

Max Egremont. *Siegfried Sassoon: A Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004. pp. vii + 639.

The book begins with details: a man in a room in Edwardian England, in love, writing a letter to a friend. This picture serves to set up the tension that drives the biography forward: the man was Jewish, he lived in an ostentatious nouveau riche house, and he was in love with a man. Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) is best remembered as a poet and soldier who, during World War One, threw his medals of honour into England's Mersey River, an act that symbolized the broader shift in British literature away from traditional Victorian forms and towards the defiance of modernism. In *Siegfried Sassoon: A Life*, Max Egremont tells a fuller story, a story of a Sassoon conflicted and anxious about his war protest, his manhood, and the place of his poetry in a changing literary landscape.

The occasion for this new biography of Sassoon—three have already been published, in addition to Sassoon's six autobiographies and three volumes of diaries—is the emergence of new primary materials: diaries, notes for Sassoon's autobiographies, correspondence, prose drafts, and unpublished poems. Egremont gained access to a goldmine of evidence, and the result is a wealth of new details about Sassoon's life. *Siegfried Sassoon: A Life* should be of great interest to historians of Britain and the First World War, to literary critics, to scholars studying sexuality and gender, and to general readers of historical and literary biography. Egremont's book also raises many questions regarding the craft of biography, particularly concerning the appropriate balance between evidence and analysis.

Egremont's uncovering of so many fresh sources casts new light on the well-known facts of Sassoon's life. Sassoon was born into a wealthy family descended from Jewish merchants and entrepreneurs. His youth was marked by relative wealth but a largely absent father and an increasing sense of himself as an outsider—as a Jew and as an effeminate boy. Sassoon attended Clare College, Cambridge, where he hunted foxes and began to write pastoral poetry

celebrating the virtues of Olde England—an imagined England for which he never lost nostalgia throughout his life. During the Great War, he was an infantry officer, was twice wounded, and in 1917 composed an oft-cited letter to his commanding officer entitled, “A Soldier’s Declaration,” in which he condemned the war as one of “aggression and conquest” that should be ended. Rather than subjecting him to a court martial, the army sent him to a psychiatric hospital to be treated for neurasthenia. Sassoon became something of a pacifist hero, though he always remained ambivalent about his status as a leftist and radical. After the war, and for the rest of his life, he had enough money from his inheritance to support himself and several others, and spent his time writing poetry and autobiography. He had several romantic relationships with men, married a woman late in life, and converted to Roman Catholicism shortly before his death. His life story includes a cast of important characters: Wilfred Owen, Edward Carpenter, Robert Graves, Thomas Hardy, Edward Marsh, Bertrand Russell, Edmund Gosse, and Lady Ottoline Morrell.

Max Egremont wants to let Sassoon speak for himself, to let the evidence convey the meaning of Sassoon’s personality and experience. Indeed, the book conveys a great deal of information; we now know more than we ever have about the details of Sassoon’s private life. In particular, the book is valuable for historians and theorists of sexuality. Most biographical subjects—especially those of the British aristocracy of this period—leave little evidence of homosexual desire, and next to none of sexual practice. This is not true of Sassoon, who wrote quite extensively of his intimate relationships with men such as Gabriel Atkin, Prince Philipp of Hesse, and Stephen Tennant. Historians of homosexuality often have to interpret veiled references, poignant silences, and homoerotic metaphor when researching and writing about late-Victorian men. Not so with Sassoon, and this volume sheds a great deal of light on his intimate practices.

However, the preponderance of evidence is in itself a weakness in the book and weighs it down. Egremont’s authorial voice is

distant, and he often leaves intriguing bits of evidence unexplained. In several instances, Egremont discusses numerous poems in a single paragraph—nine in one case—quoting from them and then moving on. He offers extensive evidence, but rarely pauses to consider its meaning or implications. This raises questions as to how biography should be structured: there are those, like Egremont, who feel their subjects should speak for themselves, that the evidence itself should allow the reader into the mind of the subject. On the other hand, the function of the biographer is to frame this evidence, to explain it, to tell us why it matters and what it reveals. Egremont too often leaves the reader without guidance, and the result is a lack of coherence, a lack of dynamic analysis, a lack of narrative trajectory. The book often feels like a collection of quotations, tied together only loosely by the author.

In addition, these quotations are often uncontextualized. To give one example, Egremont writes, “In December 1911 came a poem, ‘suggested by the Balkan wars.’” (48) We never find out in what context this quotation was written, or by whom. Did Sassoon write that the poem was “suggested by the Balkan wars” in a letter to a friend? In his diary? As an epigraph to the poem? We will never know. This regular plunking in of quotations leads to an overall tone of imprecision. It lends much of the biography an abstract quality—we often don’t know who is talking, to whom, when, or in what context.

Egremont’s strategy in this book is clearly to emphasize the voices of Sassoon and his contemporaries—a strategy not without logic or virtue. There is wisdom in being cautious about one’s own authorial conceits, in being true to one’s sources. And much of the new evidence presented here is fascinating. But because Egremont does not establish a compelling authorial voice, and does not explain this valuable evidence, the book falls flat. Sassoon’s personality does not emerge as a dynamic and lively presence. His historical and literary significance is left for the reader to surmise. We are left wanting to know more about the man in his room, in love, writing a

letter to a friend. We are given this fascinating picture, but it seems to hang on the wall without a frame.

Benjamin E. Wise
Harvard University