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Siegfried Sassoon

A Biography

Max Egremont

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Extract

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For Georg and Alison



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The purchasing power of the pound

Money – both the possession and the giving away of it – plays an important part in this book and, to make the figures clearer, here is a comparison of the purchasing power of the pound at certain dates.

There was little price inflation between 1886, the year that Siegfried Sassoon was born, and 1914. Taking the pound at £1 in 1998, its comparable purchasing power is:

1914: £58.18
1920: £23.27
1930: £36.20
1938: £37.02
1946: £22.01
1955: £14.54
1965: £11.00
1975: £4.76
1985: £1.72
1998: £1.00
2002: £0.92

Source: *Whitaker's Almanack 2004*

ONE

'The daybreak world'

SIEGFRIED SASSOON DENIED that he was 'a typical Jew'[1] and disliked to be thought rich, but at the end of the nineteenth century, when he was born, the name of Sassoon meant great riches: a 'gilded'[2] Jewish family linked to the raffish Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) and to an exotic, slightly mysterious past. If this eastern ancestry featured in his dreams, it usually took a more Arabian form, as 'processions, strange crowds of people, façades of oriental looking buildings with hieroglyphics on them – like racial memories',[3] nothing to do with trade. He made anti-Semitic remarks and mocked his family's 'Jewish gold' made 'in the east by dirty trading' to allow a snobbish life in England as cigar-smoking worshippers of 'German royalties and dissolute peers'.[4] Siegfried's cousin Philip Sassoon, the bachelor politician and host, was similarly uneasy about it and hinted that he was of Parsee stock,[5] aware perhaps how quickly the English could turn on Jews, how much they remained essentially outsiders.

The word Sassoon means 'joy' in Hebrew, and Siegfried thought the name came from a place in Mesopotamia called Sashûn and that his ancestors were 'partly Persian'. In fact they were Sephardim, descended from the Jews of Spain, Portugal and north Africa. By the eighteenth century the Sassoons were successful traders in Baghdad and prominent members of the synagogue, but it was

David, Siegfried's great-grandfather, born in 1792, who had a genius for business. He moved to Basra from Baghdad, and in 1832, having been harried by Ottoman officialdom, arrived in Bombay, then under British rule, in search of larger markets and stability. The fortune was founded upon trade in (among other goods) textiles, tea, dried fruit, metals and, when the link with China developed, opium, as well as property in Bombay, Shanghai and Hong Kong. The riches combined with piety and philanthropy: schools, synagogues, hospitals, orphanages, museums and a Jewish newspaper in Bombay and another synagogue in Poona. David was a patriarchal figure, naturally powerful, and the father of thirteen children by two marriages. After his death in 1864, contributions towards the cost of a statue of him to be put up in Bombay came from Jews, Parsees and Christians in India, Persia, China and Europe and included five guineas from the Liberal statesman William Gladstone.

David's son – and Siegfried's grandfather – Sassoon David Sassoon, who landed from Shanghai in 1858 to establish the family's business in London, was quite different. Tall and thin, sickly and shy, the scholarly, lisping 'S.D.' – collector of a library of Jewish books and manuscripts – had married Farha Reuben, the daughter of a rich and devoutly Jewish merchant in Baghdad. He seems to have been proud of his Sephardic inheritance, having a sense of being set apart from the more numerous Ashkenazim of the northern European ghettos like the Rothschilds,[6] but his father David dominated his life and S.D. also became eclipsed, at least in the public eye, by his more worldly brothers. Arthur, Reuben and their half-brother Albert (who changed his name from Abdullah) Sassoon in particular were voraciously social and sometimes mocked for this – as shown by verses in the racing paper *The Pink 'Un* about Albert, who had been made a baronet:

> *Sir Albert Abdullah Sassoon*
> *That Indian auriferous coon*
> *Has bought an estate called Queen's Gate*
> *And will enter upon it in June.*[7]

Albert, Arthur and Reuben joined the Prince of Wales's Marlborough House set and were no doubt graciously allowed to lend money to the heir to the throne. Later Siegfried Sassoon imagined the 'high minded' David's disapproval of his sons' Edwardian ostentation.[8] But the Sassoons remained devout Jews. At the Scottish estate of Tulchan, bought by Arthur Sassoon, the family spent Jewish holy days praying while their guests shot or fished without them.

