ARMS AND THE MUSE

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According to a popular conception no two professions are so much opposed to each other as those of the warrior and the poet. The former is supposed to be a practical-minded man of action while the latter is generally considered a mere dreamer who takes the first opportunity to escape into a world of fancy and fiction. But this difference is more apparent than real. For the history of literature reveals that since the infancy of mankind the poet has not only been closely associated with warriors but that his earliest songs were actually inspired by war or the desire for war. The popular ballads of all countries, according to scholars, were sung by tribal warriors who returned from battles triumphant or crest-fallen. They gave pointed expression either to the exultation of the victorious party or to the lamentation of the defeated one. The epic poems which eventually emanated from these ballads deal with heroic subject matter; they give us a picture of what is known as the Heroic Age. The central theme of every epic poem, eastern or western, is war, though the causes which lead to it may be dependent upon varying circumstances of local and racial history. These epics were composed by bards who were attached to the courts of kings or were otherwise interested in them. The poet himself might recite his composition before an audience which consisted of kings and courtiers, tribal heroes and common people. Sometimes the poem would be learnt by heart by a wandering singer or 'minstrel' who would go from place to place reciting it to more and more people. Indeed, there is evidence to show that many a king and tribal chieftain took a bard with him to the field of battle so that he might keep a keen eye on what happened there and how men behaved in the conflict and later on describe in detail all that he had seen and heard. Many epic poems contain extremely minute accounts of the fighting and movements of the warriors. Obviously, this could be done only by poets who possessed a first hand acquaintance with the battles. On the other hand, some warriors were inspired into action and achievement as a result of listening to the recitations of heroic poems by the minstrels. Alexander the Great is said to have had a copy of Homer's 'Iliad' under his pillow throughout his march of conquest. He honoured poets so much that when his soldiers pillaged and ransacked Thebes, he ordered them to spare the house of the poet Pindar. William the Conqueror proceeded to the Battle of Hastings accompanied by a singer who continuously recited passages from the 'Chansons de Geste' —the French epic poem which deals with the adventures and achievements of Charlemagne and his Knights. When Edward I invaded Wales in 1277, it is said that the Celtic bards organised a formidable
fighting front against the invading forces, and, by way of vengeance, says the legend, Edward ordered a massacre of all the bards of that country as soon as he became master of the situation. (This incident has been used by Gray in his ‘Bard’.) We read of the Māvali followers of Shivāji and the Rajput heroes plunging into battle with inspiring martial tunes on their lips. In fact, poets have not always remained content with describing other people’s fighting and encouraging other people to go to the war-field. Some of them have themselves taken to arms. Such was Sir Philip Sydney who embodied the Elizabethan ideal of the combination in one person of the courtier, the soldier and the scholar. Sidney was a poet of no mean order, and it is well-known that he died in the battle of Zetphen in the service of his country and his Queen. Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Thomas Wyatt were other renowned examples of poets being also soldiers. So were Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen who laid down their precious lives participating in the First World War. In our own country we have had illustrious instances of the same type. The greatest of our classical Kannada poets, Ādi Pampa, is said to have been Commander-in-Chief of the army of the Chalukya King, Arikešari. Janna, the author of ‘Yasodhara Charitha’, was in charge of the Hoysala forces for some time. These examples are enough to illustrate the close association that has existed between poetry and warfare, between the poet and the soldier. They prove the baselessness of the popular belief regarding the incompatibility between poetry and war. As a matter of fact poets and warriors have vied with one another in paying mutual compliments quite generously. If from time immemorial poets have glorified war and instigated people into it, there have been warriors who have evinced a live interest in poetry. While he was rowing up the St Lawrence river to lay siege to Quebec and capture it, General Wolfe recited the whole of Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’, which had been but recently published, and declared unhesitatingly that he would rather be the author of that poem than conqueror of Quebec. In our own times there was Lord Wavell who was both an eminent soldier and a lover of poetry. (He compiled a volume of poems called ‘Other Men’s Flowers’.)

The poet and the soldier are, therefore, by no means strangers to each other. Indeed, War has been, like Love, Nature, Religion, etc., one of the principal sources of poetic inspiration and fervour of poetic expression. Poets have, through the centuries, described the motives of warfare, the ideals of the warriors, the scenes of battle, the feelings of the soldiers before and after the war and while the war is raging. English poetry contains abundant examples of this interest evinced by the bards of Albion in soldiers and their activities. Their poems give us an intimate and interesting idea of the world of the warrior.

