

Jocelyn Brooke  
Part 2 Works

1. Poetry

Brooke's poetry and also that of his friend Jonathan Curling seem to have had two main influences: Ezra Pound and TS Eliot. The shadow of these two titans of English-speaking modern verse lie heavy upon all authors of that period and it is clearly visible in early, undergraduate, efforts by both Brooke and Curling.

*For a Lady on a Horse* ( extract )  
( Brooke )

How arrogantly  
the sunlight of the February afternoon  
spread its broad sheaves  
of lucent brightness  
over these flooded fields  
(gilding their silver mirrors, emerald enshrined  
with what premature summerstolen gold !) &c

*Street*  
( Curling)

Night  
White  
Strange  
Change  
from solecisms, eyes, revolvers, sex. It  
Seems  
(Streams  
Of facial platitudes bump by grinning )  
That  
Fat  
In  
Thin  
By,  
Hot with nips of port, string bags, caresses  
Of  
Men,  
When  
Who look between shuddered shapes of matrons,  
We  
See  
Till tight-hatted women seeking patrons  
By  
Eve  
Of white disdain or rude ruddy laughter  
-- Adown titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong feet that followed, followed after.

Brooke was a good French reader and also took Baudelaire's *poesie* as an influence. The Frenchman's work is dominated by the themes of sex and death, which were also preoccupations of many of the mid-Twentieth century poets, not least Brooke himself. Baudelaire was a man beset by neuroses and illness exacerbated by drink and an addiction to laudanum. Brooke was similar in constitution, although it was just the alcohol that played a dominant role in his life.

As we have mentioned earlier, Brooke was a contemporary at Oxford with Auden and Betjeman, but their styles differ, with the other authors being more conventional in form and even with Auden, in his early works, his poetry *rhymes*.

Brooke was, in reality, seen in the 1950s as a War Poet. His works from the Second World War – especially *Landscape Near Tobruk* and *Soldier's Song*- feature regularly in anthologies of war poetry. *Soldier's Song* is a rather sub-Kipling effort, that attempts to capture the futility of the soldiers existence. It does not express the futility of war as such and thus does not compare to Rupert Brooke or Owen in its power, but is rather a paean to the obstinate and obdurate Tommy. There is a good use of alliteration and a memorable phrase in "tent of flesh and bone." that nicely exhibits the inherent fragility of the soldier's life.

*Soldier's Song* ( extract )

O Death, be kind to the swaddie  
The man with a load of bull -  
Be kind to the muscled body  
Thumbs up and belly full  
Browned-off with bints and boozing  
Sweating on news from home,  
Bomb-happy, and scared of losing  
This tent of flesh and bone.

Far stronger as a war-poem is *his Landscape Near Tobruk*, which does portray the futility of war, by pitting the armed might of the Eighth Army and Afrika Korps against the pitiless Desert. Brooke spent much of the war in the Middle East and it is to be remembered that in the heat and the flies and the unsanitary conditions, skin diseases proliferated just as much as the venereal kind and Brooke's clinics also handled these 'clean' cases.

*Landscape Near Tobruk* (extract )

This land was made for War. As glass  
Resists the bite of vitriol, so this hard  
And calcine earth rejects  
The battle's hot, corrosive impact. Here  
Is no nubile , girlish land, no green  
And virginal countryside for War  
To violate.

The structure of Eliot is plain to see in this poem and it has a great strength. Brooke uses a rather bizarre metaphor in the middle, which detracts from the effect, but the power returns at the end with a description of the ‘lion-coloured’ soldiers. In *Three Barrow Downs*, Brooke takes us into a daydream, where he visits once again his familiar haunts in Kent, but war is never far away and his reverie is interrupted by the harshness of military life as it superimposes itself upon his bucolic idyll. Again we see Eliot writ large in the selection of seemingly unconnected images and symbols.

*Three Barrow Downs* ( extract )

O betony and self-heal  
 Be near to salve the wounds  
 Of warrior and rookie  
 In the embattled hour  
 And give them to the queer and lonely  
 The brief and phallic power.

We will revisit *Three Barrow Downs* again later, because there is a particularly apt description of a landmark that features prominently in his prose.

