

SOLDIER POETS

SONGS OF THE FIGHTING MEN

—the first of four pages—

A representative collection of new poems (not previously published in volume form) by:

GALLOWAY KYLE.
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THIS volume has grown out of a suggestion made by a firm of booksellers who were inspired by a letter in *The Times* in April last, headed "Soldier Poets," which directed attention to the fine spirit animating the poems by Corporal Streets, whose sonnet "Gallipoli" had appeared a few days previously. Slowly and without effort the scheme of the volume has matured and several distinct features have evolved.

Although this representative collection is not an anthology—it consists of work hitherto unpublished in volume form of a number of "soldier poets" brought together within one cover—the contents have assumed a certain homogeneity. They define, record and illustrate the aspirations, emotions, impressions and experiences of men of all ranks and branches of the Army, and they reveal a unity of spirit, of exultant sincerity and unconquerable idealism that makes the reader very proud and very humble. And if some of them deal with home themes by way of solace amid the horrors of war, the poems are essentially war poems, revealing the soul of the soldier going into battle, describing

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incidental scenes, focusing the feelings, both individual and general, of a unique body of fighting men. For one may claim that this volume represents the soldier as poet rather than the poet as soldier. It is typical of that intensification of feeling and concentration of expression developed by military service in the defence of country under extraordinary conditions which have yielded a surprising volume of fine poetry. "I know of no one to compare him to but the Archangel Michael" was said of the poet-paladin Roland. The noble Achilles of the West has to-day many brave peers who face battle with a song, Michaels and Rolands of civilization.

Any objection that, since practically all men of active age have been drawn into the Army willy-nilly, the term "soldier poet" is ambiguous, has already been met. Even a cursory glance at this volume will show that the authors are soldiers whose military service dates back in most cases to the early days of the war, if not earlier, and not conscript poetasters who have found a new stimulant to jaded literary exercises. The note of pessimism and decadence is absent, together with the flamboyant and hectic, the morose and the mawkish. The soldier poets leave the maudlin and the mock-heroic, the gruesome and fearful

handling of Death and his allies to the neurotic civilian who stayed behind to gloat on imagined horrors and inconveniences and anticipate the uncomfortable demise of friends.

What seem to me to be the characteristics of this volume give it more than a literary and temporary value. When the history of these tremendous times comes to be written, the poetry of the period will be found to be an illuminating index and memorial. And the historian will be least able to neglect the poetry of the camp and the battlefield, which reflects the temper and experiences of our great citizen army. The spirit that has turned our soldiers into poets is the spirit of the V.C.—brave and debonair, but neither melancholy nor mad. It is not a new spirit, but a new bright efflorescence—a survival and a revival. “The half-men, with their dirty songs and dreary” were stricken dumb by the storm—at the most, they whimpered in safety with none to heed them: the braver spirits were shocked into poetry and like the larks are heard between the roaring of the guns—the articulate voices of millions of fighting men, giving to poetry a new value and significance.

For many months this new verse—vivid, definite, concentrated, and not a mechanical echo any more than a striving after new or bizarre effects—has

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flowed in from all parts of our far-flung battle-line. Scores of slim volumes and hundreds of separate poems have come from men in the Army—from France and Flanders, Gallipoli and the Soudan, Egypt and East Africa. The published volumes have not been laid under contribution, but some of the poems collected here have appeared in *The Poetry Review*, in which a greatly appreciated feature has been made of contributions by soldiers, while we are indebted to *The New Witness* for permission to include typical poems by Lieutenant Geoffrey Howard and the late Lieutenant W. N. Hodgson,¹ M.C., who left Oxford to join the Army and found a grave in France in July last. About the same time Lieutenant Victor Ratcliffe¹ was killed in action near Fricourt, and as this volume is going through the press we hear that Sergeant Streets,¹ who was a miner before he enlisted in August, 1914, and Corporal Robertson have been "missing" since July 1. This is their priceless legacy. No further introduction or commentary is needed.

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¹ Memorial volumes are in preparation for early publication.