

Context: Margaret Postgate Cole and 'The Falling Leaves'

Margaret Postgate Cole (1893–1980)

Although born and raised in an Anglican family, Margaret began to question her religious faith whilst at Cambridge University. She read widely, and influenced by the writings of Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Hobson, she became a socialist, a feminist, an atheist and a member of the Fabian Society.

Her brother, Raymond Postgate, shared her views and was imprisoned briefly during the First World War as a conscientious objector, as the court didn't accept that his atheism and socialist views were a valid reason for not fighting. As someone who believed in 'the brotherhood of man', it made no sense for him that he should be involved in killing these 'brothers'. When he was eventually forced to sign up, he was found to be medically unfit, but because the public was so sure that any young man not in uniform must be a coward, he went on the run. After the war he wrote mystery novels, many of which were jointly authored with his sister.

It was during her brother's trial that Margaret Postgate's views of the Great War were transformed. Her support for her brother confirmed her as a pacifist (someone who is anti-war) and led her to campaign against conscription, or forced enlistment. As a result of her involvement in this campaign, she met her husband, G.D.H. Cole, also a socialist.

During her busy life, Margaret Postgate Cole was not only a poet and author, but also a Labour member of the London County Council. She played an important role in championing comprehensive education.

'The Falling Leaves'

World War One (1914–18) is sometimes called the Great War – 'great' here meaning 'immense' or 'huge', because it was unlike previous wars. Firstly, it involved everyone, not just the army and navy. Secondly, and probably most devastatingly, it involved the first modern weapons (machine guns, bombs and gas) at a time when soldiers were still involved in hand-to-hand combat. The horror of the trenches is hard for us to grasp fully. However, many of the young soldiers who had signed up believing they were on an heroic mission to defend their families, country and way of life felt betrayed by those who had persuaded them to enlist. The reality of war was shown in their poetry and later – for those who survived – in their novels.

As Margaret Postgate Cole and other women poets of World War One have shown in their work, it was not only the men who suffered as a result of the war. Women's lives were affected too, not least because of the millions of young men who died, all borne by women, and many loved by women. So, while male poets of this generation can tell us about the agony of trench warfare, women poets voice the despair, anguish and endurance of women, waiting, wondering and grieving.

In this poem, a tree dropping its leaves leads to thoughts of the thousands of young soldiers dying in their prime in the trenches. The pastoral imagery at the start of the poem becomes a contemplation of the death toll in Flanders, and vividly illustrates how the horror of war overshadows every area of life, even a peaceful ride in the countryside.

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