## 2. Prose

Jocelyn Brooke has often been described as ‘Proustian’ in his writings. By that is meant that he uses fictionalised autobiography to tell a story. There is no plot as such in many of his works and his books are often rambling and indeed a ramble through his life and its many landscapes. The most *proustian* section is in *Mine of Serpents*, where, on a train as it passes through Montreux – where the Brooke family spent their only foreign holiday – Brooke sees a firework shop. He then meanders into a discourse on his experiences building fireworks as a child and how he had to wait until ‘the war was over’ before he could let them off. Fireworks become Brooke’s *madeleine*. The debt to Proust is enormous and he vowed at Oxford that he would one day write a great Proust-style novel, having grown-out of Huxley and his influences.

Anthony Powell described this technique in a London Review of Books article :

All writers, one way or another, depend ultimately on their own lives for the material of their books, but the manner in which each employs personal experience, interior or exterior, is very different. Jocelyn Brooke uses both elements with a minimum of dilution, though much imagination. However far afield he went physically, his creative roots remain in his childhood. He was by nature keenly interested in himself, though without vanity or the smallest taint of exhibitionism.

And indeed it is true that the books lack vanity. Brooke is his own lead character, he writes about what he knows best: himself. His other characters tend to be composites or caricatures ( we have already mentioned Mrs Bugle ) and their names are often drawn from an encounter: Medicott, for instance ( a character who dominates Brooke’s description of the late Twenties and Thirties ) was

the name of a family lawyer, Anqueril probably comes from a novel by Vita Sackville West and Hunwick is a town in County Durham where his sometime lover was stationed.

This makes the narrative thread of his books difficult to find and sometimes perplexing. It leaves one at times to think “What is the point of this story?” Often there is no *denouement* and it even seems as if some of the stories are there just to fill the space, because the threads are rarely joined together at the end. In fact his books are jigsaw puzzles and the pieces make up a whole and one skips sections at one’s own peril. *The Orchid Trilogy*, *The Dog at Clambercrown* and *Private View* belong firmly in this fictional autobiographical category.

Strangely Brooke is on slightly flimsier ground with his ‘plotted’ novels, although they are still heavily based on his own experiences. In *The Scapegoat* it becomes melodrama. A (possibly incestuous) relationship between an uncle and an orphaned nephew harks back to Victorian novels such as those by George Eliot, but with a heavily sexualised undercurrent and a sort of ritualised sacrifice (hence the title).

*Image of a Drawn Sword* is described as ‘Kafkaesque’ in that it has a fantastical plot, with events that seem to make little sense, but happen nonetheless. The ending does indeed mirror Kafka’s *Der Prozess* in that the hero meets an unfortunate end

Aber an K.s Gurgel legten sich die Hände des einen Herrn, während der andere das Messer ihm tief ins Herz stieß und zweimal dort drehte. Mit brechenden Augen sah noch K., wie die Herren, nahe vor seinem Gesicht, Wange an Wange aneinandergelehnt, die Entscheidung beobachteten. »Wie ein Hund!« sagte er, es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben.

“As if the shame should outlive him.” And although the hero in *Image of a Drawn Sword* does not die, he might as well have had, given the shame of his public punishment. Brooke himself denies a direct influence by Kafka and states that “I can cross my heart and say that I have never, as yet, succeeded in getting through one of his novels. The Kafka influence has, I suspect, been ‘in the air’ for so long”.

What *The Scapegoat* and *Image..* have in common is progressive mental disintegration, which reflect Brooke’s own mental health issues. Although never in a position to be committed or suicidal, he was in a constant state of anxiety and was by nature depressive and found it difficult to make and keep friends. He had a short span of attention, which is one reason why he failed to hold down jobs, but the order and control of military life allowed him to develop a routine and it brought his neuroses under some form of control.

*Image...* is indeed the story of one man’s journey into a hell of his own making. Traumatized by war and convinced that a new war has started in his rural idyll, the hero, whose name is Reynard, has a life of dull routine, where he lives with his mother. It is disrupted by a mysterious visitor from his past and causes him to fall further and further into a dystopia existing disturbingly in his own corner of Kent. It is the unfamiliar happening in the familiar context that drives the narrative and the landscape is something that we will discuss later on.

