A Canadian in the Garsington Circle: Frank Prewett's Literary Friendships

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Two 1979 articles on Frank Prewett as a Canadian Georgian poet—one by Donald Precosky,[1] the other by Michael Thorpe[2] —introduce Canadian readers to this obscure literary figure. Thorpe especially supplies an adequate biographical sketch and an illuminating and accurate analysis of the poetry. Regardless of the efforts of these two scholars, the name and works of Frank James Prewett remain obscure in both the general context of literature and, specifically, in their relationship to Canadian literature. Having left Canada (except for brief, intermittent visits) in 1915, Prewett is better known in England than in his native land; however, he still remains a minor figure there, known more for the company in which he wrote than for his writing itself. It is unlikely that Prewett will (or should ever) be anything more than a minor literary figure, but the men and women with whom Prewett mingled recognized in him an artistic skill and talent, a particular vision and literary potential. Authors such as Robert Graves, Virginia Woolf, Siegfried Sassoon, Lady Ottoline Morrell, and Edmund Blunden have been mentioned by Precosky and Thorpe: I will add to that list other references to Prewett by the literary establishment which will help to form a clearer picture of the man and his work.

As noted by Precosky and Thorpe, Prewett served in both World Wars, and he wrote, often compellingly, of his experiences in both. His strongest poems—and those most frequently anthologized—are his war poems, but Prewett successfully blended verse with prose and a practical, scientific and documentary form. He wrote analytically and technically on agricultural and rural topics, and often on how they were affected by government policy and new technology. As Thorpe indicates, Prewett wrote to a colleague in the Air Ministry, Dr. Mary Allan, that his verses "have a hard but true music, and do not belong

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[1] Donald Precosky, "Frank Prewett: A Canadian Georgian Poet," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 4:2 (Summer 1979): 132-136.

[2] Michael Thorpe, "Frank Prewett: A Canadian Among Georgians," *Four Decades of Poetry 1890-1930* 2:4 (July 1979): 181-194.

to the cant of the age."[3] His verses and his own commentary on them represent only one aspect of Prewett's career. In order to focus on this "music" and gain a better understanding of the career, we would have to select, as a starting point, its basis in the rural environment. The farm, farmlife, and the countryside would nearly always influence his writing, whether technical or poetic; Prewett would often return to the land and the farming he so loved, and no matter where his career and artistic endeavour brought him, these aspects of his life were reflected in his writing.

The farm, in fact, is where Prewett spent his early childhood and adolescent years. Thorpe outlines well the "strict" but not "puritanical" Protestant upbringing that Prewett experienced on the family farm.[4] What both Precosky and Thorpe are unable to determine, however, is where exactly that family farm was. In most records the location has been narrowed to southern Ontario. Graves, in his introduction to the *Collected Poems of Frank Prewett*, calls his birthplace "Old Ontario," a charming term of rural quaintness, but one which offers no specific geographical position; Louis Untermeyer in his anthology, *Modern British Poetry*,[5] narrows the location to "near Mount Forest"; Prewett's Ontario birth certificate records his birthplace as Arthur. The family farm, and the region in which Prewett experienced his childhood, is specifically Kenilworth, Ontario. Kenilworth, named for an early pioneer storekeeper who immigrated from Kenilworth, England, saw a major influx of British settlers between 1840 and 1880. Thirty-three miles north-west of Guelph on Highway #6, Kenilworth is about seven miles from Arthur and eight miles from Mount Forest in the centre of Arthur Township. It is generally a region of fertile soil and has consistently produced good crops.[6] The supposed "military highway" mentioned by Prewett in his 1954 B.B.C. radio broadcasts, "Farm Life in Ontario Fifty Years Ago," was in fact what is called the "Owen Sound Road." James Hamilton notes, although without giving sources, that the now paved Highway #6 was once an Indian trail and then became the traditional "corduroy" road.

The reference to the Indian trail raises the question of the accuracy with which the facts of Prewett's life are recorded and

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[3] Frank Prewett, *The Collected Poems of Frank Prewett*, ed. Robert Graves (London: Cassell, 1964) 5. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will appear, in parentheses, in my text.

[4] Thorpe 181.

[5] *Modern British Poetry: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Harcourt, 1930).

