

Context: Owen Sheers and 'Mametz Wood'

Owen Sheers (1974–)

Owen Sheers was born in Fiji in 1974 but was brought up in south Wales. He now divides his time between Wales and New York. As well as poetry, he has written an award-winning non-fiction book, *Dust Diaries*, essays, novels and plays and has worked as a television presenter.

'Mametz Wood'

'Mametz Wood' was featured as the Saturday poem in *The Guardian* in 2005 and is included in Sheers' second collection of poetry, *Skirrid Hill*. Skirrid derives from a word meaning divorce or separation and many of the poems in the collection are concerned with loss. The volume has been described as 'elegaic', a word that certainly applies to 'Mametz Wood'.

The poem 'Mametz Wood' was inspired by a trip to the Somme. Sheers was involved in a documentary film project about two Welsh writers, David Jones and Wyn Griffiths. They served with the 38th Welsh Division and both fought at Mametz Wood (described by Jones in *In Parenthesis*). While Sheers was in France, a previously unknown grave was uncovered. It contained the bodies of 20 Allied soldiers, hastily buried but with arms interlinked as described in the poem. Sheers has said that when he saw the photograph of the grave, he knew it was an image that would stay with him and that it was a subject he would want to write about. This poem is the result, surfacing some time later, just as, he says, 'elements of the battle are still surfacing... years later.'

References in the poem

The battle of Mametz Wood was a real event that took place in July 1916, part of the First Battle of the Somme. The 38th Welsh Division was trying to take a heavily fortified wooded area on high ground. German forces were well equipped with machine guns and the attacking soldiers had to approach across exposed, upwardly sloping land. The 38th Welsh suffered heavy losses (almost 4000), including some to what is now called 'friendly fire'.

Dance macabre or 'Dance of Death' was a theme of much medieval poetry and art. It depicts a skeleton (Death) leading all ranks of people (from the highest to the lowest) to their graves. It symbolises the inevitability of death for all, and the futility of earthly rank and material possessions. Its appearance in religious imagery was meant to urge viewers to reflect on the state of their souls.

Bibliography

poetryarchive.org

owensheers.co.uk/index.html

contemporarywriters.com