*Private View* in contrast is in fact four character studies. As with his *Orchid* books, the characters are fictionalised and composite. A fascinating study is of Kurt Schlegel, an Austrian Jew who fled to Palestine in 1939 and in the course of the story discovers that his family has perished in Auschwitz. There is a moving scene when in a port town on Italy’s Adriatic coast, they discover an old Jewish cemetery outside the city walls.

Suddenly Kurt began to speak again

‘Ach you are English, you do not know,’ he exclaimed. ‘You do not know what it is to be like I am: one who is always outcast, one who does not belong to one place, one country. I am like the poor blokes that lie under the grass, I am always outside the walls of the town.’

In many respects, Kurt is a cipher for Brooke himself, someone who is “always outside the walls of the town.” In many respects, Kurt is also what Brooke would wish to be himself: he stands up to the sergeants and officers – as much good as it does him – and he escaped persecution, possessing an initiative and desire for freedom that Brooke had not mustered himself.

The great contrast is *A Crisis in Bulgaria*, which seems more akin to a Beachcomber article in its surreal ludicrousness. The premise being an attempted coup by anarchists in Bulgaria in 1886 who succeed in blowing up a circus thus letting the animals escape and take over Sofia. It falls to the intrepid playwright Henrik Ibsen to restore order. The illustrations are mostly collages cut out of old magazines from the Victorian and Edwardian ages.

All might now have been well, had not the flames from the burning circus, spreading rapidly in the north-easterly wind, set fire to the Royal Military Arsenal some few hundred metres away.

An annihilating explosion shook the town, and a number of lives (estimated at approximately 16,728) were lost; happily, most of the casualties were from the poorer classes.

Several adjoining buildings were entirely destroyed, including the Natural History Museum and the Metropolitan Turkish Baths. A number of bathers—mostly of the male sex—who had been disporting themselves in the latter institution, found themselves blown suddenly several hundred feet into the air.

Some of them, in their descent, had the good fortune to fall through the glass roof of the Imperial Institute of Paediatrics, whose members were enjoying their annual banquet.

The unexpected visitors were given a hearty welcome, and were soon being regaled with an excellent repast, to which was added the pleasure of listening to a number of interesting speeches.



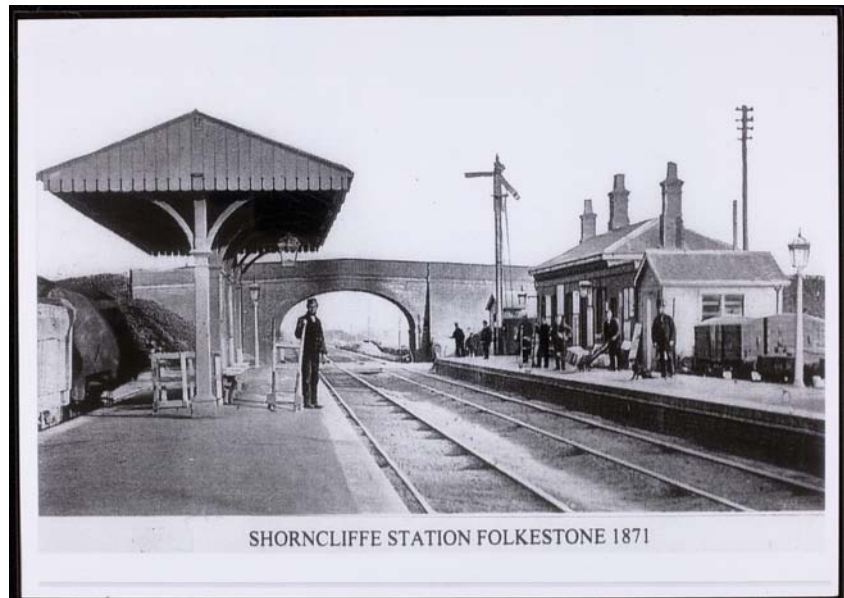
### 3. Influences

#### Sandgate

The village of his birth and its environs provided rich material for Brooke. It is almost Joycean, the way he conducts us around sections of the village. His early memories of walking with Ninnie usually involved trips to Folkestone. Along the Radnor Cliff they would progress, past Lord Radnor's property, Cliffe House ( pictured ) which he called "our nearest local equivalent, I supposed, to Buckingham Palace." On to the Lower Sandgate Road they went to the old toll-gate. The boy was fascinated by the prices for carriages, mules and pedestrians and its keeper, whom he called Mrs Mawby. This was the frontier, beyond it lay the uncertain land of Folkestone and the temptations of the Switchback and 'slot machines' by the Pier. The Lower Road and Leas Park had not as yet been fully developed as a park, although there was a lift at the Metropole until 1941. The world beyond the toll-gate remained a kind of mystery world for Brooke, part of his 'Forbidden Kingdom' to which he, as a child was not permitted to visit.