[6] For more on Kenilworth, Ontario, see James Hamilton, *The Way We Were*, vol. 3 (Arthur, Ontario: Enterprise News, 1981).

presented. There is very little evidence to support either Prewett's claim to be part Iroquois or Sioux or Graves' statement in the *Collected Poems* that the farm was surrounded by Iroquois neighbours. There is no conclusive data, if any exists at all, to support Graves' statement that Prewett had a "strain of Iroquois blood." Perhaps Prewett fancied himself as a "red-man" and slyly offered such information to those around him. This is most likely how Graves got his information for his edition of Prewett's poetry. In the radio broadcasts Prewett mentions several falsehoods and embellishments about his childhood and the area in which the Prewett homestead stood. What does become apparent, however, is that Prewett was fascinated by the North American Indian. In his poem "The Red-Man," Prewett describes the amazement with which the white townsfolk observe a passing red-skinned Indian:

> From wilderness remote he breaks
> With stealthy springing tread,
> And in the town a vision makes
> Of time and manners dead.
> . . . . . .
> And whence he came, and whither fled,
> And why, is all unknown;
> His ways are strange, his skin is red,
> Our ways and skins our own.
> (*Collected Poems* 5)

Thorpe suggests, I think quite rightly, that the poem "attests to Prewett's respect for the separateness and integrity of the Indian, who appears like a visionary rebuke and a challenge in the 'breathless dusty town' his supplanters have made."[7] In fact, the genesis of this poem came from an incident on a train in which Prewett was travelling: he was deeply impressed with the stony indifference, majesty, aloofness and yet gentleness of a large Indian dressed in full regalia. While Prewett's interest and admiration for Indians are obvious, it is difficult to translate this into evidence of his own Iroquois or Sioux background. His father's immediate background is uncertain, and Prewett's own swarthy and high-cheekboned appearance is typical of his English mother and his brothers and sister. In these instances Prewett may be errant in recording long-ago memories, or he may be taking artistic license to create an exotic and adventurous story for a British B.B.C. audience for whom tales of "colonial life" and "red-men" might have some magic. There are several other tales (some of which Prewett exaggerated into far-fetched yarns) that have little basis in fact; few "peasants" existed in Kenilworth—most farmers were hard-working and successful

[7] Thorpe 182.

landowners—and it is doubtful if there was a "hanging tree" used to execute evil "highwaymen." Prewett, no doubt, had a predilection for stretching the truth about his childhood on the farm; however, this rural farm-based upbringing greatly influenced his later life and quite frequently permeates his poetry and prose.

Prewett's parents, Arthur Henry Prewett and Clara Hellyer, moved to the mid-western United States shortly after their marriage on May 29, 1888, but they later returned to Wellington County to farm in the area in which Clara's ancestors had been pioneers. They later moved to Islington, near Toronto, where they owned a market garden of some thirteen and a half acres. While on the farm the couple had four children: Albert Arthur (b. December 13, 1889), Frank James (b. August 24, 1893), Olive Annie (b. October 11, 1896), and Gladys Elizabeth (b. June 20, 1898). While Carol A. Small's genealogy *The Hellyers* is a valuable source for the history of Prewett's mother's family, there is little information on the patrilineal background, although Arthur Prewett perhaps distinguished himself more than his son Frank did, at least in Canada. In the very early decades of this century he received acclaim as a gardener and horticulturist; one obituary dated November 3, 1937, discloses that "Arthur Prewett, one of Islington's pioneer gardeners . . . known throughout the Dominion for his beautiful roses . . . died at his home yesterday. His flowers have captured him many prizes at the Canadian National Exhibition and the Royal Winter Fair." Even Clara Hellyer had a claim to fame; upon her death at age 90 on September 18, 1949, an obituary noted that "Mrs. Prewett's forefathers came to Canada from England with a Royal charter to land gained through participation in the battle of Waterloo and the Indian Mutiny. One of her ancestors was apparently one of the 200 who perished in the Black Hole of Calcutta." Prewett's uncle, Albert Hellyer, had his own footnote in history: he was elected to the provincial legislature in the election of October 20, 1919, representing the United Farmers of Ontario party in the Wellington East constituency (since abolished).[8] Finally, the youngest child of Arthur and Clara Prewett, Frank's sister Gladys, married the late Canadian broadcaster and commentator Gordon Sinclair in 1926; Sinclair, while he knew Frank, seemed to be unaware that his brother-in-law was an author and described him only as an "Oxford don."[9]

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[8] For more on the U.F.O. see Charles M. Johnston, *E.C. Drury: An Agrarian Idealist* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987).

[9] Sinclair, according to local myth, apparently "hid" at the Prewett farm and wrote while he was assumed to be overseas on assignment. Records at Christ Church do not include any statement that Prewett was a don. This is perhaps another example of Prewett's overly-active imagination at work.