The quiet S.D. had to work unexpectedly hard in London because the American Civil War had cut off supplies of raw cotton to English manufacturers, obliging them to turn to India and the east. He lived in a Georgian house overlooking Regent's Park with his small, sharp wife and their children, Joseph, Rachel and Alfred Ezra (Siegfried's father), who was born in 1861. Old David bought S.D. a Tudor house called Ashley Park (once owned by Cardinal Wolsey) by the Thames in Surrey, some seventeen miles from London, where the young family spent much of its time. Then, in July 1867, on a very hot day, Sassoon David Sassoon dropped dead in the foyer of the Langham Hotel while waiting for a cab to take him to the Victoria and Albert Museum, where he was to look at a model of the statue of his father David that was to be put up in Bombay.

David Sassoon's fortune was diluted among his many descendants, and S.D.'s children and grandchildren lost out further by their mother's decision to encourage her sons to avoid the family business and become aristocratic Englishmen. S.D.'s widow stayed on at Ashley Park and in 1884 followed several other Sassoons by buying a house at Brighton. She kept up the family philanthropy, even if she had trouble in paying for the upkeep of Ashley Park. Walton-on-Thames, the nearby town, was given a meeting hall, Hove received a public park and she once sent melons to Brighton police station when she saw a constable suffering from the heat. This cascade of sometimes eccentric giving accompanied an increasing isolation; she became preoccupied by her religion and the past, while the extravagance of the other Sassoons grew ever more ostentatious.

Sassoon David Sassoon's widow wanted her sons to avoid this crude display. The shy Joseph, the eldest, was a good linguist and followed S.D. in collecting books and buying antique furniture, but Alfred, Siegfried's father, seems to have worshipped little more than pleasure and, in a dilettante way, the arts. As a younger son (only six when his father died), he was spoilt by his mother who, thinking he might become a concert violinist, bought him two Stradivariuses. Thin, slightly less than average height, with dark hair and a moustache and a dimpled chin, Alfred stayed at Exeter College, Oxford, for only a few terms, leaving without a degree to become a rich, cultured amateur who sketched, sculpted, played cricket and the violin and rode well (although disliking the horse world). He took a house in Paris where he met Sarah Bernhardt who, in her unreliable memoirs, claims to have refused this 'rich nabob's'[9] offer to replace a lost bracelet once given to her by Victor Hugo after her performance in his *Hernani*.

To the world, Alfred Sassoon's identity was as the heir to a fortune rather than someone of individual achievement or merit. Siegfried Sassoon had little evidence of his father's tastes: merely a glass-doored cupboard at Weirleigh, his childhood home in Kent, and some unused instruments – lutes, guitars, a viola da gamba – and stories of Alfred's 'gypsy wildness'[10] in violin-playing, in which he had been taught by the master Sarasate. There was also a slapdash amateur watercolour of the local landscape, some books by Walter Pater and one particularly fine volume, FitzGerald's *Omar Khayyám*, bound in faded rose-coloured damask figured with old gold, redolent of *The Yellow Book*, that Bible of the Aesthetic Movement, and of Oscar Wilde.[11]

On 30 January 1884, in Kensington parish church, the twenty-two-year-old Alfred married Georgiana Theresa Thornycroft, aged twenty-nine, of Melbury Road, Kensington, the daughter of Thomas Thornycroft. The marriage met furious opposition from the bridegroom's mother, for Miss Thornycroft was a gentile. Mrs Sassoon did not go to the wedding, reputedly cursing any children of the marriage and entering into ritual mourning for her 'dead' son. The

very English Thornycrofts, worried by the Jewish link, felt reassured when it seemed to have been at least partly broken. But Victorian materialism made them fear that Alfred might now forfeit the Sassoon money under the terms of his dead father's will. The prospective bride's brother Hamo inspected this document at Somerset House and was relieved to find that 'all seems right and the youth is free. He will be very well off.'[12]

*

GEORGIANA THERESA THORNYCROFT, known always as Theresa, came from Cheshire farming stock, reputedly reaching back to the thirteenth century. Indeed the Thornycrofts still had land near Congleton in Cheshire and it was said that Theresa Thornycroft had rushed into marriage to Alfred Sassoon after being jilted by a Congleton farmer who had run off with a barmaid. Her parents, though, were both sculptors, in a much more professional way than Alfred Sassoon. They had met when Thomas Thornycroft was studying with the sculptor Jack Francis in London and fell in love with Francis's daughter Mary, marrying her in 1840. The Francises were (like the Thornycrofts) originally a farming family, from Norfolk.