Up the Radnor Cliff Crescent, one reaches Coolinge Lane. This provided Brooke with a baroque world to excite his imagination. He believed that the local branch – or coven – of the Suffragettes had ensconced themselves in Coolinge Lane, based upon being shown the smashed windows of a Suffragette ( "degraded and anti-social aunt-witches" ) attack on a large house. In those days around the time of the Great War, Coolinge Lane was still quite rural, with open fields and glimpses of distant woodlands. But it was haunted by "terrifying viragoes who broke windows, flung themselves under racehorses and chained themselves to the railings of Buckingham Palace." When he and Ninnie travelled up to Shorncliffe Station ( as Folkestone West was then named ), they would always take a cab, weighed down as they were with luggage and the fierce steepness of Coolinge Lane would prove too much for them both. Coolinge Lane was the "semi-rural prelude to the 'real country', haunted by wicked suffragettes." At the top of



Coolinge Lane are the fine villas, where his mother was wont to collect for charity and where "stood a squalid and rather forbidding public-house, needless to say we didn't call there, and indeed seldom penetrated so far." Piece by piece Coolinge Lane became developed, with modern villas and asphalt roads criss-crossing the countryside. During his childhood, a number of schools became established and he shied away from the sports fields, but became fascinated by its proximity to Shorncliffe and the romantic world of the Army, which held far fewer terrors than 'school'.

The grim grey barracks were visible across the valley... and the far cries of the bugles would be borne to us, faintly across the aery pastures which separated us from that community of males which, even more than the world of school, was associated with ideas of violence, nudity and a kind of vicarious-yearning for danger and adventure.

Army life kept Brooke in an impossibly romantic thrall. The bugles were the voice of the camp calling out over the fields, carrying out a dialogue with the fog horns on the Channel. It is their sound to which Brooke frequently hearkened in his writing.

Leading up to Shorncliffe is Horn Street, which again before the War was much more rural. It led to the mysterious territory where "the soldiers lived" and he would meet, whilst on a walk, groups of red-faced men in khaki who might laugh or shout rude remarks. His terror began to give way to excited imagining of what it was to be a soldier, inhabiting the windswept plateau of the camp. Horn Street was somewhere for him to engage in his botany, the woods in those days were full of foxgloves, bluebells and primroses watered by the Seabrook stream. The Britannia pub was a frequent haunt, whilst in Shorncliffe.

At the foot of Horn Street is the Fountain pub, to which Brooke would often retire, especially on his second stint in the Army, when Shorncliffe was a holding camp. The pub was reserved for officers in former days and he was well known there. Across the road on Battery Point was the *Goose Cathedral*.



He had always known of this place - the old lifeboat station, towards Seabrook - but he really 'discovered' it when Eric Anquetil ( i.e. Jonathan Curling ) would come to stay in the early Thirties. It became the "breeding ground for a series of fantastic legends: an elaborate superstructure of nonsense not unsuited to the gimcrack, hey-nonny Gothic of the 'chapel' itself." By that stage the 1875-built lifeboat house had been made redundant and been converted into a house. A little time after it became a cafe and is still remembered with affection by older Sandgate residents. The incongruity and *bogus* nature of this building is what attracted the two young aesthetes. A boat house disguised as a Gothic chapel, was a spectacular anachronism. It was only just before the War



that the house became the cafe and Brooke never had the chance to patronise it with Eric. It was not until he rejoined the Army that it became somewhere for him to frequent, it now being at the bottom of the hill from his barracks. The building itself was eventually demolished in 1956.

