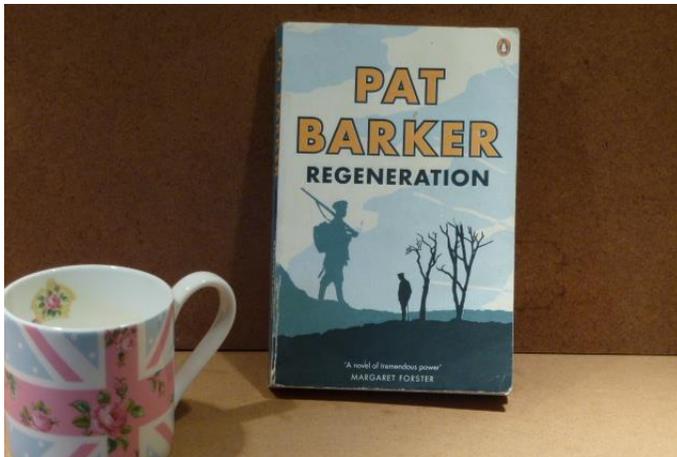


Regeneration

By Rod Fraser



REGENERATION IS THE first of three novels about the Great War written by Pat Barker. Collectively, they are called *The Regeneration Trilogy*. In my opinion, *Regeneration* is the best of the three (and the only one made into a major motion picture—now on DVD). The other books in the series are called *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*.

Regeneration is an unusual story, in that most of the action takes place at Craiglockhart War Hospital for Officers in 1917. It is here that Captain William H. R. Rivers (1864–1922), an army psychiatrist, takes three young British officers under his care.

Two of the three officers are war poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. The third, Billy Prior, is a working class lad who rose to the rank of Second Lieutenant through merit, during the fighting in France.

The phrase 'war poet' is most often attributed to those who participate in a war and write about it. British writers who fought in the trenches of WWI were often known by this term. Poetry was used to express their outrage, impotence and concern for their fellows.

Part of the charm of this book is that Craiglockhart War Hospital for Officers was a real place, located near Edinburgh. It was converted to military use in 1916 to deal with 'shell-shocked' officers. Unlike enlisted men, who received more basic care in less charming facilities, Craiglockhart offered patients golf, tennis and cricket, as well as the opportunity to wander the fields surrounding the hospital.

Having said that, it was hardly a country club. The patients suffered from what we now call PTSD, some of the cases so severe it amounted to a major permanent disability—all brought on by the tragic shelling, slaughter and mutilation these officers (almost all them were junior field officers) observed and experienced in the trenches of WWI France and Belgium.

Not only was Craiglockhart a real place but Rivers, Sassoon and Owen were real people, all of whom spent time at this hospital. Rivers, of course, was the psychiatrist mentioned earlier. Sassoon and Owen were patients. Billy Prior is a fictive character, but was also a patient in the hospital at the time.

A fifth officer, Captain Robert Graves (1895–1985), who plays a small part in this book, was also a real person, war poet and later a prolific writer. Perhaps you watched a TV series from the late 1970s called, *I Claudius*? If so, it was based on Graves' book, written in 1934. Graves also wrote a memoir of his war years, *Good-Bye to All That*. I plan to review this book in a future article.

I MENTION THESE details to introduce the above British writers, whom I had never heard of—prior to reading *Regeneration*. To have them so convincingly brought to life in Barker's novel was a revelation to me. It personalized many of the horrors and wondrous moments of the war.

For example, I learned that Graves was badly wounded at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and collapsed with exhaustion when he subsequently returned to France. He then convalesced in England at an officers' hospital at a time when his friend, Siegfried Sassoon was also recovering from war wounds.

And through Sassoon, Graves met Owen, who later sent him many of his war poems from France. Lieutenant Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) died in the war.

All the other officers mentioned earlier survived the conflict (even the fictive Prior survived). Owen's death occurred just days before the armistice took effect on November 11, 1918 and just a few weeks after he earned the Military Cross for "conspicuous gallantry."

The Military Cross was of particular importance to Owen, an award he had sought to justify himself as a war poet. In its absence, he felt those who disliked his pacifist leanings (and poetry) would attempt to discredit him as a coward. Interestingly, Sassoon, whom we will be speaking of shortly, also earned the Military Cross and (like Owen) returned to France at his own request after his stay at Craiglockhart.

