

And why we were born we could hardly guess  
Till we felt the surge of the battle press  
And looked the foe in the face.’  
‘Greater love hath no man than this  
That a man should die for his friend.’  
‘We thought life cruel, and England cold;  
But our bones were made from the English mould,  
And when all is said, she’s our mother old  
And we creep to her breast at the end.’

**Emily Orr**

[Editor: *The ‘house’ is the dreaded workhouse, where many of England’s poor feared ending their days.*]

### **A ‘Misty Sea-Girt Island’: Visions of home**

Although the pieces selected for *The Old Country* were invariably positive and uplifting, throughout the War both male and female poets used the beauty of their native land as a vehicle to express their thoughts about the conflict. Rural poetry lent itself to pain and anguish, as well as patriotism and the affirmation that the War was a just one and God was on the Allies’ side.

On 10 October 1914, Alice Meynell became the first woman to have a war poem published in *The Times*. She, like so many poets who used nature to deliver their message, contrasted the last long hot summer of the peace with events unfolding across the Channel:

### **SUMMER IN ENGLAND 1914**

On London fell a clearer light;  
    Caressing pencils of the sun  
Defined the distances, the white  
    Houses transfigured one by one,  
The “long, unlovely street” impearled.  
    O what a sky has walked the world!  
Most happy year! And out of town  
    The hay was prosperous, and the wheat;  
The silken harvest climbed the down;  
    Moon after moon was heavenly sweet,  
Stroking the bread within the sheaves,  
    Looking twixt apples and their leaves.  
And while this rose made round her cup,  
    The armies died convulsed; and when

This chaste young silver sun went up  
Softly, a thousand shattered men,  
One wet corruption, heaped the plain,  
After a league-long throb of pain.  
Flower following tender flower, and birds,  
And berries; and benignant skies  
Made thrive the serried flocks and herds.  
Yonder are men shot through the eyes,  
And children crushed. Love, hide thy face  
From man's unpardonable race.

*A Reply*

Who said "No man hath greater love than this  
To die to serve his friend?"  
So these have loved us all unto the end.  
Chide thou no more, O thou unsacrificed!  
The soldier dying dies upon a kiss,  
The very kiss of Christ.

**Alice Meynell**

The final stanza, printed either as an ellipsis or with the words 'A Reply', suggests Meynell found her own vision intolerable, she orders non-combatants, the 'unsacrificed', to accept the soldiers' sacrifice – and their own passive roles. Sacrifice for the preservation of England is a recurring theme in nature poetry; some poets see it as worthwhile whilst others question, sometimes cryptically, whether any ideal warrants the spilling of so much blood. This tension is a constant feature of women's more sophisticated pastoral poems.

Whilst some of Meynell's imagined 'thousand shattered men' would have been killed, others would have been more or less seriously wounded, the majority clinging to the hope of a 'Blighty ticket' sending them home for hospital treatment. Staff Nurse Beatrice Hopkinson, a member of the Territorial Forces Nursing Service, is among the many nurses who wrote of how patients who had lost a limb or suffered serious injury would remark that they had got 'a nice Blighty one'.

Many nurses and volunteers working in hospitals overseas frequently comment on their patients' overwhelming desire to see England again. This may lie behind Sheffield poet Constance Ada Renshaw's 'The Lure of England'. Superficially, the poem might seem to be a maudlin attempt to

sanitize the soldier's sufferings using popular pastoral tropes; a closer reading both of the poem and even the word 'Lure', reveals layers of meaning. Renshaw may be implying that the 'boys' have been duped into sacrificing their sight, their health, their lives.

The 'broken thing' has been emasculated and permanently dislocated by war. All that is left to him is the possibility that he can be returned to and healed by the idealized country he bled for.

### THE LURE OF ENGLAND

There's a misty sea-girt island in the sunset-haunted west;  
I can see it in my wounded dreams of home.  
I can see the dwindling hedgerows where the sparrow builds her nest,  
And the grass-land with its throw of daisied foam.

Oh! there's Spring upon the island, and the greening lures me back  
To mysterious meres and woodways in the west.  
They have stripped my manhood from me, they have stretched me on the rack,  
Take me home, a blinded broken thing, to rest!

I can never see the island with its fields of sheeted gold,  
And the wisps of sunset drifting in the west.  
Darkness drowns the dim green valleys and the silent hills of old,  
And the hedges where the sparrow builds her nest.

Let me put my blind eyes down among the bluebells and the grass.  
Let me feel the brimming coolness on my brow.  
Let me touch the dewy bracken where the dreamful shadows pass.  
I have bled for England! ... Let her heal me now!

England, misty England, grey and vague across the sea!  
All your blue-bells bloom in May-time, and your skies are throbbing  
blue,  
Here, the streams are streaked with crimson, and red Death is haunting me.  
— England, England! all my hungry heart is yearning back to you !

My misty sea-girt island in the sunset-laden west!  
I can feel your moorland wind upon my eyes;

**Tumult and Tears**  
The Story of the Great War  
Through the Eyes and Lives of its  
Women Poets

Vivien Newman



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