

Where Graves, Owen and Sassoon Met

Neil McLennan

Graves and Golf

Golf was not particularly Graves's game, but it seems that he was not averse to swinging a club. Indeed the ancient game, whose modern origins are in Scotland, was instrumental in Graves getting his commission in 1914.¹

The Harlech golf secretary suggested my taking a commission instead of enlisting. He rang up the nearest regimental depot – the Royal Welch Fusiliers at Wrexham – and told the adjutant I had served in the Officers Training Corps at Charterhouse. The adjutant said: 'Send him right along.' On 11th August I started my training, and immediately became a hero.²

Harlech (Royal St David's Golf Club, named after the Welsh patron saint) had been founded in 1894, its founding fathers keen to emulate the success of Scotland's St Andrews course. The first professional tournament there was won by Scottish golfer and course designer James Braid in 1901, and it received Royal patronage in 1908.

Further north, near Liverpool, officers of the Royal Welch were honorary members of a neighbouring golf club, Formby. Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves played there. Graves described his amateurish endeavours:

He [Sassoon] played golf seriously and I hit a ball alongside him. I had once played at Harlech as a junior member of the Royal St. David's, but resigned when I found it was bad for my temper. Afraid of taking the game up again seriously, I now limited myself to a single iron

My mis-hits did not matter. I played the fool and purposely put Siegfried off his game.³

However despite not being on a par with putting, their poetic friendship continued. In July 1917 after Sassoon's 'treacherous' letter to *The Times*, Graves helped to ensure that he was sent to one of the six UK hospitals specialising in war neurosis for officers, Craiglockhart War Hospital, near Edinburgh, where he found the surrounding golf courses and other sporting opportunities quite congenial.⁴

Scottish Soirees with Sassoon

Starting on 23 July 1917, Sassoon stayed at Craiglockhart for 127 days. His prolonged convalescence allowed him to refine his game as much as 'recover' from the war. Indeed his war hospital doctor, William Halse Rivers (1864-1922), originally thought Sassoon was suffering more from 'anti-war neurosis' than anything akin to the 'shell-shock' that blighted the patients housed in the former hydropathic building. According to Sassoon's autobiographical *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, getting away from what he termed the 'Mecca of psycho-neuroses' was high on his agenda.⁵

When he arrived in Edinburgh, Sassoon was struck by the disparity between the comfortable and complacent home front pursuits he observed and the struggle to end the war being waged by John Middleton Murray and Bertrand Russell, which in the previous July, had led Sassoon to draft his famous 'Declaration'.⁶ During one visit to the city's salubrious Caledonian Hotel on Princes Street, he reflected on the people in wine bars and restaurants who 'prefer to be competing for the scratch medal at Prestwick or Muirfield [top end Scottish Golf Clubs then, and still

now] instead of hearing pacifists consigned to perdition' (Sassoon 531). Nonetheless, despite his irritation with civilians quaffing champagne, lighting up with automatic cigarette lighters and listening to Mendelssohn, Sassoon was soon to join them in their leisure pursuits.⁷

Not long after he arrived at the Craiglockhart, Sassoon arranged for his golf clubs to be sent to him, at Rivers's advice. 'I acted on the advice of Rivers and wired to Aunt Evelyn for my golf clubs, which arrived the next day, maybe accelerated by three very fully addressed labels, all marked urgent'.⁸

The nearest golf club was just a three-minute walk from the hospital, and Sassoon soon found himself riding his bike to other Edinburgh clubs as well. Perhaps there was something of self-reflection in his observation; 'it did not occur to me that golf would one day be regarded [more] as a predominant national occupation [in Scotland] than a pastime'.⁹

As patients at Craiglockhart started to play at nearby Mortonhall Club, Sassoon ventured farther afield to play, to avoid the war neurosis patients.¹⁰ Sassoon started playing as far away from his fellow patients as possible. Not only did he wish to differentiate whatever was bothering him from their serious illness, he also disdained their poor standard of play as well as their golf etiquette. The absurdity of exaggerating the importance of golf etiquette to soldiers suffering war trauma was overlooked by the hospital magazine, *The Hydra*, which felt it had an obligation to remind invalid players of the rules and the etiquette of the national game. It noted for the benefit of beginners and other offenders:

