

**Isaac Rosenberg – The Making of a Great War Poet by Jean Moorcroft Wilson.
Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2008.**

Learning poetry at school I was exposed to the great poets of the First World War, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden, only four decades later, in middle age, did the name of Isaac Rosenberg come to my attention, as a result of a radio programme marking the 90th anniversary of his death.

Jean Moorcroft Wilson's biography of Rosenberg, a man who was killed in the closing months of the Great War at the age of 27, having miraculously survived most of it, is the first to be published for over thirty years. It is a substantial book which, considering the curtailed life of its subject is eloquent testimony both to the author's ingenuity and skills as a biographer and the extraordinary complexity of Rosenberg himself.

Isaac Rosenberg, born into an extremely poor Jewish family living first in Bristol and then the East End of London, grew up speaking Yiddish and only started to learn English when he went to school. He was possessed of a strong artistic sense, and through the agency of Jewish benefactors was able to study at the Slade School of Art, where he made some important friendships. But alongside his skills on canvas was a great facility for writing, both prose and poetry, and his facility with the English language in both genres, but especially the latter, brought him the highest praise both from his poet peers and eminent literary critics.

Having finished this superb biography, informed and entertained, the over-riding question remains: why did Isaac Rosenberg not receive the fame that was clearly his due much earlier, and why did other Great War poets push him from the stage? The full answer is doubtless more complex, but must result in part from the fact that the cockney accented, East End Jewish squaddie, who wrote with the perspective of the common man, was deemed not to embody the virtues of upper class self-sacrifice, or to epitomise the tragic loss of a jeunesse dorée with all its attendant romance.

But the fact also remains that Rosenberg's poetry is much more complex and challenging than the others, much more angry and uncompromising, and therefore perhaps easier and more comfortable to ignore. He also seems, for very understandable reasons, to have been an extremely difficult and rather unlikeable young man, often at odds with the world, his friends and benefactors.

Jean Moorcroft Wilson has redressed the balance of deliberate or accidental ignorance of Isaac Rosenberg with this book, and one may hope that Rosenberg's poetry will now be automatically included with the other poets of the Great War, both in English classes and in anthologies of the genre.

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