



HAL
open science

Book review of: Alisa Miller. Rupert Brooke in the First World War. Clemson, Clemson University Press, 2017

Yann Tholoniati

► **To cite this version:**

Yann Tholoniati. Book review of: Alisa Miller. Rupert Brooke in the First World War. Clemson, Clemson University Press, 2017. Michigan war studies review : review, surveys, essays and commentary in the field of military studies, 2019, pp.2019-042. hal-03192226

HAL Id: hal-03192226

<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-03192226v1>

Submitted on 7 Apr 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Rupert Brooke in the First World War by Alisa Miller.

Clemson, SC: Clemson Univ. Press, 2017. Pp. ix, 281. ISBN 978-1-942954-34-7.

Review by Yann Tholoniât, University of Lorraine–Metz (yann.tholoniât@univ-lorraine.fr).

In her new book,¹ Alisa Miller (King's College, London), provides, in Part I, a biography of poet Rupert Brooke, who died of sepsis from an infected mosquito bite at age twenty-seven (23 Apr. 1915) near the Greek island of Skyros, while traveling to join the British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force at the battle of Gallipoli. Part II is an assessment of the reception of his work.

The book begins with Brooke's family background and his boyhood years (chap. 1, "Youth"), then turns to his brief time at Cambridge University (chap. 2, "The Idyll"), which was interrupted by the death of his brother Dick and then the growing news of the impending war (chap. 3, "Self-Mobilisation"). Though Brooke was often ill in this prewar period, he hesitated only briefly before joining the Army (chap. 4, "Enlistment"). He had become convinced (chap. 5, "War and Waiting"), as we see in his best-known poems (chap. 6, "The War Sonnets"), that he needed to go to the Continent to participate in the fight (chap. 7, "Transport"). His correspondence reveals that he grew more and more certain he would die in the conflict.

Against this biographical outline, Miller analyzes how the image of Brooke became a standard by which to gauge patriotic feelings (chap. 8, "Patriotic Poetry") and a symbol of the experience of mourning throughout the nation in the months after the announcement of his death. *The Times* obituary (26 Apr. 1915), to which Winston Churchill contributed in parts, and the speech by the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, William Ralph Inge (chap. 9, "Public Death") began "the process of moral promotion and sanctification of the poet-soldier" (104), turning Brooke into "a *lieux* [sic] *de mémoire* of the war" (118). Newspaper articles cast him as an archetypal young soldier: he was apolitical, unmarried, and an athlete, with a Byronic attitude (125) toward fate and a supposed love of adventure. Last but not least, he was a "true" Englishman (chap. 10, "Syndication").

In other terms, Brooke was used as a tool of war propaganda, which involved a "close interaction between public and private sectors," that is, "governments and publishers, ... and the consuming public." Indeed, his name became synonymous with "mourning and commercialisation" (124, 130).

Brooke's posthumous celebrity was fueled by newspaper photographs (chap. 11, "Image"). His good looks hinted at poetic sensibility and made him "an icon that achieved visual ubiquity" (145). Henry James's preface to Brooke's *Letters from America*,² played a part in the "dissemination of the Brooke myth" (149; chap. 12, "Patrons"). Chapter 13, "Readers," shows to what extent "the War Sonnets, particularly, 'The Soldier,' had become bona fide wartime literary 'hits'" (164). Miller's discussion of the testimony of "Poet-Soldiers" (chap. 14) shows that Brooke's War Sonnets constituted a "thematic and emotional bridge" (182) between the front and an ideal of home, while conveying the consensual wartime values of "honour, brotherhood, self-sacrifice, bravery, and particularly the calm acceptance of death" (191).

1. Orig., diss. (DPhil Oxon.) 2008.

2. NY: Scribner's Sons, 1916.

Although it was difficult to criticize Brooke in public, reservations by those like Charles Sorley, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and even Virginia Woolf, who had known him in Cambridge, provided a counterpoint to the general chorus of praise (chap. 15, "Careful Critics"). Brooke was also an iconic figure of war propaganda in various other, mostly Anglophone, countries (chap. 16, "Export"). Miller concludes that the literary fate of Rupert Brooke exemplifies the "processes through which individuals and societies recast inherited forms in order to render violence familiar and manageable" (226).

Miller's succinct study both evokes and deconstructs the myth of "England's poet-soldier." Her narrative is supported and enlivened by relevant quotations and illustrations. Though she espouses no allegiance to a specific critical school, her work is close in spirit to Pierre Bourdieu's *Rules of Art*,³ especially in its investigation of the factors that led to Brooke's immediate and long-lasting canonization. Students and scholars of either the life and poetry of Rupert Brooke or World War I will find Alisa Miller's book to be discerning and instructive.

3. Subtitle: *Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr., 1996).