Brooke's botany expeditions took him ( and the long suffering Ninnie ) beyond the reaches of Sandgate. Up by bus along Black Bull Road he would alight and turn into a farm behind the Black Bull pub, which had a plethora of chalk-loving flowers especially orchids. Further on into the hills beyond and Caesar's Camp – the not-at-all Roman earthworks – offered the young Brooke further opportunity to explore and collect plants. He found in a chalk pit on one of the expeditions a Bee Orchid and the rarer Late Spider Orchid.

His childhood revolved around two places : Sandgate with its Little Paths that took him to the Leas or the beach and beyond which lay the terrifying Forbidden Kingdom; and the place where he really felt at home and was the Land of Lost Content – Bishopsbourne.

### Bishopsbourne and the Elham Valley.

Nestling in the Elham Valley, just six miles south of Canterbury is the pretty village of Bishopsbourne. A couple of streets and a couple of grand houses, some cottages and a pub ( which the young Jocelyn considered rather ugly and squat, but in fact *The Mermaid* is quite pleasant ). At one end is the closed railway station and the old school. In the middle is a truly stupendous church dating from the thirteenth century with Medieval wall paintings depicting St Michael and a glorious Victorian altar surrounded by mosaics designed by William Morris. The village lies to the north west of the larger and no less ornate Barham and the A2 passes nearby. This was the place where in two properties: Forge Cottage and next door Ivy Cottage, the family spent their vacations at Easter and in Summer.



St Mary's

This was the 'real' countryside for Brooke. The few remaining rural parts of Folkestone were an *ersatz* version, with the station at Shorncliffe ( now Folkestone West ) being the boundary between his everyday life and his 'country of the mind'. He describes hiring a horse and cantering around the



woods off of Horn Street and admitted to having “an odd sense of being isolated in some ambiguous territory between two worlds...”, caused by not being in the ‘real country’, which lay beyond the hills – an “impassable barrier along the northern sky-line.”

As a child, Jocelyn’s world had had strict boundaries: he was not permitted to venture to Folkestone alone, with its temptations of funfairs, slot machines and music halls; with Bishopsbourne it involved the distance one could easily walk. Sometimes the family would take the car and journey – but never too far – to have a picnic. For the young boy, the Boundary at Bishopsbourne was marked by the Watertower. This structure occupies a whole chapter of the book *A Mine of Serpents*. Brooke imagines it as a kind of ‘beacon to guide us’, in the thick woods that surrounded it were primroses and bluebells. The tower features in *The Barrow Downs* poem that we mentioned earlier :



Their eyes unheeding  
Of storm-dark horizon,  
And white-capped water-tower  
Pricking the sullen line  
Of the wood whose trees conceal  
Tombs of an older time.

The tower itself still stands, now used for mobile communications rather than feeding the burghers of Margate with fresh water. It is situated near Adisham, slightly to the north east of Bishopsbourne and about a mile away. It was built in a very eclectic style. To quote a baroque description by Wikipedia

The structure was built in 1903 in an Edwardian Italianate Revival style for the Margate Corporation District Waterworks

The architectural style and its mundane use encapsulates the early Twentieth century mania for disguising water pumping stations and towers for other things ( Streatham and Hampton pumping stations and the tower at

Littlestone are prime examples ). It is now obscured fully by trees that had probably grown considerably since Brooke’s childhood, but it served as a local landmark, visible from the valley ridges.

In a depiction of immanence, worthy of the English Romantic poets, Brooke describes one of the family picnics where he wandered off and approached the ‘august and inviolate mass’ :

...with a start of astonishment saw, at the end of the path only twenty yards away and presenting to me ... an aspect of itself which I had never seen before, the brick arcades and the white peaked summit of the watertower.

Because I had never seen it from just that position, and because I was alone with it, the tower seemed more than ever, to be offering me some extraordinary and desirable secret...

Ruskin tells us of a concept which he calls 'pathetic fallacy' which is where a person describing an object or place becomes overwhelmed by the emotion that that place evokes or of some incident associated with it. Brooke uses pathetic fallacy with great abandon in his works. This area of East Kent and especially the Elham Valley is 'real country' and a place where he feels comfortable and safe. He muses whether it would ever be called 'Brooke Country' in the same way Dorset and its neighbours are 'Hardy Country'. Even the regular and mundane journey to Bishopsbourne on board the SE&CR trains assumed for Brooke an excitement and anticipation of adventure.