Two last bits of trivia before I move on to my review of *Regeneration*:

Like Sassoon and Owen, Graves also suffered from 'shell-shock' (often called neurasthenia during the war years). While he was hospitalized two times for war injuries during his army service, there is no evidence he was treated for neurasthenia.

In 1919, while on garrison duty, Graves woke up one morning with a severe fever, this being a key

symptom of the 'Spanish Flu'. Not wanting to remain in Ireland, he deserted his post and traveled to England to receive care in an English hospital. Fortunately, he met an officer on the trip home who signed his demobilization papers; otherwise he might well have been charged with desertion.

A GOOD START to my review of *Regeneration* is to provide a little background on the real Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), a key figure (and perhaps the most important character) in the novel.

You may be a little surprised by his first name. It sounds a little German for a British officer. Apparently his mother loved Wilhelm Wagner's operas and so favoured a German name for her son.

There is an amusing anecdote in the novel that plays on the name Siegfried. While at Craiglockhart, Sassoon shared a room with another officer who was slightly delusional, and chose to complain about Sassoon to Rivers. He told Rivers that Sassoon was a German spy. Without batting an eye, Rivers wearily commented that a German spy would hardly have a name as revealing as Siegfried. The roommate was unimpressed, but let it go.

His war record shows Sassoon to be a young man of exceptional bravery and ability as a soldier and officer. He won the Military Cross in 1916, but

that was only one of his exploits. On an earlier raid, he single-handedly captured a German trench, and armed with grenades, scattered 60 German soldiers. The enlisted men of his company were reluctant to engage with the enemy, when not accompanied by this young officer.

So with great moral authority, he declined to return to duty after convalescence in 1917. Rather he penned: "*Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration*" in July 1917 and sent it to his commanding officer. It was leaked to the press and subsequently read in Parliament. The first sentence gives you the gist of the message. It reads as follows:

"I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it."

It doesn't take much imagination to expect this behaviour would be considered treasonous by the political leadership. Unfortunately they were dealing with a hero, not a shirker or a coward. Sassoon had spent three years in the army, earned the Military Cross and was extremely well regarded by officers and enlisted men alike.

For an offence such as this, Sassoon could expect to be court martialed and spend the remainder of the war in prison. There was no suggestion in the

novel that he might be shot for such an offence, but I suspect that might have been a possibility. And certainly more likely for a private soldier.

The story opens with Sassoon traveling to Craiglockhart on the train for rest and rehabilitation. His friend, Robert Graves, was able to convince the authorities that Sassoon had suffered from "a severe mental breakdown and was not responsible for his actions." Instead of being court martialed, Graves persuaded the military to place Sassoon under the care of Dr. Rivers at Craiglockhart.

This, of course, was an easy sell. It was far better for the authorities to put Sassoon away in a mental hospital, rather than give him the publicity of a court martial and prison sentence.

The stage was now set. Dr. Rivers' job was to convince Sassoon to give up his crusade and return to duty. Sassoon was given a choice: Resist Rivers' arguments in perpetuity and face a court martial; or return to duty when declared fit to do so.

In an amusing anecdote describing their first meeting, Sassoon asks Rivers, "Do you think I'm suffering from a war neurosis?" Rivers replies dryly, "No, but you may be suffering from an anti-war neurosis!"

Continuing his thought, Rivers tells Sassoon straight out, "[Your record shows you to be quite a hero in battle]. Taking unnecessary risks is one of

the first signs of a war neurosis.”

“Is it,” Sassoon replied, “I didn’t know that.”

“Yes,” Rivers continued, “Nightmares and hallucinations come later.”

And so starts the fascinating conversations that take place at Craiglockhart between Rivers and Sassoon, which finally culminate in Sassoon agreeing to return to the front, mainly as an act of solidarity with his fellow soldiers, rather than his being convinced the war makes any sense.

Included in the novel are the stories of Billy Prior and Wilfred Owen mentioned earlier. Owen plays only a bit part in the story, but Billy Prior’s working class background and rise to 2nd Lieutenant are explored in detail, as is his love affair with a local Scottish girl who works in a munitions’ plant. Even the story of the learned Dr. Rivers is nicely told in this novel.

All in all, this is a very interesting book and I recommend it to my readers. It amounts to 250 pages, but in my opinion, it would be much better if it was 20% shorter. I suggest the DVD for those who have little patience with wordy—though worthy—stories.

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