Although drawn to socialism and republicanism when young, Thomas Thornycroft had a style suited to the public pomposity of the Victorian age. He made busts for the House of Lords, a statue of Queen Victoria on a horse for the Great Exhibition of 1851, and, after 1861, three equestrian statues of the dead Prince Consort for Halifax, Liverpool and Wolverhampton. Thomas's most spectacular piece, however, is *Boadicea and Her Daughters*, a massively bombastic display begun in 1856, still in progress when he died in 1885, and finally put up on Westminster Bridge some ten years later. Mary worked more delicately. In 1843 she did the first of her royal commissions, a portrait of Queen Victoria's baby daughter Princess Alice as *Spring*, and soon the drawing room at Osborne filled up with cloying pieces like the young Prince of Wales as *Winter*, *Princess Beatrice in a Nautilus Shell* and *Prince Leopold as a Fisher*

Boy. Mary Thornycroft also gave lessons to her subjects and was partly responsible for Princess Louise becoming a sculptress. Both Thornycrofts were loving but firm parents to their seven children (five girls and two boys), who, when young, began letters to their mother, 'Honoured Madam'.[13]

In addition to his art, Thomas Thornycroft became interested in engineering and in 1862 bought land by the river at Chiswick. Here his elder son John founded the firm of John I. Thornycroft that later made warships for the Royal Navy. Frances, one of Thomas and Mary's daughters, married John Donaldson, one of John's engineering partners, but the rest of the family stuck to art, and three of the other daughters, including Theresa, painted and sculpted.

Siegfried Sassoon much preferred the Thornycrofts to the Sassoons (in whose remarkable history he took very little interest) and felt that he had inherited their respect for hard work, craftsmanship, dislike of flamboyance and sense that the ideal life was one lived simply in the landscape of rural England. But Thomas and Mary Thornycroft's younger son William was an example of artistic fame as well. By 1870, aged twenty, William had adopted the name of Hamo, derived from an early-thirteenth-century Thornycroft, and his sister Alice, echoing the romantic medievalism of Alfred Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites, changed her name to Alyce. Sent as a boy to his childless uncle's farm in Cheshire, with the idea that he should eventually inherit it, Hamo Thornycroft liked country life but returned to London to complete his education at University College School. In 1868 his sister Helen painted him as a knight in armour – athletic, powerful, with longish golden hair and a frothy moustache – representing the Tennysonian ideal.

Hamo also wanted to be a sculptor. He improved his talents and his body, attending classes at the Royal Academy, swimming and rowing and joining the Artists Rifle Corps, although admonished by his mother for taking time off from his art. In 1872, in competition with (among others) his father Thomas and G. F. Watts, he was chosen to sculpt the statue of the assassinated Viceroy of India, Lord Mayo; in 1873 he won the Royal Academy gold medal and in 1881

was elected an associate of the Academy. Among his supporters for this last honour was his new friend the writer Edmund Gosse, with whom (although they both married and had children) he had a relationship of such sentimental intensity that it seems like homosexual love. But the Thornycrofts were quietly wholesome, a little prim; Gosse's involvement with *The Yellow Book* shocked Hamo, and his sisters feared that the writer might have lured their brother away from their mother's High Church principles.

The family was also suspicious when Hamo took up with the agnostic Agatha Cox, whose beauty stunned Thomas Hardy and who may have been the model for the heroine of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Fourteen years younger than Hamo Thornycroft, and with brothers who were Fabian socialists, she seemed unsuitable, and among other girls put in Hamo's path was Siegfried's aunt Rachel Sassoon. But in 1884 Hamo married Agatha and, perhaps under her influence or that of William Morris (the result of an early meeting with Burne-Jones), became even more contemptuous of 'the lazy do-nothing selfish' rich.[14]

A pioneer of the 'New Sculpture' which, under French influence, attempted to show natural movement, emotion and strength, Hamo created pieces like *The Sower*, examples of the 'democratic art'. But with this went a lucrative line in memorials to the great: gigantic figures of General Gordon, William Gladstone and Oliver Cromwell for London; King Alfred in Winchester; and icons for the Raj – Queen Victoria in Karachi, Lucknow and Ajodhya; King Edward VII in Karachi and King George V and Lord Curzon in Calcutta. These made Hamo Thornycroft one of the establishment's favourite artists, a communicator of imperial and patriotic ideals.