Men become soldiers for various reasons and are admired for various reasons also. In the novels of Jane Austen we find people being attracted by the trim appearance of soldiers. Some people may enter the army
tempted by the salaries and the plentiful supplies of food and clothing that are offered them by the recruiting authorities. But there are more praiseworthy considerations also which motivate men's acceptance of the warrior's profession. For example, the Knights of the medieval times cared only for Honour. Chaucer's Knight was one of this tribe. The ideal of a Knight of the Middle Ages—the Age of Chivalry—is excellently summed up by Tennyson in the lines,

'When every morning brought a noble chance,
And every chance a noble knight'.

('Morte de Arthur')

Shakespeare's description of the Seven Ages of Man in 'As You Like It' is well-known. One of these seven stages in the life of a man is that of a soldier,

'Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth'.

It was and has been considered the duty of a soldier to fight for his king and country. Nicholas Breton, the Elizabethan poet, points out this aspect of a soldiers' functions when he says,

'The Knight is knowledge how to fight
Against his Prince's enemies'.

Another Elizabethan, Gascoigne, definitely declares that

'The Knight should fight to defend the realm'

('Steel Glass')

In his 'Unto This Last' Ruskin excellently analyses the reasons why members of different professions are honoured by people, and makes the following remarks concerning the soldier: 'The soldier's trade, verily and essentially is not slaying, but being slain. This, without well knowing its own meaning, the world honours it for. A bravo's trade is slaying, but the world has never respected bravos more than merchants: the reason it honours the soldier is, because he holds his life at the service of the State. Reckless he may be—fond of pleasure or of adventure—all kinds of by-motives and mean impulses may have determined the choice of his profession, and may affect (to all appearance exclusively) his daily conduct in it; but our estimate of him is based on this ultimate fact—of which we are well assured that, put him in a fortress breach, with all the pleasures of the world behind him, and only death and his duty in front of him, he will keep his face to the front; and he knows that his choice may be put to him at any moment, and has beforehand taken his part—virtually takes such part continually—does, in reality, die daily'. In fact, according to the
assumptions and standards of public etiquette in the days of yore, whenever a period of national stress and turmoil arose, a worthy man was expected to give up every other pursuit and become a warrior and go to the field of battle. Hence the pronouncement of Andrew Marvell—

“The forward youth that would appear
Must now forsake his Muses dear,
Nor in the shadows sing
His numbers languishing.

‘It is time to leave the books in dust,
And oil the unused armour’s rust:
Removing from the wall
The corslet of the hall.’

(‘Horatian Ode on Cromwell’s Return from Ireland’)

Sometimes it is devotion to Religion that has made men suffer tortures or lose their lives in warfare. Such was Bonnivard, immortalised by Byron in his ‘Prisoner of Chillon’—

‘And mine has been the fate of those
To whom the goodly earth and air
Are banned and barr’d—forbidden fare,
But this was for my father’s faith
I suffer’d chains and courted death;
That father perished at the stake
For tenets he would not forsake;
And for the same his lineal race
In darkness found a dwelling place’.

Valour may be employed in the service of Love also. The medieval Knights adored charming ladies whom they delighted with their martial achievements. Only a hero was held worthy of the hand of a beautiful woman.

‘None but the brave,
None but the brave,
None but the brave deserves the fair’

says Dryden in ‘Alexander’s Feast’. But, if the demands of Love threatened to come into conflict with those of Honour and the consequent call of war, the hero knew which to choose first.

‘Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind
That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind
To war and arms I fly,’
‘True, a new mistress I now chase,
The first foe in the field,
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

‘Yet this inconstancy is such
As you too shall adore:
I could not love thee, Dear, so much
Loved I not Honour more’.

This is the reply given by Richard Lovelace to his mistress who has obviously protested against his leaving her for the battle-field. Sir William Devenant’s amusing poem, ‘The Soldier Going to Field’ begins with the lines—

‘Preserve thy sighs, unthrifty girl,
To purify the air;
Thy tears to thread, in stead of pearl
On bracelets of thy hair.

‘The trumpet makes the echo hoarse
And wakes the louder drum;
Expense of grief makes no remorse
When sorrow should be dumb.’

