

FRANK 'TORONTO' PREWETT

An excerpt from the Introduction to *Trauma, Primitivism, and the Making of Frank "Toronto" Prewett* by Joy Porter, forthcoming from Bloomsbury

Joy Porter

This is an analysis of how the first world war affected one of the finest Canadian poets of the First World War, Frank 'Toronto' Prewett. War-induced trauma or "shell-shock" led him to 'play Indian', that is, to pretend to be an indigenous North American, whilst in hospital undergoing treatment for 'shell-shock' and afterwards when living in Oxfordshire. He was accepted as indigenous by some of the most significant literary figures of the time, notably Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden – key members of the group of first world war poets brought into critical relief in 1975 by Paul Fussell. Often thought of as quintessentially English poets, they continue to stand in symbolic guard over the cultural memory of the war.¹ Prewett also 'played Indian' to great effect within an exceptional literary and intellectual milieu that included Lady Ottoline Morrell, Virginia and Leonard Woolf and W.H.R. Rivers as well as a great many others. This first book-length consideration of Prewett as a poet of combat-induced trauma directly connects his adoption of an indigenous identity to both his experiences in war and the primitivist cultural currents of the time.

This volume foregrounds a number of archives new to scholarship including the Lennel Papers held at the National Records of Scotland and sheds light upon an

1 They are figures of memory in Jan Assman's phrase. Jan Assmann. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: Beck, 1977.

individual whose life, associations and work merit much greater exposure, but it does not attempt a conventional biography or pronounce critically upon Prewett's poetry in total, the worth of his literary style or his status as a Canadian icon. Instead, the focus is solely upon war-induced trauma, primitivism and the brief, bright snapshot of Prewett's life and thought around the time of the war and its aftermath revealed by the available archives. Those seeking a detailed recovery of Prewett's family history and experiences from birth to death or discussion of his poetry as it relates to anything other than his experience of war are asked to await further studies.

Prewett was profoundly affected by combat. A Canadian promoted into the British Expeditionary Force, he experienced some of the worst fighting at Passchendaele, the Somme, the Second Battle of Ypres and Vimy, the battle often held up as the coming of age conflict for Canada as a nation on the world stage. As a Lieutenant in the 5B Reserve Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery, he was thrown from his horse at the Somme early on 1916, and sustained a serious spinal wound. He then spent a year in hospital in England recovering, before returning to the front as an officer with the Royal Welch Fusiliers, the regiment revered by Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves throughout their lives. Prewett was buried alive in April 1918 after a dug-out collapsed on top of him during combat, but he managed to claw his way out with his bare hands. Deeply traumatized and badly wounded in the spine, he was sent once again first to hospital in southern England, then to recuperate in Scotland at Craiglockhart, and following this to Lennel House on the Scottish Borders. Here, like Siegfried Sassoon, he received



*Frank Prewett at Garsington 1919, Photo by Lady Ottoline Morrell
National Portrait Gallery*

care from the influential Cambridge anthropologist and psychologist, W. H. R. Rivers. At Lennel, he began to dress and behave as an 'Iroquois Indian'. He formed attachments that led to his being introduced to the literary set that orbited around Garsington Manor, Oxfordshire,

at the time a clearing house for creative talent and the home of Lady Ottoline Morrell and her husband, Philip, a pacifist Member of the British Parliament.

In this way Prewett's life interconnected with some of the early twentieth century's most significant literary and cultural figures. One intimate circle contained Leonard and Virginia Woolf, who hand-set his first book *Poems* (1921) at the Hogarth Press, William Heineman, who published his second collection, *Rural Scene* (1924), Siegfried Sassoon, who fell in love with Prewett and remained his friend and benefactor; Robert Graves, who consistently championed his talent, included his work in *Oxford Poetry 1921* and edited his *Collected Poems* (1964), and the Morrells, vital benefactors and employers for Prewett during and after the war. A wider circle whom Prewett either met, corresponded or had sustained interactions with included the painters Mark Gertler and Dorothy Brett, the translator S.S. Koteliansky and the writers and poets Lytton Strachey, Aldous Huxley, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Edmund Blunden, poet laureate John Masefield, T.E. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield and her husband John Middleton Murray, Edward Marsh, W.B. Yeats, the Sitwells and Thomas Hardy, a particular influence. Prewett also met Harold Monro, who included his work in *Georgian Poetry V*. Other Garsington visitors he encountered included T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster and Walter de la Mare. Prewett was therefore a remarkable intellect caught up at an extraordinary time with exceptional people.