Do not drive until the players in front have played their second shots, or are well out of reach 2) do not attempt even a long shot on to a green until those in front have replaced the pin 3) do not practice putting on a green when

there are other couples waiting on approach and 4) always replaced the turf. There has several times been reported to me, both officially and unofficially, that officers will persist in driving into other players. This is looked upon by golfers everywhere as the essence of bad sportsmanship so remembering the sporting manner in which we are treated by the Council and members of the (local) Merchants of Edinburgh Golf Club, we should do all we can to show them that we appreciate the kindness, and also that we do *not* forget that we are their guests on the course, and do our utmost in return by PLAYING THE GAME.¹¹

Just as Rivers worried about Sassoon, Sassoon worried about Rivers. Whilst some felt Sassoon may have had shell shock, neither suffered as badly as the stammering, quivering, patients whose wellbeing had been visibly wrecked by war and ‘who never made it down the stairs’.¹² For some, hiding in bedrooms was the only security they had from the flashbacks, nightmares and trauma of the Western Front. Many walked with bizarre gaits and suffered from ticks and uncontrollable shaking and seizures. Sassoon insisted he was not *one of those* ‘Mental Cases’, but felt, on the whole, ‘psychologically passive – content to make time on the golf links and do some steady reading after dinner’.¹³

More than anything it seems, golf gave Sassoon an escape from the ‘shell shocked’ soldiers, and the frightening possibility that he *was* one of them, and that he was betraying soldiers like them by his protest.

Sassoon golfed regularly and eventually claimed to have played in almost all the clubs in the Edinburgh area. Indeed, he travelled as far as North Berwick to play on the East Lothian coastline, which was over twenty-five miles from hospital, presumably using the local rail network that existed in the area in 1917. However most golf clubs were in easier reach and walking or

bicycling took him to the tee. He expresses his attachment to his favourite game in his poem *David Cleek*. While acknowledging Sassoon's whimsicality, we may also notice a trace of the repressed war trauma playing along the edges of the poem, even in the poem's first stanza:

I cannot think that Death will press his claim
To snuff you out or put you off your game:
You'll still contrive to play your steady round,
Through hurricanes may sweep the dismal ground,
And darkness blur the sandy-skirted green
Where silence gulfs the shot you strike so clean.

A sense of the tragic breaks through even the heavy weather of Sassoon's mock-tragedy.

Memorably, Sassoon refers to Graves by the pseudonym David Cromlech (a megalithic tomb or a circle of standing stones), and recalls their playing a number of times together; one can see his recollections dovetail with Graves's:

Nevertheless I did not like the game to be treated with levity; in fact I played it somewhat seriously. My friend Cromlech had once insisted on trying to defeat me in a game in which he used nothing but a niblick; and to my great annoyance he performed such astonishing feats with it as to cause me some disquietude, though I won comfortably in the end.¹⁴

Convalescence steadily improved Sassoon's game:

When played seriously, even golf can, I suppose, claim to be 'an epitome of human life'. Anyhow in that fourth October of the War I was a better golfer than I'd ever

been before – and, I may add, a better one than I’ve ever been since.¹⁵

And his game speeded his recovery:

I must admit though, that I wasn’t worrying much about the War when I’d just hit a perfect tee-shot up the charming vista which was the fairway to the first green at Mortonhall [Edinburgh]. How easy it felt! I scarcely seemed to be gripping the golf club at all. Afternoon sunshine was slanting through the golden brown breeches and at last I knew what it was like to hit the ball properly. ‘I suppose I’m getting too keen on the game’ I thought, as I bicycled home to the hydro at the end of some such afternoon, when I’d been sampling one of the delightfully unfrequented links which the War had converted into Arcadian solitudes’.¹⁶

However Sassoon did not always get out to play;

Bad weather prevented me from playing golf all day and every day, and my brain became more active in the evening.¹⁷

On days like these or between his rounds, he oft referred to cleaning and sanding his clubs, the way a soldier might clean his weapon when inactive. Despite the fact that golf provided an escape for him, it was not fool-proof. The Battle of Third Ypres was in full swing as Sassoon teed-off in Edinburgh. Men lived through Passchendaele whilst Sassoon tried to avoid bunker shots. The shadow of war did creep onto the fairways and greens, and Sassoon was forced to confront it:

Hadn't I just spent an afternoon playing golf with a man who'd just lost half his company in a gas bombardment a few months ago? . . . It seemed to amount to this, I ruminated, twirling my putter as it polished its neck – that I am exiled from the troops as a whole rather than from my former fellow officers and men.¹⁸

It was a golf course that provided the setting for the historic meeting of Graves, Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Sassoon was due to play with a regular partner, a doctor who had survived the sinking of the SS Transylvania when it was torpedoed on 4 May 1917 off the Gulf of Genoa during its voyage from Marseilles to Alexandria, claiming the lives of 402 soldiers. He had arranged to play and Sassoon felt the game could not be cancelled. With Graves on his way, it seemed logical they should meet on the course. Exactly which course has long been a matter of conjecture. Mortons Hall Golf Club has claimed the bragging rights and had a plaque prepared to mark the site.

