. The bond between mother and son was augmented by the vocation he had discovered at the early age of ten. From that time on he was irretrievably dedicated to letters and above all poetry. He became studious and solitary, separated from brothers, sister, and father, a fact which caused Tom Owen bitter pain. He thus turned more and more to his younger son and to their outdoor activities. The household became in a way divided, Wilfred and his mother talking poetry indoors, Harold and his father walking, swimming, skating. Meanwhile, Mrs. Owen commenced to cherish hopes, for the time secret, that her eldest son was destined for the Church. Wilfred was sent for his education to the Birkenhead Institute, the best school they could afford, though a strain on the family resources.

Harold, younger than Wilfred by four years, was of a different nature. He was tough, both physically and mentally, high-spirited, a lover of outdoor sports. At an early age he saved another boy from drowning. He became the companion his father, a man of impatient and adventurous nature, had failed to find in his wife or older son. But his father and mother had made up their minds that Harold was a child not only of little promise but even of some stupidity. "They had," says their son, "a curious attitude toward Wilfred and me." This caused him to assume a sort of derisive pugnacity and contributed to the separateness of the two brothers.

While Wilfred was pursuing his studies at the Birkenhead Institute and spending the rest of his time wrapped in solitude in his small attic room, Harold was enduring a series of board-

ing schools where he learned nothing and was often compelled to outrun pursuers or, caught, to flail about inflicting what punishment he could on his rough fellows. His parents were unaware of or indifferent to his difficulties, a fact which increased his differences with Wilfred. "The more his suitability for preferential educational treatment was thrust at me, the more belligerent and defiant I became," says Harold. Wilfred's passionate dedication to letters and above all to poetry also divided his parents. Mrs. Owen was determined that Wilfred should be hers alone. Her husband suffered this situation without outward protest. Mary accepted her lot with equanimity. Little Colin became Harold's constant companion. All of them lived cut off from those around them.

In these years, Harold discovered his own vocation. All his spare time, and his even sparer pennies, were spent in water color sketchings of the fields, cottages, churches, and streams in the vicinity. Soon he was able to sell some of his sketches, for pittance, to be sure, but sell them he did. Low on the totem pole in the family, on his own he was becoming an artist, as dedicated as Wilfred was to poetry. And presently, on his own and still in short trousers, he had talked his way into the local School of Art and was happily engaged in becoming an artist.

As the boys grew, their parents were faced with the problem of their future. Wilfred was determined to have more time for his books and poetry before he should be set to earning a living. When school-leaving time drew near, Mrs. Owen managed to have him taken on as a sort of unofficial curate to a local clergyman. She was still cherishing hopes that he might find a vocation in the Church. The post paid almost nothing, but did give him a respite from wage earning and a largely token tutoring.

Wilfred settled for the time being, there remained the question of Harold's future. It is strange, considering his passionate devotion to art and the progress he had made through his own efforts alone, that no attention was paid to this by father or mother. Instead, they proposed that he should go to

sea, his father because he cherished a romantic view of life at sea, coming from his own young manhood, his mother with what seems a bland indifference to the hardships and perils he would encounter. She contented herself with evangelical exhortations to purity and prayer and his father extracted from him a promise that he would never enter any place unfit to take his mother or Mary. So prepared for separation from his family and life on an ocean-going merchant ship, Harold, only fifteen and still immature in mind and body, was literally shipped off for a career in the merchant marine.

But young Harold was a hard case. He survived the filthy and inadequate food and comfortless quarters, scrambled to get his math up to par for navigation, learned how to handle the crews of lascars and east Indians, and by the time he was sixteen had garnered the reputation of a tough young officer. In Calcutta he came to grief. He had been set to overseeing the clearing of coal from the ship's hold and was felled by a nearly fatal attack of heat and sunstroke. He recovered slowly and returned home on leave, and determined to remain in the merchant marine, he secured a berth as midshipman on another ship. His adventures at sea and in port are vividly set out in the second and third volumes of *Journey From Obscurity*, the long memoir in which he tells of himself and family.