In such a background Frank Prewett had his upbringing. While he would slip out of view for many years, he would eventually return the Prewett name, if not to the headlines, then to the footnotes of literary history. He spent his high school days at Riverdale Collegiate before attending the University of Toronto (University College) between 1912 and 1915; sometime in 1914 he was an editor of *The Varsity*. Just as he would eventually return to his countryside and farming roots, so would he return to his editorial and literary interests, but only after serving overseas in the First World War. He enlisted, as a private, on February 12, 1915, with the Eaton Machine Gun Brigade (4th Battery) and became Second Machine Gunner and a qualified signaller. The Eaton Machine Gun Brigade would later incorporate with an outfit from the Yukon to form the Eaton Motor Machine Gun Brigade. Prewett left for overseas on the S.S. *Metagama* on June 4 and arrived in England on June 14. He was discharged from the Canadian Forces on November 25, 1915, at Folkestone, having been granted a commission in the Imperial Army on November 4; he was made second lieutenant in 5B Reserve Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery (British Expeditionary Force) stationed at Ballincollig, Ireland, before moving to the Front.[10] There he would serve as battery officer, later in trench mortars, and finally as a staff officer.

Archives at the University of Toronto[11] disclose that Prewett injured his spine in France by being thrown by a horse, and that this injury kept him hospitalized for a good portion of 1916. Graves' introduction to *The Collected Poems of Frank Prewett* mentions no horse, but states that he was "wounded under shell fire and invalided out in 1917" (p. vii). Although both accounts are vague, the shell story is most likely and is corroborated by Siegfried Sassoon, who understood Prewett to have been injured while serving in "the Ypres Salient, from the horrors of which he had been delivered by a huge shell bursting near him."[12] Louis Untermeyer contradicts this when he writes that Prewett served, "as he put it, 'uneventfully' at the Front."[13] As we have seen, other sources reveal that Prewett was seriously wounded and discharged in 1916 or 1917, whereupon he convalesced at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Slateford, Midlothian, under the treatment of the renowned Dr. W.H.R Rivers and where his association with Siegfried Sassoon began. Archives at the Univer-

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[10] *Public Archives of Canada*, RG 9, III volume 731, M-16-2.

[11] *UTA*, A73-0026, Box 368, File 41.

[12] Precosky 132. See also Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920* (London: Faber, n.d.) 75-76.

[13] Untermeyer 17.

sity of Toronto also contain information which supports the theory that Prewett was wounded and "invalided out" at some time just before the war ended; Untermeyer, it seems, was given some inaccurate information about exactly what Prewett himself had said regarding his war injuries.

It was following his deliverance from the horrors of war that Prewett held a special position (especially among Canadians) in English literature, for he had close association with and found mentors in an elite group of British poets, essayists, and novelists. As Donald Precosky has noted of Prewett, "for a few years immediately following the Great War [and even in the period shortly before the Armistice] he mingled with the members of one of England's most illustrious literary salons, that of Lady Ottoline Morrell, where he was something of a favorite."[14] Indeed, previous to the Garsington years and shortly after the war, Lady Ottoline Morrell wrote to Graves stating that she was arranging a "debating society and dining club with Frank Prewett, Masefield, Marsh, Lytton Strachey, [Karl] Liebknecht and Trotsky as honorary members."[15] In the early 1920s Prewett published two small volumes of poetry, one unpretentiously titled *Poems*, published in 1921 at Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press, and then later, in 1924, *The Rural Scene* (William Heinemann). Several poems were originally composed in Canada in the early 1920s and sent by Prewett to Lady Ottoline at Garsington. A great many of these poems were untitled until they were published in *The Collected Poems* and consequently did not find their way into print until some two or three years after his death. Graves, as editor, was in fact fulfilling Prewett's deathbed wish that his work should somehow find its way into print; the verses had been bequeathed to Dr. Mary Allan with whom Prewett worked at the Air Ministry.

While Virginia Woolf's August 29, 1921, letter to Lytton Strachey affirms somewhat humorously that Prewett is indeed a poet ("*The [Times] Literary Supplement*, by the way, says that Prewett *is* a poet; perhaps a great one"),[16] it remains difficult to locate his position on the literary spectrum, especially the Canadian spectrum. According to Precosky, of one thing we can be certain: his "gloomy attitudes toward nature, Canada, and life in general make Prewett an interesting contrast to contemporaries such as Arthur Bourinot . . . and W.W.E.

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[14] Precosky 132.

[15] Paul O'Prey, *Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914-1926* (London: Hutchinson, 1982) 105.

[16] Virginia Woolf, *The Question of Things Happening: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. Vol. II, 1912-1922 (London: Hogarth, 1976) 479.

Ross. . . . " Professor Precosky notes that these two poets "reflected the Dominion's nationalistic optimism" and that, contrarily, Prewett was unwilling to remain in Canada, "for he was out of harmony with the attitudes which dominated the nation's literary and intellectual milieu."[17] While Precosky is correct in reading in Prewett's poetry the anger and pessimism of a war poet like Sassoon and Owen, he would like us to see that Prewett was uncomfortable in the nation's "literary and intellectual milieu" in 1915 (and at age 22), but this was not true until later, after he had spent some time outside of Canada.

