

MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

‘The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney’ – Michael Hurd
OUP (1978)

It is forty years ago that Ivor Gurney died. During that time, for all the cherishing and strenuous efforts of his friends and champions, his reputation has remained as obscure as it was in his lifetime. The bulk of his songs have stayed silent in their anthologies; the published selections of his poem have gone unremarked, been remaindered. He is known, if at all, for just one marvellous song – *Sleep* – and, vaguely, as a casualty of the 1914-18 War, who ended his days in a mental asylum. Poor Gurney – he can so easily be disposed of in a footnote.

Now Michael Hurd’s sympathetic and brilliantly constructed biography may have come to help set things aright. Already the book has been warmly received: a puff from Anthony Storr, (Sunday Times Correspondent for Psychological Affairs); two whole pages in the Times Lit. Sup. - perhaps Gurney has ‘arrived’.

Or perhaps the public imagination has been caught by the tragedy of his life, told here with unusual tact and simplicity. In more sentimental hands, the story might have been presented as yet another soft-filtered anecdote: Housemanesque, mythical. All the ingredients are there: the boy from the West Country, singer, night-walker, scholar-gypsy, war poet. But Gurney’s winter journey was real: his retreat from London and rapid decline into madness was watched with alarm by his friends, and the outcome foreseen with terror by himself. By interleaving the narrative with poems and letters from the front and from hospital, Michael Hurd allows us to hear the real voice of Gurney; most touching in his quiet, spent retrospection, chronicling the encounters and scenes of his lost life; most harrowing and almost unbearably moving in his protest and despair.

What evil coil of Fate has fastened me
Who cannot move to sight, whose bread is sight
And in nothing has more bare delight
Than dawn or the violet or the winter tree.
Stuck in the mud – Blinkered up, roped for the Fair,
What use to vessel breath that lengthens pain?
O but the empty joys of wasted air
That blow on Crickley and whimper wanting me!

Michael Hurd does not set out to provide a thorough appraisal of Gurney’s achievement as poet and composer. Even if space had been available, this would not necessarily have been helpful at the moment, since only a small proportion of the 900-odd poems and 265 songs are in print. Moreover the collection of MSS in the City of Gloucester Public Library is still uncatalogued.

The songs certainly deserve to be more widely known. Although I would quibble at one or two names cited as Gurney’s peers – Parry and Warlock, for instance – I would still agree that he belongs to the ‘galaxy of great British song composers’. He is never routine or simply polite like the former, and at his best his thought has a breadth and

ambition beyond the latter's capacity. His range is also broad: it covers light-weight "ditties"; dramatic ballads; almost Fauré-esque lovesongs – for instance, the magnificent setting of Robert Bridge's *Thou didst delight mine eyes*; and one or two songs suggest orchestral accompaniment – most obviously the powerful declamatory setting of Yeats' *The folly of being comforted*. Gurney the composer comes close to his poet-self in the nocturnes – Edward Thomas's *Lights out*; Belloc's *Most holy night* – in which a sense of solitariness, resignation, rapture, and wonder are mixed. Here his language is at its richest: the melody expansive, the harmony and piano texture flooded with colour. He is never precious, never quaint; seldom 'hearty' like so many of those OUP composers of the 20's. But he's still a 'Georgian' composer, confined by the verse he chose to set; rarely as enterprising or as experimental as he was in his poetry.

Gurney turned to writing poetry in adversity; in the first place during the War, when for obvious practical reasons composing was difficult; and the habit remained with him, even after the music had gone, until the words too at last disintegrated. The 'making' of verse became necessary to him not only for the release of feeling, but also because it gave him occupation; a craft by which he could prove his will intact and his kinship with other Makers, his companions in solitude whom he invoked so frequently – Townshend, Marston, Whitman, William Byrd. The two volumes published during his lifetime – *Severn and Somme*; *War's Embers* – are not especially distinguished; most written at the Front, they comprise poems which are topical, fervid, satirical, trite. It was only later, in recollection, that he found a language that could convey honestly, without rhetoric, what he had seen: a war devoid of chivalry – though not of comradeship; a ranker's war; banal, scaring, messy. But he was not only a war-poet, with, I believe, a unique perspective; in the ensuing years, enriched by his voracious reading of Hopkins, Whitman and others, his empathy increased, his fantasy flourished. Once robbed of his freedom and health, he had no option but to turn, like Proust, to memory and imagination. Long epistles addressed to the United States of America or to Scotland Yard; songs celebrating the year's turning; verse-portraits; homages; and over and over again the still sharp delineation of his beloved Gloucester: his vision is wide; his technique resourceful and his language often astonishing. I believe that he will come to be regarded as a great poet.

This is an exceedingly sad book to read, yet one comes away from it rejoicing. Gurney will not be extinguished; all the efforts of the earlier custodians of his memory – Marion Scott, Gerald Finzi – were not in vain. I prefer to regard the book as an upbeat, a challenge, thrown down by Michael Hurd on behalf of Gurney and of those others. Singers, recording companies, promotion officers, publishing houses, lovers of poetry and music – the ball is in your court. Who will run to pick it up?

(Review published in *The Composer*, the magazine of the Composers' Guild, 1978).