Hamo's sisters had been, by the standards of the time, quite free. Theresa – short, plump, red-haired, with large ears, and nicknamed 'Trees' – studied painting under Ford Madox Brown with her friend Nellie Epps (who married Edmund Gosse). She too went on to the Royal Academy Schools and, with her sisters, learned musketry drill from Hamo, as well as swimming and rowing in the healthy, country-loving Thornycroft spirit, and had High Church beliefs.

Alfred Sassoon, in contrast, was spasmodically energetic, a frustrated artist, essentially metropolitan. There was an age gap of eight years, with the older Theresa, at twenty-nine, embarrassed by this.

*

THEY BOUGHT WEIRLEIGH, a house just outside the village of Matfield, near Tunbridge Wells in the still unspoilt weald of Kent, within reach of London. Even though its garden and views inspired his poetry, Siegfried Sassoon came to dislike the tall, narrow, suburban-gothic building of red brick and tiles, crammed up on one side against a road and possibly designed to be the lodge of a much larger residence. Its original owner and builder was Harrison Weir, a popular children's illustrator and admirer of William Morris who lived on into the 1890s. He had added a sixty-foot-high tiled spire (taken down during the Second World War because of the danger to aeroplanes), where a lamp was lit at night if he was at home. Weirleigh is fake medievalism at its most gloomy, with narrow-paned windows, high gabled roofs, doorways that might have been designed for dungeons and prominent chimneys in the Jacobean style. There is even a Latin inscription over the front door by the road, 'Vero Nihil Verius', the motto of the aristocratic de Vere family to whom Weir thought himself related. The architect John Belcher, a friend of Hamo Thornycroft, added a two-storey studio, set back from the house on the garden side, the lower part red brick below white walls crossed with black-patterned beams. Weirleigh evokes that fairy-tale Victorian land of knights and castles, a small-scale dream-world of the sanitized but romantic past: that of Shalott or Tennyson's 'moated grange' yet more like 'the black bat night' than a visionary dawn.

Alfred and Theresa's first child, Michael Thornycroft Sassoon, was born at Weirleigh in October 1884, ten months after their marriage. On 8 September 1886 Michael was followed by Siegfried; and, in 1887, Hamo (named after his uncle Hamo Thornycroft) completed the trio of boys. Siegfried Loraine Sassoon's first name came from his mother's admiration for Wagner and the second out

of her respect for a High Church clergyman, Canon Loraine. Although half Jewish, he was baptized and brought up in the Christian faith.[15] As an infant, he featured in a pious picture by Theresa of Christ with a fat baby and sensually curved children, a reflection of her continuing belief.

At Weirleigh, Theresa went on with her painting, although it seems to have made Alfred jealous, and worked on her huge picture *The Hours*, shown at the Royal Academy in 1889, in which twenty-four large Rossetti-like women in classical costume float across the sky from darkness into light, apparently in a state of heifer-like calm. All his life Siegfried Sassoon loved the work's poetic atmosphere and idealistic emotion, which owed much to the symbolism of Burne-Jones and Watts – Pre-Raphaelite precision merging with the romantic mystery of 'poems painted on canvas'.[16] Theresa knew Watts, who had his studio next to the Thornycroft house in Holland Park, and made him godfather to her youngest son Hamo; later she took the boys often to the Tate Gallery to see Watts's *The Happy Warrior*, in which a woman representing Death approaches a young man in armour. A reproduction of his famous *Love and Death*, thought by Wilde to be worthy of Michelangelo, hung at Weirleigh, its frightening depiction of the giant, sinister Death and the helpless boy-figure of Love bringing to Siegfried an early image of innocent and beautiful sacrifice.