Prewett, in fact, left his homeland to fight in the "Great Adventure," feeling, as he tells University of Toronto economics professor James Mavor, a minor twinge of patriotism and nationalism. Shortly after the outbreak of the War, Mavor requested all University of Toronto students who enlisted to write to him giving their reasons for doing so; Prewett stated in his letter dated February 11, 1915:

> I am sending this letter in answer to your request that all who enlist for active service should notify you of the circumstances. Chiefly it has been a feeling of injured pride that has drawn me into the force. I have felt hurt to see that those very men who are Canadians, if there can be said to be any Canadian nationality yet, men who have received all the advantages and more of the hardships of this country, are yet the men who are remaining home and permitting those who have a less careful physical and mental development to represent their country in this great war that is changing the whole life of the world, and which in its change is going to determine to the eyes of all nations whether this Canada of ours is a colony or a great and distinct people independent and confident in thought, feeling and action. I receive my uniform to-day, and will take my place in the Eaton gun battery.[18]

In 1915 Prewett saw various Canadian "hardships," but there is evidence in his letter to Mavor of "injured" Canadian pride and a definite patriotic tone. It was not until 1920 that Prewett's views of the country of his birth became almost vicious; he wrote acerbically, as Precosky notes, that he was in fear of becoming a "'veneered barbarian' in a land where 'everyone becomes married and a bank clerk with slicked hair.'" He felt truly exiled

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[17] Precosky 136.

[18] "James Mavor Collection" in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto Manuscript Collections, MS. 119, Box 47.

in such an "'intellectual Siberia'": he wrote to Lady Ottoline, "'man cannot live by bread alone, and Canada offers only the bread.'"[19] At the very least, Prewett came to see Canada as a cold and forbidding place. In "To My Mother in Canada, From Sick-Bed in Italy," Prewett writes

> Here, mother, there is sunshine every day;
> It warms the bones and breathes upon the heart;
> But you I see out-plod a little way,
> Bitten with cold; your cheeks and fingers smart.[20]

Having spent some time outside of Canada and having experienced the War, Prewett had indeed grown less kindly toward his country. He had, however, grown close to Garsington and Lady Ottoline during his visits; he was a favorite of hers, and between 1918 and 1926 he was one of her most loyal correspondents. In November, 1920, Lady Ottoline, according to Sandra Darroch, apparently travelled to Ontario to visit Prewett, who had, for a time, returned to his native land and was residing at the home of his brother in Humber Bay. Prewett had been frequently requested by medical authorities to admit himself to hospital for tests and rest; he was, understandably, easily upset by loud bangs and claps of thunder. These noises were apparently more than his frazzled nerves could take, and he said that the noises "returned" him to the "dugout," such as those he knew from the trenches. The fact that Lady Ottoline travelled to Canada to visit Prewett and that while staying with him she received a letter enquiring about her close friend Bertrand Russell disproves Miriam Waddington's belief that Prewett left Canada before 1920 and never returned.[21]

When Prewett was well enough again to travel, and when he could scrounge up enough money, he returned to Garsington. For a poet to write of the beauty and serenity of nature and the pastoral world, he or she needs, perhaps, to visualize such an environment. For Prewett, this environment was Garsington, Lady Ottoline and Philip Morrell's manor house. Garsington sits in a countryside that "could almost have been a Constable painting—tall elms, drowsy cows munching the spring grass, fields dotted with wildflowers, and a hill surrounded with a small village and a church . . . . "[22] (Garsington appears in Yeats's

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[19] Sandra Jobson Darroch, *Ottoline: The Life of Lady Ottoline Morrell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976) 238.

[20] Frank Prewett, "To My Mother in Canada, From Sick-Bed in Italy," *Georgian Poetry 1920-1922*, ed. Edward Marsh. Vol. V. (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1922) 143.

[21] "Voices From Exile," *Canadian Literature* 26 (Autumn 1965): 56-63.

[22] Darroch 157.

"Ancestral Houses" and D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*.) Prewett arrived at this isolated, idyllic and venerable setting in the 1920s. He would also use the setting of Berkshire Downs in his 1933 novel *The Chazzey Tragedy*, which will be discussed later. While Lady Ottoline lived at Garsington for only fourteen years, she spent most of that time entertaining and accomodating some of the great artists and writers of the age. She hoped to create more than a home for herself; she wanted "an oasis perhaps, isolated not only from war but from all material values, a place where artists, writers and other sensitive people might relax and express themselves in a congenial atmosphere."[23]

What was intended as a perfect idyllic setting, an oasis, could quickly become a battlefield. Lytton Strachey, for example, reviles Lady Ottoline to Virginia Woolf in the cruelest manner; then in a letter written the same day he expresses to Ottoline his pleasure at seeing her again and thanking her for an enjoyable weekend. The artist Mark Gertler in a letter from Garsington to S.S. Koteliansky dated 1921 says, "it is a pity that things are always so imperfect. This place is in some ways attractive to me—like a second home and yet it goes wrong somehow, and I have to fly."[24] By 1923 Gertler had written to W.J. Turner stating that he had "come back from Garsington on Tuesday, as usual, more dead than alive, with a fearful headache and sickness."