The soldier complains that the lady has stolen his heart and thereby incapacitated him for fighting.

‘But first I’ll chide thy cruel theft:
Can I in war delight
Who, being of my heart bereft,
Can have no heart to fight?’

According to ‘the sacred laws of old’, a thief had to pay ‘sevenfold what he had stolen away’. Therefore, he demands that she should

‘With speed resign
My own seduced heart to me
Accompanied with thine’.

It is such devotion to a noble cause and confidence in themselves that has inspired thousands of warriors to march to the battle-field unflinchingly. This is how Hardy puts it:

‘What of the faith and fire within us
Men who march away
Ere the barn-cocks say
Night is growing gray,
Leaving all that here can win us;
What of the faith and fire within us
Men who march away?’
'We well see what we are doing,
Though some may not see—

* * * * *

'In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just,
And that braggarts must
Surely bite the dust,
Press we to the field ungrieving,
In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just.

* * * * *

'Hence the faith and fire within us'.

('Men Who March Away')

C. H. Sorley expresses the same idea in a slightly different manner thus:

'All the hills and vales along
Earth is bursting into song,
And the singers are the chaps
Who are going to die perhaps.
O sing, marching men
Till the valleys ring again,
Give your gladness to earth's keeping
So be glad, when you are sleeping

'Cast away regret and rue,
Think what you are marching to.
Little live, great pass.
Jesus Christ and Barabbas
Were found the same day.
This died, that went his way.
So sing with joyful breath,
For why, you are going to death.
Teeming earth will surely store
All the gladness that you pour.'

But not always have warriors been guided by noble motives to take the sword. Mere savagery and greed have also been responsible for much ferocious fighting. King Ranjit in Tagore's 'Mukta Dhara' represents imperialists who trouble others for their own gratification. The 'War Song of Dinas Vawr' by Thomas Love Peacock contains a fine presentation of the attitude of such selfish war-mongers. The
following is the first stanza of the poem which must be read in full to be appreciated properly:

'The mountain sheep are sweeter,
But the valley sheep are fatter,
We therefore deemed it meeter
To carry off the latter.
We made an expedition;
We met an host, and quelled it;
We forced a strong position,
And killed the men who held it.'

There has been no lack of mercenary soldiers who have fought for the wrong cause lured by 'filthy lucre' or similar other considerations. What people think of them and what they deserve is tersely and tellingly expressed by A. E. Houseman in his little poem, 'Epitaph on An Army of Mercenaries'—

'These, in the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth's foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling,
And took their wages and are dead.

'Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay'.

Some others become soldiers for even more unworthy reasons. Their best representative in literature is Ancient Pistol in Shakespeare's 'Henry V'. He has, according to one of his own fellow-characters in the play, 'a killing tongue and a quiet sword; by the means where of a' breaks words, and keeps whole weapons'. He decides upon going to France with the English army with a purely commercial intention, and confesses without any hesitation,

'I shall sutler be
Unto the camp, and profits will accrue'.

(Act II, Sc. i. LL. 101-102)

No mercenary soldier or one motivated by ignoble considerations ever distinguished himself in warfare. True soldiers, like true poets, are born and not made. Such men have always joined fighting forces voluntarily and not because of compulsion or conscription. In the Prologue to Act II of 'Henry V', the chorus describes how when Henry declared war against France
'... all the youth of England are on fire,
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies:
Now thrive the armourers, and honour's thought
Reigns solely in the breast of every man:
They sell the pasture now to buy the horse,
Following the mirror of all the Christian kings'.

Indeed the mere spirit of adventure and an unconquerable innate longing to encounter hazards and a certain joy in doing so have impelled many a man to become a warrior for the sake of his own or any other country. In his neat little poem, 'An Irish Airman Foresees His own Death', W. B. Yeats makes the airman say,

'I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love.
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My-countrymen Kiltartan's poor.
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death'.

Men come forward to become soldiers in response to the call of battle or the battle—cry which, to them, is obviously irresistible. Such is Scott's 'Gathering Song'.

'Come away, come away,
Hark to the summons!
Come in your war—array,
Gentles and commons.