A significant number of the post-war intellectual élite were convinced he would be the next big literary splash. Virginia Woolf, after Prewett's first book came out, wrote to Lytton Strachey on 29 August, 1921, 'The [*Times*]

Literary Supplement, by the way, says that Prewett *is* a poet, perhaps a great one.² Siegfried Sassoon was convinced Prewett was special from the moment he set eyes upon him. He told fellow poet Robert Graves, ‘Toronto is a great man, and will be a great writer, - greater than you or me, because of his simplicity of mind and freedom from intellectual prejudices’. Graves, for his part, remained convinced all of his life of Prewett’s literary importance. His introduction to Prewett’s posthumous *Collected Poems* states, ‘dedicated poets like Frank Prewett are few in any age; and lamentably so in this’.²

Such strong personal impact was rooted in Prewett’s inherent charisma, his good looks and his self-presentation as a glamorous figure from another culture. Fresh from the war, he said he had either Iroquois, Mohawk or Sioux ancestry. It helped that he looked and acted every inch the movie version of a ‘Native brave’. Adroit on a horse, he liked to ride shirtless, was prone to brooding silences and made a point of giving others the sense that he possessed both profound sensitivity and a kinship with nature. At five feet nine with a dark complexion, high cheekbones, hot, deep-set hazel eyes and dark hair, he reminded those he met of the Italian movie star Rudolph Valentino. One of the strongest literary and emotional engagements he formed was with Lady Ottoline Morrell, the remarkable beauty and aristocratic patroness whom Lytton Strachey memorably described as the daughter of a thousand earls. Dorothy Brett and Siegfried Sassoon also became deeply emotionally engaged with Prewett, along with a number of other visitors to Garsington after

2 . Robert Graves, ‘Introduction’, *The Collected Poems of Frank Prewett*, (Cassell, 1920) p.viii. (CPFP)

the war.³ As the artist Mark Gertler remarked with some chagrin in 1921, ‘Women seem rather taken with him, goodness knows why...’ Even towards the end of his life, after Prewett had been an alcoholic for many years because of demons he linked to psychological trauma caused by the war, he was still attractive. The artist Vivienne Jenkins was forced to admit when she created Prewett’s bust late in his life, ‘There was something about him to which you could not help being drawn.’

Prewett felt he was a man apart and that his literary voice was attuned to generations far in the future instead of to the morés of his own time. He wrote that he heard ‘a hard but true music, and do not belong to the cant of the age.’ When he was living at Garsington he confessed to Edward Blunden, ‘I occasionally get a moment in which I see more than this world’ and even though he suffered acute poverty following the war, he never wavered from this profound commitment to his own sense of literary integrity. He knew that if poetry presented ‘new and halting expressions’, then the general public would not like it, as he explained to Lady Clementine Waring, the aristocrat with whom he became fast friends when he spent time recuperating at her home Lennel House in 1918. Yet he was also convinced that ‘If truth and sincerity are inherent in art, sooner or later that art is recognized.’⁴ Graves, as his dear friend and a fellow veteran, put it differently, and wrote that Prewett ‘felt it his duty to write at the

3 The phrase describing Ottoline Morrell as “the daughter of a thousand earls” is attributed to Lytton Strachey, and was probably meant partly as an insult.

4 Frank Prewett to Clementine Waring, from Garsington, 6 September, 1919, NRS, e2/117.

orders of the daemon who rode him.⁵

What made Prewett's poetry unique was its particular approach to truth. He was prepared to discuss the psychological harshness necessary to survival in war and to acknowledge the horror that haunted the conscious and unconscious mind following proximity to danger and death. He was also prepared to both confront depression and deathly thoughts and to weigh up the possibilities for joy and love in a post-war world increasingly alienated from the rhythms of nature. He stands, therefore, as an early and significant modern poet of trauma. If, for Wilfred Owen (who was fascinated by Prewett and read his work in the trenches) 'the poetry was in the pity', for 'Toronto' Prewett, poetry was an imperfect means to attempt to articulate the trauma that attended the modern soul. He thought of war as a necessary and ageless experience and his literary focus was not upon how it might be prevented in future, but upon how its effects might be coped with in a world increasingly bereft of certainties, subject to large-scale change and unanchored in tradition. His war poetry often had an immediacy, directness and candor that resonates deeply with modern sensibilities in ways analogous and at the same time discreet from, that of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg. After the war, Prewett did not lapse into romance

5 See Frank Prewett to Edmund Blunden, 10 Dec. 1921, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, The University of Texas at Austin, (HRC), Edmund Charles Blunden Coll., Recipient series; Robert Graves, who at times had little respect for details like facts, described Prewett in the Introduction to the CFPF in a way that was as descriptive of himself as it was of Prewett. He claimed that Prewett had explained that his daemon "had told him to attempt the simple beyond simplicity, the sensuous beyond sense, the distainment of mere fact.", CFPF, p.viii.

for the English landscape as did Sassoon, or at least, he did not do so consistently. Rather, Prewett's focus remained the challenge of living with the legacy of historical trauma and of finding ways to cherish and preserve human relationships to land and to nature in an era of agricultural industrialization.⁶ Although deeply influenced by Sassoon and by Owen (whom he partly replaced in Sassoon's affections at Lennel House), Prewett's aesthetic project was to find a way to get beyond both language and the experience of suffering. He considered words 'not the means, but the obstacles to expression'. The literary and personal challenge of his post-war life was to recapture the emotional immediacy lost by having been a soldier. He wrote in an attempt to restore what had been taken from him in war - a secure internal platform from which to express emotion. 'I cannot write,' as he put it in 1919, 'simply because I experience no deep emotion. I stand still, and the world spins around me.'⁷

6 For examples of fossilized language, steeped in a particular understanding of the "timelessness" of the English landscape, see Edmund Blunden's *The Face of England*, New York: Longman's, Green & Co, 1932 and Sassoon's *Rhymed Ruminations*, London: Faber, 1940.

7 Frank Prewett, HRC, 17 October, 1919, quoted in Andrew Coppolino, p.38.