Joseph Conrad lived in Bishopsbourne for the last five years of his life and the village hall is named after him, yet strangely he never featured in Brooke's musings. A towering figure such as Conrad should surely have piqued the interest of the literary minded youth. As it was the young Jocelyn was friends with the Bell family, who lived in Oswalds prior to Conrad and also owned Bourne Park, the local stately home. The Bells were local benefactors and the war memorial outside the church at Bishopsbourne is to one of their fallen scions. They had rented out Bourne Park to a family called Toynbee and lived instead in the dower-house of Oswalds in the village.

One of the local phenomena which preoccupied the young Jocelyn was the village stream. It only intermittently flowed and when it did in any strength, it was known as the 'woe-water' as it was the harbinger of bad times ahead. Rather than announcing imminent doom, the Nailbourne river instead suggested nature renewed and the presence of moor hens, frogs and water rats. A later war-poem depicts the rising of the woe-water and its legendary consequences :

The Woe-Waters ( extract )

The woe-waters foretold  
This troubled Spring, and I  
Have sat by the waters at sundown  
Beneath the cold green sky

And have seen the sadness of waters  
And heard the crying of wind,  
And wondered that this loved country  
Seemed suddenly unkind

The village was for Brooke the 'Land of Lost Content' ; a symbol of happiness that would only reappear when the next holiday began, Brooke is full of contradictions and one such is that for most children it was the seaside that was the ultimate goal of any holiday and thus the progenitor of happy memories, but for him it was the 'real country' .

If the village of our summer holidays was an afternoon land, tranced in a perpetual and postprandial drowsiness, our real home at Sandgate was by contrast matutinal:

my memories of it are bathed in the keen, windy light of spring mornings, a seaside gaiety and brilliance haunted by the thud of waves on the shingle...

This feeling of drowsiness and languidity is surely what attracted him to another great geographic love of his: Italy.

### Italy

Much to her astonishment, this hole kept spreading wider and wider, and growing deeper and deeper, until it really seemed to have no bottom; and all the while, there came a rumbling noise out of its depths, louder and louder, and nearer and nearer, and sounding like the tramp of horses' hoofs and the rattling of wheels... and soon saw a team of four sable horses, snorting smoke out of their nostrils, and tearing their way out of the earth with a splendid golden chariot whirling at their heels... In a moment, Proserpina lost sight of the pleasant vale of Enna, in which she had always dwelt. Another instant, and even the summit of Mount Ætna had become so blue in the distance, that she could scarcely distinguish it from the smoke that gushed out of its crater.

The story of Proserpina being snatched away by Pluto haunted Brooke. He had read it in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood tales* - a sort of American version of Kingsley's *The Heroes* - and he made it his goal one day to find Enna and poor Proserpina's grotto.

His first experience of Sicily in 1943, though, was a disappointing one. He travelled on a hospital ship and disembarked to be transported to a huge building, which, to his amazement, turned out to be an airship hangar. But they were no longer in the harsh and hard world of the North African desert but in Europe and the soft airs of the Sicilian morning seemed to infect him and indeed the entire army. Everything seemed to move more slowly. Olive orchards and fields now dominated their vista, once inland. Brooke tells us that this land represented the 'bare bones' of nature - a hard landscape still, like Africa, but with "primitive candour which concealed nothing."

Brooke travelled to Syracuse and was attached to his appointed General Hospital, opening up shop. Soon they had four hundred patients and he was too busy to explore the island further, apart from Syracuse itself or a beautiful cove along the coast.

Before long they had been ordered north and crossed into Italy proper, landing at Taranto and moving along the coast to Bari and then Foggia eventually ending up in the Abruzzo region, about halfway up on the Adriatic coast. Here for Brooke was 'real country' once more with low hills and lush fields and woods, brimming with fruitfulness.

Brooke ended his war in Italy, sent to the north, which he said he loathed. His demob meant travelling by train to Naples and there he had to wait for weeks until he was transported to Milan and thence home by train.

Despite the hardships of war and the incompetence of the Army, Brooke resolved to return to Italy and did so again in 1947. Now as a civilian, he found the country a different place. It proved too difficult for him to return to Abruzzo, but contented himself with the glories of Florence. He noticed that living in Italy was a surreal experience: everything that was rationed or unavailable in Britain was in abundance in Italy - but at a price.