'Come from deep glen and
From mountain so rocky,
The war-pipe and pennon
Are at Inverlochy,
Come every hill-plaid and
True heart that wears one,
Come every steel blade and
Strong hand that bears one.
‘Leave untended the herd,
The flock without shelter;
Leave the corpse uninterred,
The bride at the altar,
Leave the deer, leave the steer,
Leave nets and barges;
Come with your fighting gear,
Broadswords and targes.

‘Come as the winds come when
Forests are rended,
Come as the waves come when
Navies are stranded:
Faster come, faster come,
Faster and faster,
Chief, vassal, page and groom,
Tenant and master.’

A song of the Elizabethan days by a poet called Humphrey Gifford begins thus—

‘Ye buds of Brutus’ line, courageous youths,
now play your parts,
Unto your tackle stand, abide the brunt
with valiant hearts,
For news is carried to and fro that we
must forth to warfare go.

* * * *

Faint not, spend blood, do your Queen and country good’.

Another Elizabethan song by an anonymous poet says:

‘Long lives the man that dies in lusty years
In actions wherein honour may arise.
And wherein may you honour more expect
Than wronged men to succour and protect?’

And here is Byron’s translation from an old Greek song:

‘Sons of the Greeks, arise!
The glorious hour is gone forth,
And worthy of such ties,
Display who gave us birth.

‘Sons of Greeks, let us go
In arms against the foe,
Till their hated blood shall flow
In a river past our feet’.
When the rallying cry is so enticing, it is not surprising that there is satisfactory response to it. Scott's own 'Gathering Song' contains the exulting remark—

'Fast they come, fast they come,  
See how they gather!'  

But more picturesque is Macaulay's account of how the Etruscans came forth in obedience to the wish of Lars Porsena of Clusium—

'The horsemen and the footmen  
Are pouring in amain  
From many a stately market-place,  
From many a fruitful plain,  
From many a lonely hamlet,  
Which hid by beach and pine  
Like an eagle's nest hangs on the crest  
Of purple Appenine.  

* * * *  

'And now hath every city  
Sent up her tale of men,  
The foot are fourscore thousand,  
The horse are thousands ten.  
Before the gates of Sutrium  
Is met the great array  
A proud man was Lars Porsena  
Upon the trysting day'  

('Horatius')  

The following are a few lines from the opening part of Walt Whitman's 'Manhattan Arming'—

'O superb! O Manhattan, my own, my peerless!  
O strongest you in the hour of danger, in crisis! O truer than steel!  
How you sprang—how you threw off the  
costumes of peace with indifferent hands;  
How your soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife  
were heard in their stead;  
How you led to the war ....  
How Manhattan's drum-taps led'.  

In modern times compulsory enlistment of soldiers or conscription is resorted to by governments in the interests of national defence. Some people protest against this practice and get exempted from military service on grounds of conscientious opposition to warfare. A humorous
and epigrammatic reference to this difference of opinion between pacifists and war-mongers is made by Hilaire Belloc in this couplet:

‘Pale Ebenezer thought it wrong to fight,  
But Roaring Bill (who killed him) thought it right’

(‘The Pacifist’)

Some may waver for a time, and ask themselves with John Pudney,

‘How will I stand apart  
How will I keep my stance  
In the dark crisis of the present tense  
When I am face to face  
With every chance?’

(‘First Drums Heard’)

But there are others who are eager to don the uniform and die. Such is the ‘Volunteer’ described by Sir Henry Newbolt:

‘He leapt to arms unbidden,  
Unneeded, over-bold,  
His face by earth is hidden,  
His heart in earth is cold.

‘Curse on the reckless daring  
That could not wait the call,  
The proud fantastic bearing  
That would be first to fall’

It takes some time for the new recruit to master the art of warfare and to harden his mind and heart to the rigours of the profession. An interesting glimpse into the mind of one such person can be had from Arthur Walley’s translation of the little poem, ‘The Scholar Recruit’, by the fifth century Chinese poet, Pao Chao:

‘Now late  
I follow Time’s Necessity:  
Mounting a barricade I pacify remote tribes.  
Discarding my sash I don a coat of rhinoceros skin:  
Rolling up my skirts I shoulder a black bow.  
Even at the very start my strength fails:  
What will become of me before it’s all over?’

