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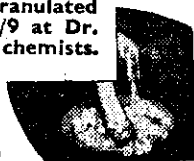
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**Dr. Scholl's
GRANULATED FOOT SOAP**

MANY POETS HAVE GONE INTO BATTLE

—But They Have Not Written Popular War Poetry

SOME weeks ago a contributor to *The Listener's* Viewsreel made some remarks about "the difference between the poet of olden time and the poet of to-day." The contributor was talking through his (or her) hat, but to what extent depends upon the exact chronological interpretation of what he (or she) said. According to your contributor, "in the early part of the world's history there was no mental or moral compulsion on the poet to take an actual part in warfare; it was more or less taken for granted that soldiers were there to fight the battles, and poets to write about them. Warfare was conducted on more or less dignified lines, and a poet who actually unsheathed his sword was doing so as a magnificent gesture, the fitting expression of it in verse being no less magnificent. Nowadays war is everybody's business. . ."

Now I don't know what exactly your contributor meant by "olden time" or by the "early part of the world's history," but if he (or she) intended to go a long way back, he (or she) was quite wrong. I think he (or she) must have had in mind the history of the British Army which, until 1914, was very small compared with the population, and was recruited from those who are traditionally called the Lower Classes, officered by what a famous military historian, himself a soldier, described as the cold shade of the aristocracy. It was a wonderful army, but it was not a national army. If we go right back to ancient times we find that the poet was a soldier like anybody else. Everybody had to fight. When the call came in ancient Greece the poet, together with his neighbours, took his spear and his armour from the corner, reached for his bag of oatmeal or lentils (or whatever it was) for food, and went off, grumbling no doubt, to join his Phalanx. It was regular routine. We have a record of a very early Greek Poet, Archilochus (8th century, B.C.), who is a type that appears through the ages. He was a first-rate poet, a professional soldier, and an egotist, absorbed in his own adventures, candid enough to say that he once ran away and abandoned his shield, an unforgivable offence to Greek sentiment. Among fragments that he left us is this phrase, which shows that at least one of the personal discomforts of war is as old as the hills—"plagued with lice."

Greek Poets Knew War

The great Greek tragic poets knew all about war. They'd been to it; they'd fought in it; you couldn't tell them anything about its horrors. Perhaps nothing written since then is so terribly poignant in its picture of the tragedy of war as "The Trojan Women" of Euripides, and Euripides had been a soldier. In his book *Euripides and his Age*, written before World War I, Gilbert Murray contrasted the life of the ancient poet with that of the modern.

"It is strange to reflect on the gulf that lies between the life of an ancient poet and his modern descendants. Our poets and men of letters mostly live either by writing or by investments eked out by writing. They are professional writers and readers and, as a rule, nothing else. It is comparatively rare for any one of them to face daily dangers, to stand against men who mean to kill him and beside men for whom he is ready to die, to be kept a couple of days fasting, or even to work in the sweat of his body for the food he eats. If such things happen by accident to one of us we cherish them as priceless 'copy,' or we even go out of our way to compass the experience artificially. But an ancient poet was living hard, working, thinking, fighting, suffering, through most of the years that we are writing about life. He took part in the political assembly, in the Council, in the jury courts; he worked at his own farm or business; and every year he was liable to be sent on long military expeditions abroad or to be summoned at a day's notice to defend the frontier



" . . . Dropping alcoholic tears into their
absinthe"

at home. It is out of a life like this, a life of crowded reality and work, that Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides found leisure to write their tragedies; one writing 90, one 127, and the third 92!"

To the Italian of the Renaissance and the Englishman of the Tudor period, the idea of a poet's part in society would have been similar. They were accustomed to write and to fight. The two greatest figures of the Italian Renaissance in art, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, were poets and military engineers. Men like Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Philip Sidney were poets and soldiers. Coming down to Caroline times, we have the soldier, Richard Lovelace, writing lyrics which will last as long as the language. If I were asked to say which very short poem I should like to have written beyond any other, I might reply the one that ends with:

"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more."



" . . . Went off to join his Phalanx"

However, times changed, in England at any rate. The Industrial Revolution had profound effects upon Society. Gentlemen ceased to carry swords; commerce was enthroned. The Army, shockingly neglected between wars and covering itself with glory when it came to battle, was, as I have said, a very small affair. The attitude of society to the poet changed. And poets themselves gave the public all too much reason to believe that they were a class apart, and in certain respects not a very creditable class; at any rate, a class which flouted the canons of respectability. There was Coleridge, a dreamer who took drugs. There was Byron, the haughty aristocrat, who in the words of a later English poet bore "the pageant of his bleeding heart" through Europe. "A terrible man, my dear, a terrible man," you could imagine thousands of English mothers saying, not without cause. And there was Shelley. Now Shelley was a great poet, but I take leave to say that no poet, by his appearance and his private conduct, ever did more to set the average man against poetry and poets. Look at his girlish face and his canoe shirt—they've helped a lot to make people think of poets in general as simps. Then consider his appalling lack of humour and of taste, at any rate according to conventional standards. Having deserted Harriett, his wife, and gone off with Mary to France, he actually wrote to Harriett and quite seriously invited her to join the party. "What a crew!" exclaimed Matthew Arnold about the Shelley set. It was Matthew Arnold who declared that conduct was three parts of life.

Art with a Large "A"

Through the 19th century the ideals of industry and money-making were very potent in England, and poetry and art were not considered respectable. England was largely Puritan, and Puritanism discouraged worship of Apollo. If a young man seeking the girl's hand in marriage explained to the father that he was a poet by profession, he was probably shown the door at once. And the poets continued to provide their enemies with some ammunition. There was Swinburne, for instance, with his small body, his large head crowned with a mass of red hair, and his extraordinary loves and hates, which threw him into physical as well as mental ecstasies. There was Rossetti, who buried the manuscript of his poems in his wife's

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