Was it possible that the individuals comprising this conquered and bankrupt nation might in time, re-establish their traditional way of life, in spite of corrupt government and in defiance of economic law ?

Italy had effectively become a Mafia state – the very poor starved and only the clever or crooked could make a living. The middle-classes were the ones who suffered most, unused to hustling and haggling they were easy prey for the black marketers that infested the cities. The journey to Italy unsettled him and it was afterwards that he determined once more to rejoin the Army. After he left the Army and had earned some money from his writings, he returned to Italy – this time flying – and resolved to travel to Sicily to find Enna. Travelling from Syracuse by a snail’s-pace train and bus, he reached the village

Here, more than ever, one was haunted by a sense of some ancient, immitigable tragedy; more even than the hills of Santa Panagia, or the mountain hideout of the *capo di Mafia*, did this landscape breathe an air of deadness and desolation; here, at the ‘navel of Sicily’, the whole dark and vengeful spirit of the island seemed gathered into a central nucleus of potential terror and violence.

The journey to Enna was a disappointment, the site of Proserpina’s abduction, high up in the hills of central Sicily was now a lake ( Lago di Pergusa ), rather than some grotto as Hawthorne had described it. Pergusa is actually famed for being scenic and for its wide biodiversity, but Brooke had travelled there at Easter when it was not yet in full bloom.

Sitting upon the rocky bank I became aware of the silence as something positive, a ponderable element brooding, like some heavy, inert gas, in the lower levels of the atmosphere. ‘The sense of emptiness, of utter negation which had haunted me in the cafés of Syracuse, and again at Enna itself, had become, in this place of death, dominant and inescapable.

### Sexuality

It is clear from Brooke’s writing that he was a homosexual. His writing is not high camp, as one would find with EF Benson or JR Ackerley, or even purposefully outrageous as with Ronald Firbank. It is whimsical and fey. The clues abound throughout the books. In his drinking escapades in London after Oxford, he takes us on a tour of gay bars in the West End and Bloomsbury. The description in *Mine of Serpents*, where he accidentally meets an old ( and rather louche ) Oxford acquaintance on a train is in fact one long pick-up attempt. Women, apart from Ninnie, his mother, a platonic friend or two and various schoolboy crushes do not feature much in his works. Brooke prefers the company of men, which is another reason why he was drawn to the Army. He felt uncomfortable around women, except for his ‘old ladies’. Even his sister does not feature in the books after Brooke’s schooldays, although he does write to her from his Army postings. Furthermore, the endings of *Image of a Drawn Sword* and *The Scapegoat* are direct homosexual fantasies of sado-masochism. His ‘discovery’ of his own sexuality in *The Dog at Clambercrown* is itself an act of self-scourging.

He was also a great proponent of other gay writers: Ronald Firbank and Denton Welch owed their later acceptance to Brooke’s critiques. A good example is an article on his influences in *The London* magazine of 1955:

Later came Christopher Isherwood, whose easy, colloquial prose provided a much-needed corrective to the ‘mandarin’ styles of Proust and Huxley. His ‘tea-tabling’ method, as he calls it—the reduction of stirring or dramatic events to the scale of a

drawing-room comedy — itself owes something to E. M. Forster, for whom I have an unbounded admiration...

This is not to say that Brooke lived only in some ‘gay bubble’, but he was quite naturally drawn to these writers and their styles. Indeed Brooke does not seem to have been particularly promiscuous. In fact we might even consider him something of a prude, as he complained about the abundance of sex in Proust and in Huxley ( over done in the former, there to shock in the latter ). There is a hilarious description of how he travelled to Paris, met up with a friend there and the pair were bamboozled by a taxi driver into attending a bordello, from which they fled in horror. Jonathan Curling probably was a lover and we can identify one specific lover, Albert Heron. He was a soldier in the Seaforth Highlanders, based in Dover and would often tap Brooke for money. Heron was a template for the character of Bert Hunwick in *Military Orchid*.