Before they are sent to the war-field, soldiers are put into barracks under strict vigilance and supervision and subjected to military training. An extremely illuminating and arresting picture of barrack-room life and of a soldier under training is presented by Kipling’s poem, ‘Tommy’. The soldier who gives the poem its title is treated with scorn and suspicion when he goes to public houses and theatres, and every one says,
'We serve no red coats here'. Tommy is infuriated by this conduct of the civilians to protect whom he is being trained to face death, and bursts out impatiently—

'Yes, makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep
Is cheaper than them uniforms, an' they're starvation cheap;
An' hustlin' drunken soldiers when they're goin' large a bit
Is five times better business than paradin' in full kit

'We aren't thin red' eroes, nor we aren't no blackguards too,
Be single men in barricks, most remarkable like you;
An' if sometimes our conduct isn't all your fancy paints,
Why single men in barricks don't grow into plaster saints,
While it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy,
fall be' ind",
But it's "Please to walk in front, sir," when there's trouble
in the wind,

O it's "Please to walk in front sir", when there's trouble
in the wind.

'... it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Chuck him out,
the brute!"
But it's "Saviour of 'is country" when the guns begin to shoot;
An' it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' anything you please;
An' Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool—you bet that 'Tommy sees!'

Poor Tommy is particularly exasperated by people calling him a drunkard. For does not Dryden say,

'Bacchus' blessings are a treasure,
Drinking is a soldier's pleasure:
Rich the treasure
Sweet the pleasure,
Sweet is pleasure after pain'?

('Alexander's Feast')

The risks that are incidental to naval training are excellently and graphically suggested by Hopkins in his 'Loss of the Euridice' which commemorates the tragic drowning in the English Channel of nearly three hundred recruits to the British Navy, and tells us in moving language how both 'bole and branch'—young and old—met with a watery grave when the 'Euridice' went down.

In recent times the Air Force has become the dominant wing of Defence Forces of a modern country, and systematic training is given to the cadets thereof in the efficient dropping of bombs just as soldiers in the Army are taught rifle-shooting. Even as mounds of earth or
trees or vacant air are used as targets by the trainees in the Army, the sea is the field for practice-work done by the learners in the Air-Force. Bombs are dropped into the sea so that the airman might develop a deft hand at dropping them on cities and other congregations of fellow human beings later on. Norman Nicholson’s ‘Bombing Practice’ raises before our minds a striking picture of the dropping of bombs into the sea by the members of an air-force. The sea is calm, and

‘In the long estuary now the water
At the top and turn of the tide
Is quiet as a mountain tarn’.

And then,

‘The surging aeroplane drops seed through the air
Plumb into the water, where slowly it grows
Boles of smoke and trees
Of swelling and ballooning leafage,
Silver as willows
Or white as blossoming pear.

‘The trees float seaward, spreading and filling like sails,
And the smoke mingles with the sea-mist when
The breeze shreds it. And the curlew sadly cries
That things so beautiful as these
Shall fall through nights of winter gales
And plant their germs of pain in the limbs of men’.

After a certain period of training and preparation soldiers are ordered off to the battle-front. It is a common sight in war-time to see them marching on to where duty calls them. A stanza by W. H. Auden pictures them in ringing words:

‘O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
Down in the valley drumming, drumming?
Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,
The soldiers coming’.

And when the soldiers are going to the battle-field, every one’s good wishes go with them, and every one will say ‘Amen!’ to A. E. Houseman’s words,

‘... dead or living, drunk or dry,
Soldier, I wish you well’.

When a man becomes a soldier, he automatically submits himself to the rules of discipline which obtain in the army. In fact, discipline is the life-breath of military camps and battle-fields. Armies have won
or lost according to their ability to maintain the strictest possible discipline wherever they go. (We may here remind ourselves of the old saying that the British Empire was won on the sports-fields of Eton and Harrow where discipline and team-spirit were learnt by many Englishmen). This discipline consists chiefly in the unquestioning obedience of the soldier to his official superiors. The classic expression of this virtue is that of Tennyson in his ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’:

‘Half a league, half a league,
    Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
    Rode the six hundred.
“Forward the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!” he said,
Into the valley of Death
    Rode the six hundred!

“Forward the Light Brigade!”
Was there a man dismay’d?
Not tho’ the soldier knew
Someone had blunder’d.
Their’s not to make reply,
Their’s but to do and die;
Into the valley of Death
    Rode the six hundred!’