Meanwhile Wilfred was increasingly dissatisfied with his role as unofficial curate. He worked hard and had little time for his books and poetry. His mentor too was disappointed in his indifference to the rituals, theology, and history of the Church. On one of their rare meetings Wilfred told Harold that he had lost all faith, retaining only an admiration for the person and sacrifice of Jesus. His years at Dunsden Vicarage ended by mutual consent. He came home sick and dispirited, a young man of about twenty, desperate to find some way of continuing all he cared about, his poetic vocation. His mother accepted the situation complacently, feeling that this setback was all for the best and that his future could look after itself. Maddened by this attitude, his father withdrew, his sympathy

for Wilfred alienated, and determined to let them work out their own plans alone.

Suddenly Wilfred became seriously ill. A bad bout of chest congestion left him weak and white and fearing tuberculosis. Wilfred diagnosed the illness as a culmination, resulting from overdriving himself. He was depressed and savagely bitter and tormented himself continuously with a conviction that he had failed to achieve anything and—worse—that he was not on the right path towards achievement. He was obsessed with time, shaken with panic that he would not have time, time to write poetry and, above all, to be recognized as a poet. All other things were secondary. Recovering from his illness he brought out his plan that he would like to seek a post in France. He did not at first meet with any success. But finally he received a delayed reply to an advertisement he had answered, from the Berlitz School of Languages offering a part-time and pathetically badly paid post to teach English in their school at Bordeaux. He was keen to take it up; it was a chance to get to France and the very nature of his work would be the best possible way to fulfill a minor ambition—to speak and think precisely as a French-born national. His father came forward with an offer to let him have enough money to eke out his salary, and the summer of 1913 found Wilfred in Bordeaux, while Harold was outward bound for the South Atlantic.

It seems clear that it was not intellectual doubts of the validity of Christian dogma that alone weaned Wilfred from the Church as a profession and from faith in orthodox Christianity. These doubts he had entertained for some time. His experiences at Dunsden revealed to him forcibly the utter lack of connection—as it seemed to him—between the Church and the real lives of ordinary people. In a letter to Harold, Wilfred denounced the Established Church as a complete divergence from the teachings of Christ. To his mother he wrote, “I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it.” What Dunsden gave him then, was a reinforcement of his doctrinal doubts by experience of the Church’s failure to meet the most pressing material needs of real people.

Nothing of a quiet revolution in heart and mind as yet showed in the verses he was writing. They were still preoccupied with a dream world, with fantasies of love, of beauty, of fame. His indignant scorn and protest against callousness and hypocrisy speak only in his letters. But the way was being prepared for his response to the bloodshed and horror of war, for the great poems of his poetic maturity, for the profound and unsentimental compassion which is his hallmark as a poet. Rejecting formal Christianity and all that "religion" had once connoted to him, as later he was to reject "Poetry", declaring that "The Poetry is in the pity," he began instead to turn to the "greater love" embodied in human suffering and sacrifice for others. The effect of France was to confirm and consolidate the process that had begun at Dunsden. He continued to emerge from self-absorption and egocentrism, to rid himself of the overcritical intolerance untempered by experience, which his mother's example and influence had encouraged.

Owen's first reaction, however, when war burst over Europe in 1914, was typical of the earlier self he was only painfully and slowly outgrowing. He resented the noisy intrusion of war and the threat it presented to all his ambitions. When doubts did assail him, he revealed the self-control and integrity which had been developing in him. "I am determined to think for myself and act only when I know which road I must take," he wrote to Harold.

He was resolved not to be swept away by excitement, driven by fears of being called a coward, not to be coerced by outer pressures, but to make a reasoned and responsible decision. He returned to England in 1915, joined the Artists Rifles, and eight months later was commissioned in the Manchester Regiment. He departed once more for France on active service, attached to the Lancashire Fusiliers.