In fact along with the descriptions of the Twenties gay scene in London, Brooke was also attracted to Dover – for much the same reason as Noel Coward was. This ‘vulgar’ town offered easy access to young men in uniform. Its working-class pubs and Hippodrome music hall became frequent haunts for Jocelyn – the doors to the Forbidden Kingdom that lay beyond Folkestone had at last been opened for him and in this he was abetted by an unlikely ally.

Jonathan Hunt maintains and there is no reason to disbelieve him, that Jocelyn’s brother, Cecil was also homosexual. There are plentiful descriptions of how the pair of them would hang out in ‘sordid’ Dover. Cecil was the antithesis of Jocelyn : he was a ‘hearty’ attended the macho Rugby School and joined the army, being commissioned into The Buffs in 1917. He was ten years Jocelyn’s senior and because of his position in the Army and later as Chairman of the family firm, he was supposed to be more discreet.





Cecil was a reservist and returned to the Army at the outbreak of the war as a captain. In March 1941, he was being driven in a taxi from The Esplanade Hotel in Folkestone back to his unit based in Dover, when the car hit a lorry in Capel le Ferne. Cecil was killed instantly – one of the thousands of victims of the Blackout. There is no mention of this tragedy in Brooke's writing, as far as has been noted by the author. The character of Geoffrey Greene is possibly a representation of his brother in *Conventional Weapons*, a soldier who also dies without honour, but in this case of a heart attack. What effect his brother's death had on Jocelyn, one can only surmise, he was doing his medical training at the time and did not attend the funeral. Geoffrey complains of something similar in *Conventional Weapons*, he could not attend his brother's funeral. Gerald Brockhurst in *Private View* is another macho who is a closet gay and suffers a breakdown, alcoholism and after being caught in an homosexual act in the Army in post-war Germany - "splashed across the News of the World" - commits suicide while awaiting court-martial. It is also possible that Cecil provides the template for one of Brooke's characters: Basil Medicott, who is also a sporty type, takes Jocelyn on pub crawls and rejoins the Army, to meet an undistinguished end (in Medicott's case dysentery).

#### 4. Conclusion

Bathos, anti-climax and disappointment are all regular themes in Brooke's literature. *The Dog at Clambercrown* is especially guilty of providing us with disappointment. The pub that he searches for is closed and has been for some time, the Lago di Pergusa – so early in the season – is drab and dead. He even leaves the Army for a job at the BBC that he discovers he cannot do.

These disappointments are the results of quests, searches for things or goals that prove unfindable. The elusive Military Orchid is symbolic of his search for something that will give his life meaning. It is as if everyone finds the orchid but him.

The characters in his stories often meet disappointing ends: disease, heart attacks, breakdowns and beatings are their unfortunate fates. A pattern emerges. One does not go to Brooke looking for a happy-ending. Whether or not this disappointment is a true reflection of his own life is debatable (the authoress Olivia Manning was certain that it was). He seemed to retreat into purposeful obscurity, writing his critiques and talking occasionally on the wireless or television.

Brooke's writing is pleasant to read. It is easy-going and witty, his characters are well drawn, but he suffers from reproducing the same trope – the hidden or shamed homosexual who meets a sticky end. His descriptive powers are excellent and he has a good eye for satire and the acidic comment. He has left us a strong body of literary criticism and he was a well respected and regarded critic, in the days when critics such as C Day-Lewis or Cyril Connolly were as famous as the authors. His writing style is impeccably polite and thorough and he was a frequent guest on the television and wireless.

The danger with reading Brooke's novels is to take them at face value. We must always remember that these are works of fiction. Brooke left no real memoirs, nor has an authoritative biography appeared (Jonathan Hunt had been working on one). His papers at Christchurch Canterbury and University of Texas do not really help us with a rounded picture: a few letters and mostly business correspondence. Few people really knew him well: Anthony Powell and Olivia Manning have written at length about Jocelyn, but even they knew him professionally and only occasionally met him. He was friends with Betjeman and the composer John Ireland, but again their meetings were perfunctory. It is also too tempting to quote verbatim from his work and sometimes difficult to treat them critically, simply because he is so convincing. We must remember that everything we read by Brooke is embellished – it may not be outright lies, but it is also not quite the truth either.



From Brooke's 'Wild Orchids of Britain' 1950 Bodley Head

Monkey Orchid



Military Orchid