But the true soldier does not complain of the restraints and hardships which he may have to bear. On the contrary he takes a delight in marching to the battle-field and frets impatiently to face the foe. The following lines from Shakespeare’s ‘Othello’ very well picture the joy of the soldiers at the prospect of war. When Othello’s peace of mind is destroyed by Iago’s insinuations regarding Desdemona’s relationship with Cassio, the Moor exclaims,

‘O now, for ever,
Farewell, the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,
That make ambition virtue! O farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
The immortal Jove’s dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello’s occupation’s gone!

(Act III, Sc. 3, LL. 347—357)
Browning's line

'Boot, saddle, to horse, and away!'

('A Cavalier Song')

effectively presents the mentality of an eager soldier who, far from grumbling about his difficulties, rushes forward to hug them. Of the same tenour are the following lines which constitute the first stanza of a war-song of the Civil War period by William Motherwell—

'Boot, boot, into the stirrup, lads,
And hand once more on rein;
Up, up, into the saddle, lads,
Afield we ride again:
One cheer, one cheer, for dame or dear,
No leisure now to sigh,
God bless them—we have their prayers,
And they our hearts—Good-Bye!'

Indeed a soldier's heart 'leaps up with pleasure' at the prospect of war and at the sight of the battle-field. The call of the battle is to him irresistible and even peremptory. To his beloved who protests

'O where are you going? Stay with me here!
Were the vows you swore deceiving, deceiving?'

he replies,

'No, I promised to love you, dear,
But I must be leaving'.

(W. H. Auden: 'O What is That Sound')

These words which Auden puts into the mouth of a soldier are similar to those of Lovelace (op. cit.) and the following lines from Kipling's little poem, 'The Bridegroom':

'Call me not false, beloved,
If from thy scarce-known breast
So little time removed
In other arms I rest.

'For this more ancient bride,
Whom coldly I embrace,
Was constant at my side
Before I saw thy face'.
Similar in tone is the ‘War Song of the Saracens’ by James Elroy Flecker which begins with these stirring lines:

'We are they who come faster than fate: we are they who ride early or late:
We storm at your ivory gate: Pale kings of the Sunset, beware,
Not on silk nor in samet we lie, not in curtained solemnity die 
Among women who chatter and cry, and children who mumble a prayer.
But we sleep by the ropes of the camp, and we rise with a shout, and we tramp
With the sun or the moon for a lamp, and the spray of the wind in our hair.'
(LL. 1-6)

It is undeniable that a soldier with the true mettle, to whom war is a passion, ever prefers death on the battle-field to what he considers the misery of prolonging a life of idle comfort. Hence the following rousing declaration of Julian Henley Grenfell:

'The naked earth is warm with Spring,
   And with green grass and bursting trees
Leans to the sun’s gaze glorying,
   And quivers in the sunny breeze;
And Life is Colour and Warmth and Light,
   And a striving evermore for these;
And he is dead who will not fight,
   And who dies fighting has increase.

'The fighting man shall from the sun
   Take warmth, and life from the glowing earth;
Speed with the light-foot winds to run,
   And with the trees to newer birth;
And find, when fighting shall be done,
   Great rest, and fullness after dearth'.

(‘Into Battle’) 

Even more emphatic are the words of Lionel Johnson in ‘The Coming of War, 1889’—

'Gather the people, for the battle breaks:
   From camping grounds above the valley,
Gather the men-at-arms, and bid them rally:
   Because the morn, the battle, wakes.
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'This was the meaning of those plenteous years,
   Those unarmed years of peace unbroken:
Flashing war crowns them! Now war’s trump hath spoken
This final glory in our ears.
'Gather the people, let the battle break:
An hundred peaceful years are over.
Now march each man to battle as a lover.

* * * * * *

'Let no man dare to be disheartened now!
We challenge death beyond denial.
Against the host of death we make our trial:
Lord God of Hosts! do thou,
Who gavest us the fulness of thy Sun
On fields of peace, perfect war's work begun:
Warriors, to thee we bow'.

The conduct of the warrior on the battle-field has been described profusely and minutely in poetry. Poets have again and again waxed eloquent over scenes of battle. Shakespeare's 'Henry V' has been conceived as a model for all exemplary qualities that should be possessed by an ideal king who, in the days of yore, had also to be a warrior in the interests of his country and of his crown. Macbeth is described as 'brave Macbeth' who

'Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion carv'd out his passage
Till he fac'd the slave
Which never shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements'.