The war to which Owen was introduced at the very end of 1916 was one of ugliness, physical misery and horror. Filth, fatigue, and pain wearied the body. The constant spectacle of senseless violence and bestiality, waste and corruption revolted and then numbed the mind. The sight of death in the

vilest and most degrading forms charred the senses and disordered the nerves. A letter from this period of Owen's first service in the trenches reveals how swiftly his experiences were affecting and changing him. "Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul languages . . . even from one's own mouth (for all are devil-ridden)—everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dugouts all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious." So the man who had dedicated himself to poetry now declared "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity." Harold tells of the change that came over him, the result of a deliberate effort at self-mastery. "I was impressed enormously by an air which hung about him of tremendous soldierly competence." Wilfred himself said, "You know, Harold, if I have got to be a soldier, I must be a good one, anything else is unthinkable . . . outwardly I will conform . . . my inward force will be the greater for it."

He suffered a concussion from a fall into a cellar, was invalidated out for a few days, but rejoined his regiment. In the early winter of 1917, he took part in some of the hardest fighting of the war. It was during this period that he was blown bodily from his hole in a railway embankment by a shell that landed only six feet away, and found on recovery that a fellow officer had been buried alive just across from him. In May he was in a casualty clearing station, the victim of a condition then labeled "neurasthenia." His state was sufficiently serious for him to be sent to Craig Lockhart War Hospital at Edinburgh.

In Craig Lockhart, Owen met Siegfried Sassoon, one of the heroes of the war, who had rejected further service and flung his medals into the Mersey River. Sassoon, Owen's senior by six years, had already published several volumes of poetry. On Owen's poetry, Sassoon had little direct influence. The two men were dissimilar in temperament and talent. What Sassoon could provide was understanding and encouragement and the inestimable benefit of commentary on work

already done. Sassoon also introduced the young poet to a circle of authors and men of letters, Osbert Sitwell, Robert Graves, Robert Ross, H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett. To Owen's sojourn at Craig Lockart and the months of light duty that followed we owe most of his best poems.

Meanwhile Harold had settled down to sea life and "had a pleasant compensating sensation that I was physically hardening . . . I was feeling grown-up . . . I had begun to sense the vocational attraction as distinct from just the ordinary prospect of a means of earning a livelihood and, best of all, I was learning to savor to the full the subtlety of the ephemeral beauty that went so paradoxically hand in hand with rough coarseness . . . I had always in front of me as well my secret plans, first to qualify as a master mariner, after which I meant to wean myself slowly from the sea and so only my painting . . . The duality of this scheme drew me enormously . . . I would have the best of both worlds."

Meanwhile he continued his sea journeying, through the Panama Canal, to Ecuador, Peru, through the Straits of Magellan, up the coasts of Patagonia, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil. A bitter northeasterly gale prevented the ship from putting in La Rochelle where Wilfred was waiting to greet him. "My disappointment brought into sharp, stinging relief all my pent-up affection for Wilfred . . . I tried to conjure up some resentment against him for all his jibes and scornings, but it was no good—for these only twisted themselves into softening memories . . . I felt another of my great urges of physical protectiveness towards him, and longed to be with him and look after him . . . it was not until the hot suns of the Spanish ports had warmed me . . . that I was able to throw off my disappointment over not seeing Wilfred . . ."

The advent of war brought Harold the feeling that enormous changes were coming about, and with it an unsettling regret. "I remember so well thinking during the long night watches what a pity it was if disruptions were going to come about for me now. For the first time in my life things seemed to be going well for me. I was selling my water-colours faster

than I could paint them; my seafaring career was I thought quite promising [he had been promoted to Third Officer]; with no little pride I reminded myself that I was even looked upon as a hard-case; my navigation studies were going well; I had lost all my fear that my neglected education would prevent me obtaining my sea-going qualifications. I had a fine feeling that I had caught up with many things . . . I sensed a thread to all this.” He was still to do another two years sailing short voyages running the submarine blockade carrying food and war materials before he could get free of the Merchant Service and transfer to the Navy. He did it in a roundabout way by applying for a Naval Commission in the Royal Naval Air Service. He served six months as a Flying Officer, R.N. but then returned to sea, serving as a midshipman in various battleships and finishing the war as the sub-lieutenant of a light cruiser.