The Search for the Graves, Owen and Sassoon Edinburgh Meeting Venue

However, Oxford based scholar and Owen biographer Dominic Hibberd first floated the idea in 2003 that it was Baberton Golf Course that saw the Graves, Owen and Sassoon Edinburgh meeting; but he could not verify it or remember what evidence led him to it.¹⁹ After a long search, I turned up a letter from Sassoon to Graves in the archives at Southern Illinois University that seemed to confirm Hibberd's hypothesis (see illustration).²⁰ Owen met Graves earlier in the day. Owen was an aspiring poet, an officer, and a shell-shock patient at Craiglockhart, having been admitted there on 26 June 1917. There he was to spend 126 days, a day longer than Sassoon.²¹ Owen had no passion for Sassoon's

game of golf, but they did converse on their mutual interest of poetry, so it made sense to dispatch him to collect the other war poet when golf kept Sassoon away. Graves and Owen possibly met at Edinburgh Waverley station, from where the two officers went on to meet Sassoon, possibly catching a train to Juniper Green station and then walking the short distance up Baberton Avenue (where, ironically, bands once sent off soldiers to the Boer War). Baberton Clubhouse sat at the top of the avenue. It's also possible that Owen and Graves walked from Craiglockhart War Hospital to Baberton Clubhouse, since one of Sassoon's later letters talks of walking.²²

Meeting of Three Great British War Poets²³

Aside from the historic value of being the first – and last – time three of the greatest British war poets were together in the same place, the meeting at Baberton may have had a direct effect on Owen's poetry. Owen was encouraged in his poetic development generally but also specifically in the further drafts of 'To Jessie Pope', which emerged in 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' and 'Disabled'. He wrote a second draft of 'Dulce et Decorum Est' two days after the meeting.²⁴

[ca. 1917, Oct.]

Why aren't you at your military duties?
or is it final leave before going Sphinx-ward?

CRAIGLOCKHART WAR HOSPITAL,
SLATEFORD,
MIDLOTHIAN.

TELEGRAMS: "WARSPITH", SLATEFORD.
TELEPHONE: CENTRAL 9830.

Satz.

Dearest Robert,

I shall insist on paying your railway fare
to Edinburgh. You will be ruined!
You will find me playing golf at a
place called Baberton. You walk to
Juniper Green. - ($2\frac{3}{4}$ miles from the Hoop^l).

I can't get out of playing without
entirely spoiling the day for the chap I
play with. so you will have to make
the best of it. He is very hearty & jolly -
a doctor - who got torpedoed on the
"Drausy^l ~~Chania~~". We can dine in Edinburgh.
Awful nice seeing you again.

Yrs. J.

Ruin you to London for 3 days
to-day so you'll miss him.

Sassoon to Robert Graves [ca. October 1917], Southern Illinois University

That Owen made an impact on Graves is evidenced by the letters Graves subsequently wrote him and by his invitation to Graves's wedding, which would have opened the door to the London literary set for Owen.

Postscript – Baberton's Battle Honours

Whilst Graves noted that the war had not reached golf links, clubs were soon to be affected especially as Unrestricted Submarine Warfare took its toll. Baberton Golf Club, like many others, had already given up green space to be made into allotments. The club's committee minutes also note difficulties in filling the bar with adequate stocks, including whisky.²⁵

Whilst Baberton faced sacrifices in green space and stock, it also made a magnificent contribution. Officers from the Craiglockhart War Hospital golfing section soon played at the club after Sassoon's game here.²⁶ And whilst other Edinburgh clubs charged the officer patients, Baberton allowed them to play free during late 1917 and 1918. Officers from the nearby Malleny Army Camp near Balerno also played at the club. The 3rd Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry (HLI) had a close relationship, with officers playing and squads also helping to work on the course in the absence of green staff on active service.²⁷ To this day the HLI Cup is still played for at Baberton.

Baberton Golf Club's hospitality to Craiglockhart War Hospital officer shell-shock patients was known, as was its strong links with the Highland Light Infantry. However now it also boasts the fact that it hosted the only meeting of the three Great War poets Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. A plaque now marks the spot where the old clubhouse stood and where the meeting took place, whilst a facsimile copy of the October 1917 letter from Siegfried Sassoon to Robert Graves now adorns the

reception area of the new club alongside its other historic artefacts.