The hideaway from the thundering guns of the Great War had itself become a battleground. There are numerous anecdotes regarding Prewett in this period at Lady Ottoline's which perhaps give us further insight into his character. 1919 to 1922 was generally a troublesome period at Garsington, and we find that Frank Prewett himself contributed to the problems. There was a violent row between Lady Ottoline and Dorothy Brett over Lawrence, but as Darroch indicates another point of friction between them was a "consumptive part-Sioux Canadian poet named Frank Prewitt [sic] whom Siegfried Sassoon had befriended and brought back to Garsington with him. Ottoline took quite a fancy to Prewitt (whom everyone called 'Toronto')."[25] If Prewett is here merely indirectly involved in the tensions, he would later become a more active and direct force. Following a brief return to Canada, Prewett made his way back to Garsington and was given a job as a farmhand by Philip Morrell. A

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[23] Darroch 159.

[24] Mark Gertler, *Selected Letters*, ed. Noel Carrington (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1965) 208.

[25] Darroch 233.

question over accounting for milk receipts arose and consequently Prewett was relieved of his duties.[26] The atmosphere of congeniality which Lady Ottoline tried painfully hard to create frequently turned sour.

Prewett, with his drastic mood swings, often became the centre of these conflicts. Mark Gertler gives an example of the attitudes toward Prewett. In a January 20, 1921, letter, again to Koteliansky, he states that

> Toronto is quite a nice young fellow. I could never make up my mind whether he is a fraud or genuine, but even if he is a fraud, he's a nice homely one . . . . Women seem rather taken with him, goodness knows why . . . . I used to like going into Oxford with him and having a fling—that is to say a drinking bout, on which occasion he made an amusing companion. He could drink ever so much without getting drunk . . . .[27]

However, in another letter dated later in 1921, Gertler suddenly has a completely different attitude toward Prewett: "Toronto bores me infinitely now—he more than bores me, he gets on my nerves. He doesn't know what he wants and is always trying to gain the ladies' sympathy by his grumblings—even to Julian [Morrell] he grumbles and whines, and looks at her with glossy eyes. Ugh! Every view he expresses is romantic, unreal and sickly. In fact, he has a sickly soul . . . . " In yet another letter Prewett is described by Gertler as one "who mooches about like a faded Hamlet."[28]

Gertler's experiences with Prewett were by no means isolated incidents. One of Prewett's earliest discoverers, Siegfried Sassoon, a fellow soldier and convalescent, had similar ambivalent feelings. In 1917, Sassoon was resting at Lennel near Coldstream in Berwickshire. Lennel was the home of Lady Clementine and Major Walter Waring, which they had converted into a convalescent home for officers. Sassoon, turning aside from trimming the roughly cut pages of a Hardy edition on a rainy day, meets the young Frank Prewett, perhaps only days or weeks out of action. The care he has given to the Hardy edition was gratifying work, but as Sassoon writes, in the passage quoted by both Precosky and Thorpe,

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[26] Darroch 257.

[27] Gertler 197.

[28] Gertler 209.

> the greatest luck I had was in finding among my fellow convalescents one who wrote poetry. His name was Frank Prewett. Everyone called him "Toronto," that being his home town. He was a remarkable character, delightful when in a cheerful frame of mind, though liable to be moody and aloof.[29]

Already, from his earliest meeting with Prewett, Sassoon notes the aloofness, taciturnity and moodiness of the man; he would also see the obverse side, however: the amiability, the helpfulness and what Sassoon called the "spiritual animation."