Siegfried recalled his father as pale, moody and delicate-looking with a dark moustache, yet capable 'when in good spirits' of riotous joking.[17] There were stories of Alfred hitting sixes on the village cricket field and, in 1889, when the London Sassoons entertained the Shah of Persia, sending three camels and attendants dressed as Arabs to Sir Albert Sassoon's Kensington house ostensibly with gifts from the Shah that in fact were sacks of old newspapers and rags. But by 1890 Hamo Thornycroft wrote that Theresa's husband ('a madman') had revealed his 'eastern blood'[18] by abandoning his wife, probably for the independent, sophisticated American novelist Julia Constance Fletcher. Certainly in 1885, only a year after his marriage, Alfred Sassoon sent £50 secretly to the publisher George

Bentley as a contribution to Bentley's purchase of the rights of *Andromeda*, a two-volume novel by Fletcher, who wrote epigrammatic stories under the name of 'George Fleming', had lived in Italy, talked brilliantly and knew Oscar Wilde and Henry James.[19] Soon the liaison, possibly revealed to Theresa when they were all in Venice together, failed, reputedly because Constance found Alfred too poor. But he moved to London, away from his wife.

The boys were sometimes visited by their father, for whom they dressed up, to be first tickled by Alfred's moustache when he kissed them and then fascinated by his amber and gold cigar-holder, his two gold rings (one with a brown diamond) and his gold watch, which – anxious not to miss the London train – he repeatedly took out of his pocket. Alfred brought exotic presents of guava jelly, pomegranates and expensive toys, and smelt of cigar smoke as he romped with his sons and made 'screamingly funny jokes'.[20] One autumn afternoon, when he was pushing them in a handcart, they met Theresa in the garden and the laughter abruptly stopped. In the ensuing silence, Alfred looked obstinate and masterful, but Theresa was suddenly pathetic. 'I have never forgotten the look on her face,' Sassoon wrote: 'the first time I had seen life being brutal to someone I loved'. He longed to enjoy them both together.[21] Theresa never criticized their father to the children, beyond referring to 'poor Alfred',[22] but the separation preyed on her emotionally; she was a single, abandoned woman, a rare, pitiable and humiliating position in Victorian society. In revenge, she brought her boys up almost as if the Sassoons did not exist, to try to make them not only as English as her Cheshire ancestors but far in spirit from the unhealthy city to which her husband had fled. Pushed into the background by Theresa's silence about him, their father faded. Like Alfred, Siegfried experienced throughout his life outbursts of apparently uncontrollable high spirits and a very emotional response to music, but he lacked, to his occasional regret, that less rigidly English outlook that his absent, more cosmopolitan father might have given to him.

Theresa epitomized a certain kind of Englishness. A tremendous

Tory, an admirer of the statesman Lord Salisbury, she was a Victorian patriot, utterly confident that her country was by far the best in the world. Weirleigh became the centre of an almost aggressively English childhood, even though it could not quite fulfil the role to which those who lived there aspired. Sassoon admits that in his memoirs he gives Weirleigh, as part of an aesthetic exercise, 'an impression of charm' whereas in reality, uncertain of 'its social position', it 'lacked dignity'. Privacy was fleeting because the family's quarters were scarcely separate from those of the servants, and tramps and other unwanted callers often banged on the door. Above all, Weirleigh seemed very different to 'the mellow old mansion in a park' Siegfried longed for as a child, especially when he began to read Tennyson and *The Ingoldsby Legends* and went to some of the grander houses near by. Even so, he knew every corner of Weirleigh: the plaster casts of classical busts, the smell of oil paints in the Studio and of potpourri and beeswax polish in the drawing room hung with large etchings of Mason's *Harvest Moon* and Walker's *Harbour of Refuge*; the dining room and the bust of Hypnos painted green by Alfred; a Queen Elizabeth clock standing on an old oak cupboard. Then there were the books in the drawing-room bookcases: *Wuthering Heights*, a favourite of Theresa's, and the translated Russian novels bound in green cloth, among them one called *My Husband and I*. This last vaguely upset the young Siegfried for the word husband 'suggested antagonism between two people who had once been happy together'.[23]

Outside, however, was Theresa Sassoon's solace – her garden of Irish yews, climbing roses, apple orchards, wide lawns, peony walks, sloping paths, a quince tree by the pond and herbaceous borders that shone against the dark house. From here, Siegfried could see across the fruit orchards and hop kilns of the Kentish weald to an apparently illimitable land of mysterious possibilities hinted at by trains rattling through the stillness on their way to London or the coast. This brought about the feeling of wonder that he later dreaded losing.