Harold and Wilfred met infrequently during these years, but a warmth and closeness had grown up between them. It was early in 1918 that they spent their last night with each other. Wilfred had made up his mind to return to the western front as soon as possible, having refused all offers to secure for himself a safe job in England. Harold was expecting to take part in a very special mission, known later as Zeebrugge. Both were under stress. They talked into the night of many things. Wilfred told Harold he had made up his mind to get back to the front. “It’s the only place that I can make my protest from.”

“Your poetry?”

“Yes, yes. What else is really important? Nothing else matters.”

As they parted for the last time, Wilfred adjured Harold, “Remember you can’t paint and I can’t write poetry unless we both somehow make some money . . . think hard about this. Without some money nothing is possible.” They were the last words Harold was to hear him speak.

Little remains to tell. Wilfred rejoined his regiment and was killed in November by a machine gun bullet while trying

to get his men across the Sambre Canal. He had just been awarded the Military Cross. The church bells were ringing for the armistice when they handed his mother the cable announcing his death.

A few days later Harold's ship was at anchor at Victoria in the Cameroons. He stepped inside his cabin "and to my amazement saw Wilfred sitting in my chair. I felt shock run through me with appalling force, but I spoke quietly: "Wilfred, how did you get here?" . . . his whole face broke into his sweetest and most endearing dark smile . . . I spoke again, "Wilfred dear, how can you be here, it's just not possible." . . . I loved having him there . . . I remember thinking how out of place the khaki looked amongst the cabin furnishing. With this thought I must have turned my eyes away from him; when I looked back my cabin chair was empty . . . Suddenly I felt terribly tired and moving to my bunk I lay down . . . instantly I went into a deep oblivious sleep. When I woke up I knew with absolute certainty that Wilfred was dead."

Wilfred's manuscripts, written on scraps of paper, the backs of playbill, whatever paper he had by, were in his kit sent home after his death. By 1920, owing to the efforts of Siegfried Sassoon and Edith Sitwell, they had been edited and some of them published. He was on his way to his subsequent reputation as the best of the World War I war poets. But his mother had contributed a touch of her own. For his gravestone she had selected a sonnet called "The End" which reads in full:

After the blast of lightning from the east
The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot Throne;
After the drums of time have rolled and ceased,
And by the bronze west long retreat is blown,

Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a truth,
All death will he annul, all tears assuage?—
Or fill these void veins full again with youth,
And wash, with an immortal water, Age?

When I do ask white Age he saith not so:
“My head hangs weighed with snow.”
And when I hearken to the Earth, she saith:
“My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is death.
Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified
Nor my titanic tears, the seas, be dried.”

On his gravestone, Mrs. Owen caused the words to be inscribed thus: “Of a truth/All death will He annul, all tears assuage.”

Pathos and irony! Converting a question, to which the poet himself returns a negative, to a statement of affirmation and faith, the bereaved mother thus reverses her son’s intention and imposes her own. The mutilated quotation might stand as a symbol of their relationship. Owen had achieved his boyhood ambition of poethood by slowly and painfully freeing himself from the trammels cast about him by upbringing. Perhaps it is as well that his mother could not understand the distance he had traveled from his early days to the Somme.

Harold, after a hard struggle in postwar England, achieved his ambition to become a painter and had the satisfaction of seeing his work hung in the Burlington Galleries. He married happily and in old age wrote the story of his family and of his relationship with his famous brother.

EDITORS’ NOTE: This essay derives from two principal sources. One is Harold Owen, *Journey from Obscurity: Memoirs of the Owen Family* in Three Volumes: I *Childhood*; II *Youth*; III *War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). The other is from conversations Professor White had with Harold Owen, at his home in Oxfordshire, in 1965. These took place while Professor White was writing her own book: Gertrude M. White, *Wilfrid Owen* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc, 1969).