In another passage referred to by Thorpe, Sassoon, while on a reading tour of North America, arrived in Toronto in March, 1920. Here he stayed with University of Toronto professor Pelham Edgar, whom Sassoon described as a "charmingly friendly but rather fatiguingly talkative man." Edgar had also been *charmingly* misleading in what exactly he wanted Sassoon to do while a guest at the university. Sassoon had expected to give a poetry reading to a small crowd; Edgar wanted a half hour lecture on contemporary English poetry *plus* a reading of war poems. Sassoon was thoroughly horrified and thought the situation was hopeless. He writes:

> At this juncture, however, a helping hand arrived in the shape of my friend "Toronto" Prewett, who had returned to his native place for a time after studying English literature at Oxford during 1919. I explained the plight I was in, and between us we vamped up a superficial conspectus of living bards—Toronto's providential collaboration converting what had previously appeared an inevitable catastrophe into a light-hearted *tour de force*. I went to the Convocation Hall rather queasily sustained by his assurance that I should "get away with it" more successfully by being bright and chatty than if I had composed a serious academic discourse. Fortunately for me, the audience was indulgent, and my impudently unconsidered remarks were accepted as "Toronto" had predicted.[30]

The next encounters Sassoon had with Prewett were less amiable. Both men returned to Garsington, Sassoon somewhat later with the hope of retrieving a forgotten pair of grey flannel trousers. He found, when he arrived, that Prewett had "adopted

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[29] Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920* (London: Faber, n.d.) 75-76.

[30] Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey* 199.

them," and he wrote that "Prewett's wardrobe is scanty, like his income, so I hesitated before the operation of recovering my g.f.ts. [grey flannel trousers]. At dinner time [Prewett] appeared *wearing* the actual garments."[31] When Sassoon finally got the trousers back, he discovered a huge gap in the seat "which had come unstitched (as if by the agency of some mischievous imp) . . . . My week-end seemed increasingly trouserish." With his pants in Prewett's possession and his patience gone, Sassoon had developed a "distinct feeling of annoyance" for Prewett. Later that year, as Sassoon reveals in his diaries, Prewett has turned 180 degrees and is again imbued with the "spiritual animation" that Sassoon earlier saw in him. While the pair were in Rome, in an entry dated September 21, 1921, Sassoon writes of "attractive faces in the streets . . . [and the] bracing influence of Toronto and pleasure at seeing his enjoyment of everything."[32] There seems to be at this point in his diaries an indication that Sassoon was struggling with homosexuality and an attraction to Prewett. In discussing his relationships with male friends, Sassoon notes that his

> intimacy with Toronto Prewett began with a strong sexual attraction (which horrified [Prewett] when he became aware of it). When that element had been banished . . . we established a very solid and and sympathetic understanding which ranks very high among the amicabilities of my existence. But Toronto's character lacks that . . . sweetness which makes little [Edmund] B[lunden] so delightful. Toronto is always rather enigmatic. He is inclined to sulk and grumble and retire into resentfulness. One does not always feel that he trusts one. He does not *give* himself wholeheartedly to his friends.[33]

The sexual relationship, according to Sassoon, was never recognized by Prewett.

From the "bracing highs" Sassoon finds in his pleasure at observing life, and within a matter of months (by December 1, 1922), Toronto Prewett has returned to his "dark depression": "Prewett has low vitality; and can only be taken in occasional doses, though I'm genuinely attached to him and admire

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[31] Siegfried Sassoon, *Diaries 1920-1922*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber, 1983) 113.

[32] Sassoon, *Diaries* 86.

[33] Sassoon, *Diaries* 162.

his . . . verses."[34] If Garsington was not always that "oasis" Lady Ottoline hoped it would be, Prewett's disposition was similarly, in Sassoon's view, an alternation between "spiritual animation and dark depression." This same fluctuation is often present in Prewett's poetry just as it forms a central characteristic and "duality" of his own personality. By the early 1930s Prewett rarely visited Garsington. The influence of both its pastoral, idyllic setting and its illustrious guests would deeply affect his writing.

In approximately 1924 or 1925, Prewett was appointed, as a research fellow, to the staff of Oxford University's Agricultural Economics Research Institute. He was a research officer with the Institute until 1934. He had taken a baccalaureate from Christ Church and may have also attended Magdalen College. Prewett's work could be extremely technical and often contained detailed and complex maps, graphs and tables, appendices, and photographs; it was quite a departure from his poetic works of only a few years earlier. In his nine years with the Institute, Prewett published a report each year. In the preface to Prewett's 1926 *The Marketing of Farm Produce, Part I: Live-stock*, editor C.S. Orwin states that the Institute "was fortunate in securing the services of Mr. F.J. Prewett, B.A. (Christ Church). Himself a farmer on a commercial scale, [Prewett] had also the advantage of a long experience of the farming industry in Canada, and the subject of the marketing of farm produce is one to which he had already given much attention in connexion with his own operations." Orwin continues that Prewett's publication embodies "the results of his study of existing conditions, together with his proposals, put forward for consideration by farmers, for the improvement of time-honoured practice."[35]

Early in 1929, Prewett suffered a severe attack of influenza and, on medical advice, took a sea voyage to convalesce. In 1930, he published *A Survey of Milk Production in Derbyshire, June 1928* in collaboration with the Cheshire School of Agriculture, and with a grant from the "Development Commission." Archives in Oxford University disclose that shortly afterwards, Prewett "made a two months' tour in Canada and the United States, to study recent developments in agricultural co-operation, with the aid of a grant from the Horace Plunkett Foundation."[36] In 1931 he delivered a series of broadcast talks on

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[34] Sassoon, *Diaries* 91.