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NOTES

¹ With thanks to Dr Charles Mundy, conversations with him helped to affirm Graves’ involvement with the game sometime after my find of the venue of the golfing meeting of the three war poets.

² Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (1929) (Middlesex: Penguin, Middlesex, 1973), p. 62.

³ *Good-bye to All That*, p. 193.

⁴ Craiglockhart War Hospital was set up by the War Office in October 1916 in an Edinburgh disused hydropathic institute by the British Red Cross. It was operational by the end of that year taking up to 174 patients at any one time. Sassoon often referred to it as Slateford War Hospital, Slateford being the nearby Edinburgh village. He also referred to it as ‘Dottyville’ in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell soon after his arrival on 26 July 1917.

⁵ Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p. 543.

⁶ Siegfried Sassoon, ‘Finished with the War: A Soldier’s Declaration,’ *Wikisource*

<https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Finished_with_the_War:_A_Soldier's_Declaration> [accessed 14 October, 2018]

⁷ Siegfried Sassoon, p. 531.

⁸ Ibid, p. 519.

⁹ Ibid, p. 535.

¹⁰ Reports of the Golf Section, *The Hydra: Magazine of Craiglockhart War Hospital* highly recommended the nearby Mortonhall Golf Club where the hospital had set up for officer patients to become members. Over 1917 and 1918 this arrangement changed with some green fees being applied.

¹¹ *The Hydra*, June 1918, p. 20.

¹² Elaine Showalter, 'Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Anxieties', in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. by Margaret R. Higonnet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 61–69.

¹³ Siegfried Sassoon, p. 520.

¹⁴ *Good-bye to All That*, p. 535.

¹⁵ Siegfried Sassoon, pp. 535-536.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 536.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 541.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 540.

¹⁹ Private correspondence Dominic Hibberd to Neil McLennan 24 September 2009. 'It is now over eight years since I finished my Owen biography & I am afraid my memory for details fails me all too often. I do remember feeling confident that the course was indeed at Baberton ("some miles away" p. 267), but I have no idea where that information could have come from. I have looked though my transcripts of unpublished letters from Graves but can find nothing. I am sorry – I'm pretty sure it was right, but I can't give any proof. I remember all too little of my book'.

Baberton Golf Club is first and foremost famous for golf. Founded in 1893 the course was designed initially by Willie Park and then redesigned by James Braid, of Gleneagles fame (and also Royal St David's 1901 acclaim). Baberton is also the home to the steel-shafted golf club. Thomas Horsburgh's 1894 patented club now sits in the Golf Museum at St Andrews. However the course now can also add a meeting of the most influential war poets, if not the most influential

poets of the twentieth century, to its list of historic honours. Alongside
pars and putting there is now poetry.

²⁰ Siegfried Sassoon to Robert Graves, [October 1917], 1/1/MSS 064,
folder 7: Siegfried Sassoon, 1916 February 1-circa 1919, Robert Graves
papers, 1917-1962, Special Collections Research Centre, Southern
Illinois University, Carbondale.

²¹ Sassoon arrived on 23 July 1917 and spent 127 days at Craiglockhart.

²² If Graves and Owen were coming from the war hospital they might
have walked through Slateford village or Colinton village and along
Lanark Road to Juniper Green and Baberton Clubhouse. Sassoon talks
of walking in a letter to Edmund Blunden, 1 March 1930, in Carol
Rothkopf, *Selected Letters of Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden,
1919-1967* (vol. 1) (London, Pickering and Chatto, 2012) p. 269.
However, they might have taken the train from Slateford Station to
Juniper Green Station. *The Hydra*, June 1918 recommended players take
the train.

²³ The BBC described the meeting as this in a news article about my find
and confirming the meeting venue. See ‘War poets meeting place
revealed as Baberton Golf Club’, *BBC News*, 11 April 2017
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-39567320>
[accessed 15 October 2018]

²⁴ He wrote the first draft on 8 October 1917.

²⁵ Baberton Golf Club Committee Minute Books 1914-1918, held at
Baberton Golf Club, Edinburgh.

²⁶ *The Hydra*, December 1917, p. 25.

²⁷ Gordon Grant, *Baberton Golf Club – The First Hundred Years*
(Edinburgh, Baberton Golf Club, 1992). See *Baberton Golf Club
Committee Minute Books 1914-1918*.