



Gilbert Waterhouse
2/Lt .2nd Battalion Essex Regt. 1st July 1916.
Serre Road Cemetery No.2, Beaumont-Hamel, Somme

Poet, educated at Bancroft School. Commissioned May 1915.

Rail-Head

Someville is the Railhead for bully beef and tea,
Matches and candles, and (good for you and me)
Cocoa and coffee and biscuits by the tin,
Sardines, condensed milk, petrol and paraffin.
Truck-load and train-load and lorries by the score,
Mule-cart and limber, "what are yer waitin' for ?"
Dusty and dirty and full of noisy din,
"if 'e fights upon 'is stomach, this 'ere army oughter win !"

The Casualty Clearing Station

A bowl of daffodils,
A crimson-quilted bed,
Sheets and pillows white as snow—
White and gold and red—
And sisters moving to and fro,
With soft and silent tread.

So all my spirit fills
With pleasure infinite,
And all the feathered wings of rest
Seem flocking from the radiant West
To bear we thro' the night.

See, how they close me in,
They, and the sisters' arms.
One eye is closed, the other lid
Is watching how my spirit slid
Toward some red-roofed farms,
And having crept beneath them slept

Secure from war's alarms.

AN OLD BANCROFTIAN POET IN THE TRENCHES

Gilbert Waterhouse left Bancroft's in 1900, after six years, and, like many of his contemporaries, set out for office work or an apprenticeship at the age of 16. It is likely (see below) that he entered an architect's office like another poet before him, Thomas Hardy. However, like so many other thousands of young boys growing up in Europe, he could not know that his expectations of life were to be cruelly devastated by rumblings of militarism already beginning. All we know from *The Bancroftian* in the autumn of 1916 is that he was reported wounded and missing July 2nd, the second day of the Battle of the Somme "he is possibly a prisoner.

He was in civil life a very capable architect, and also a writer of plays and poems."

It took nearly two years for confirmation of his death from wounds to appear in *The Bancroftian*. A fuller account appears in a fine anthology entitled "A Deep Cry" edited by Anne Powell (Sutton, 1998) where she quotes an extract from "Essex Units in the War, 1914-1919". The 2nd Battalion of the Essex Regiment, in which Waterhouse was commissioned in May 1915, was decimated in German counter-attacks after the 4th Division's attack to the south of the village of Serre. The Essex Battalion, having started the fateful day of battle with 24 officers and 606 other ranks, finished it with only two officers and 192 ranks. Gilbert Waterhouse was posted missing, presumed killed. He appears in *The Bancroftian* Roll of Honour in February 1918, and his burial at Serre Road No.2 Cemetery is also mentioned.

Gilbert Waterhouse left behind a slim volume of poems, published posthumously in December 1916, entitled "Rail-Head and other poems". There are only 24 poems, most of them written pre-war or before he arrived at the front. But some half a dozen are definitely 'trench' poems and show that his powers of observation, precise expression and developing satiric humour might have matched a Sassoon or Owen had he survived longer than the average infantry officer. One example must suffice below. Perhaps more can follow when space and time permit. We should pause for thought at the long list of names on the School War Memorial Board in the south cloister, pay tribute to the wonderful human potential cut short and particularly give thanks for the short life of a genuine poet, for that is what Gilbert Waterhouse surely was.

David Giles