[35] Frank Prewett, *The Marketing of Farm Produce, Part I: Live-Stock* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926) v-vi.

[36] Oxford University Archives, *Institute of Agricultural Economics*, Director's Report for the year ending 30 September 1930.

"Country Life," and in 1933, in collaboration with Christopher Turner, Prewett edited a series of articles entitled "Towards an Agricultural Policy"; these would be his last publications with the Institute. In 1934, as the Oxford archives document, Prewett and two other members of the research staff "resigned their appointments during the year to take up other work: Mr. F.J. Prewett . . . has been appointed editor of a new agricultural newspaper, *The Farmers' Weekly.*"

The Farmers' Weekly was founded on June 22, 1934, and it was launched by the press barons Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Rothermere primarily as a "counterblast to the old-established *Farmer and Stockbreeder.*" Prewett had been living at Henley on Thames in the 1930s when he was asked to join the staff of the magazine. As Victor Bonham-Carter notes, "Frank made the paper into a lively readable paper, not devoted entirely to farming but [he] enlivened it with articles and photos of country life, past and present."[37] Prewett eventually fell out with the paper's owners and walked out one press night (an "unforgiveable thing to do," Bonham-Carter notes).

In 1933 *The Chazzey Tragedy* (Chatto & Windus) was published, a novel with a distinct socio-agrarian bent. It shows Prewett not only as agricultural analyst, but also as chronicler of local folklore. He has, in the novel, captured the Berkshire countryside and its inhabitants' attitudes and dialects in a way that could be achieved only after many years of living within such an enviroment. In a review of the novel, which is more an anecdotal account of its author, entitled "Toronto University Grad Rustic English Realist," *The Chazzey Tragedy* is called a "powerful revelation . . . of what actually made the tragedy of rural England after the Napoleonic wars."[38] Ultimately the reviewer suggests that Prewett's "sketch, even though it fails as a legitimate novel, is a big social document." *The Chazzey Tragedy*, according to the review, perhaps much like a Hardy novel showing the demise of rural, agrarian England, "illustrates by social evolution the present very different crisis in rural England. Any reader of this [novel] will conclude that no matter how desperate things may be now those of 1825 were frightfully worse."

The Chazzey Tragedy is set in Berkshire, in an area called the Vale, in an anonymous village which Prewett calls Chazzey. The time is roughly 1830; agricultural society, in general, is in

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[37] Letter to me from Mr. Victor Bonham-Carter, July 26, 1986.

[38] *Toronto Star*, May 23, 1933.

turmoil, because the situation which had fed England for centuries had just been dramatically changed by enclosures: the time of common freeholding had come to an end. Farming was now a strictly regimented and political enterprise. At the top of the Chazzey hierarchy are the squire and the parson. They have in turn chosen one or two of the previous freehold farmers to be the farmer designated for their district. These farmers are beholden to the sqire and the parson. All other agricultural workers are now paid labourers or specialists such as shepherds or carters. The farmer, in turn, hires a foreman to be the buffer between himself and the common men (just as the squire has hired the farmer to be a buffer for him). This situation clearly sets the stage for the undercurrent of violence and rebellion among the men who had previously been freehold farmers. Instead of having a bit of land and a common area to graze sheep or cattle, the men suddenly have nothing and must depend on wages from hired work or else go on "parish relief," which is very little and still requires a financially crippling tithe to be paid. It is out of this tension that Prewett establishes two points of view: on the one hand, men like Bob Lonsley advocate violence (rick-burning, destroying machinery, razing barns), while, on the other hand, others counsel patience and feel that by unifying and petitioning Parliament they may rectify or at least alleviate the problem. Such a view is held by Costar Carter, a young man and ex-freeholder who is moderately educated and has been able to travel to "Lunnun"; he is enlightened enough to see the tragedy that violence will cause regardless of the present suffering.

Prewett's story deals with Britain and Britons. While liberal Englishmen were upset with the slave trade, they were actually "enslaving" their own farmers. The novel is characterized by bumpkins, sleazy tavern owners, barn-burnings and ambushes, by the pageantry of rustic celebrations such as "The Chazzey Feast," and by drunkenness and harvest-time revelry. There is even a mythical figure, Captain Swing, who is said to have led several successful revolts in a number of counties and parishes; no one has every seen him, but all these activities and other unexplainable phenomena are attributed to him. In fact, Captain Swing's shadowy character and mystery sum up the whole novel. It is difficult to establish just where Prewett's sympathies lie. He obviously had little sympathy for the common labourers, but he also recognized their helplessness and the tragedy it represented for Britain.

In the mid to late 1930s Prewett contributed to and acted as editorial assistant (or perhaps Deputy Editor) on *The Countryman.* Before that time he was a regular contributor to and one

of many experts writing for the journal. Now Britain's "leading magazine of the countryside," *The Countryman* altered its format during the summer months of 1929 "to give the utmost prominence, on the advent of a new government, to what must be regarded [as] *the most weighty non-Party declaration on agricultural policy yet published.*" Realizing that the country lacks "the guidance of non-partisan leadership by acknowledged authorities at a time when the agricultural situation calls for important decisions," *The Countryman* sought to remedy the problem. Following the election the editors asked agrarian and rural experts "*confidentially* for a candid answer to the question, '*Can the State help and can It help now?*'" The replies were submitted by the experts anonymously to show their knowledge, experience, responsibility and non-partisanship.[39] Prewett's response appears in the issue of July 1929 on page 248, according to records at the office of *The Countryman.* He states, but we must remember anonymously, that "State control could be made a very great source of economy both to producer and consumer . . . . On his own account the English farmer can do little for himself since his market is largely supplied and ruled from abroad . . . . A root trouble of our agriculture is: the system of land tenure is worn out and prevents capital going into the land. The only remedy is State control, and this could be put into force now." *The Chazzey Tragedy* is perhaps an expression in more literary form of these concerns.

Apparently Prewett became discontented with the direction of *The Countryman* and left, perhaps as late as 1937. Documents of the former *aide-de-camp* of the early publishers, Thirza West, disclose that the

> Editor had as his . . . assistant at the time Frank Prewett, an author in his own right, who was half Indian. He had hot brown eyes . . . . Following some sort of disagreement with the [publishers], Prewett, Dorothy Pollard and Victor Bonham-Carter walked out and set up an opposition periodical, *Country Scene and Topic*, with headquarters at Bourton-on-the-Water, four miles away. The locals called the place "Adultery House." The periodical did not last long [three issues]. My guess is that they did not have the tenacity, discipline or know-how to make a success of it.[40]

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[39] *The Countryman* (July 1929): 240. I am indebted to Mr. Christopher Hall, editor of *The Countryman*, for furnishing me with information about Prewett and copies of back issues of the journal.

[40] Letter to Andrew Coppolino from Mr. Christopher Hall, June 27, 1986.

Ms. West's description of the headquarters at Bourton-on-the-Water as "Adultery House" is an appropriate moniker. Prewett married Dorothy Pollard, who drove a van for the County Library, but the status, at this juncture of his earlier marriage to Madeline Clinkard is uncertain.

Prewett's anonymous reply to the "State and Agriculture" question reveals a definite political stand, and his farming and rural instincts remained with him all his life. In his capacity as a farm analyst and as a contributor to country magazines, Prewett would research and publish agricultural policy and farm management documents as well as lighter pieces like his "Wales Unvisited—Vale of Ewyas" and "The Farmer in Clun." His "The Funeral of a Fat Man" shows both a sense of humour and an ear finely tuned to the subtleties of dialect.

After serving in the Second World War in a bomb disposal unit and in Asia in operational research, Prewett retired from the urban world in 1954 and returned to the background from which he came and in which he would spend his last days doing what he loved most: farming. He always found pleasure in the rural, pastoral world of the husbandman, especially in times of depression. In a world which had been rapidly modernizing and industrializing itself since the end of World War II, Prewett maintained his individuality and his devotion to rural life. Robert Graves and other companions appreciated this devotion in Prewett, and they travelled to his Tubney Farm in Abingdon on occasions and stayed with him in old army pup-tents. As was his devotion to the rural environment and pastoral world, so was his devotion to his poetry. In words taken from his *Collected Poems*, Prewett states that these poems were his "only true wealth . . . I think I shall do no more." If he was driven continually back to the land and farming, then he was driven, similarly, to write poetry, he said by a "demon" which pursued and enslaved him. His dying wish, as he expressed it to Mary Allan, was to see the fruit of this demon's tyranny—his poems—published "against the time when 'this cant has dissolved, and their originality can be accepted by numbers of men.'" His demon, Graves writes, "had told him to attempt the simple beyond simplicity, the sensuous beyond sense, the disdainment of mere fact" (*Collected Poems*, p. viii). Prewett spent his final years in the Cotswolds in declining health, suffering from tuberculosis (or possibly cancer), farming and writing; he died on February 16, 1962, at Raigmore Hospital, Inverness, after visiting a friend. He is buried at Fifield, Scotland.

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