Othello is referred to by his admirers as 'valiant' (just as Achilles in Homer's 'Iliad' is always 'Swift-footed' and Sir Bedivere in Tennyson's 'Morte D' Arthur' has the permanent epithet 'bold' attached to his name). Apart from these casual indications of personal distinction on the part of a hero, poets have expatiated frequently upon the sights and sounds of battle-fields. The earliest poet known to the annals of English song, Caedmon, himself did this. Although he was a Christian, the Anglo-Saxon spirit of fighting was so strong in him that he could not resist the temptation to indulge in a description like the following in his 'Exodus', a poem which deals with a Biblical subject-matter. Caedmon describes the approach of the host of Pharoah thus:

'They prepared their arms,
The war advanced,
Bucklers glittered,
Trumpets sang,
Standards rattled.
Among them scream
The fowls of war,
Greedy of battle,
Dewy-feathered,
Over the bodies of the host
The dark choosers of the slain;
The wolves sing their
Horrid evensong'.

(Thorpe's translation. Quoted by S. Pancoast: 'An Introduction to English Literature', p. 52).

We find the same attention to details in another poem of the Anglo-Saxon times, the fragment called 'Battle of Brunanburgh'—

'All the field with blood of the fighters
Flow'd, from when first the great
Sun-star of morning tide
* * * * * *
Glode over earth till the glorious creature
Sank to his setting.
There lay many a man
Marr'd by the javelin,
Men of the Northland
Shot over shield.
There was the Scotsman
Weary of war.
We the West-Saxons,
Long as the daylight
Lasted, in companies
Troubled the track of the host that we hated,
Grimly with the swords that were sharp from the grindstone,
Fiercely we hacked at the flyers before us'.

(Quoted by Stopford A. Brooke: 'English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest', pp. 257-258)

Descriptions of battles are among the commonest subjects in popular ballads. Here is a sample taken from the celebrated ballad, 'Chevy Chase'—

'Our English archers bent their bows,
Their hearts were good and true,
At the first sight of arrows sent,
Full fourscore Scots they slew.

'Yet bides Erle Douglas on the bent,
As chieftain stout and good.
As valiant captain all unmoved
The shock he firmly stood.
'His host he parted had in three,
    As leader ware and try'd,
As soon his spearmen on their foes
Bare down on every side.

'Throughout the English archery
    They dealt full many a wound,
But still our valiant Englishmen
All firmly kept their ground,

'And throwing strait their bowes away
    They grasped their swords so bright,
And now sharp blows, a heavy shower,
On shields and helmets light,

'They closed full fast on every side,
    No slackness there was found;
And many a gallant gentleman
Lay gasping on the ground'.

Later poets have not lagged behind in rendering battle scenes with great care and gusto. Shakespeare himself makes use of every opportunity to introduce into his plays descriptions of warfare. The Fourth Act of 'Henry V' and the Fifth Act of 'Julius Caesar' are full of scenes of this type. This is how Henry addresses his men at Harfleur:

'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead;
In peace there is nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the senews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage;
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;

*      *      *      *      *

Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,
Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit
To his full height' etc.

(Act. III, Sc. 2, LL. 1-17)

In Drayton's poem, 'The Ballad of Agincourt', Henry is made to address his soldiers on the eve of the battle.

'And turning to his men,'
Says Drayton,

'Quoth our brave Henry then,
Though they be one to ten,
Be not amazed.
Yet have we well begun,
Battles so bravely won
Have ever to the sun
By fame been raised'

'"And for myself", quoth he,
'This my full rest shall be:
England ne'er mourn for me,
Nor more esteem me;
Victor I will remain
Or on this earth lie slain;
Never shall she sustain
Loss to redeem me?'

The following lines are from the 'Battle Song' by Ebnezer Elliott:

'Day, like our souls is fiercely dark,
What then? 'Tis day!
We sleep no more; the cock crows—hark!
To arms! away!
They come! They come! The knell is rung
Of us or them!'

There is a graphic presentation of warriors rushing to the battle of Waterloo in the third Canto of Byron's 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage'. It is too long to be quoted, but here is a picturesque passage from his 'Storming of Corinth':

'The night is past, and shines the sun
As if that morn were a jocund one.

Hark to the trump and the drum,
And the mournful sound of the barbarous horn
And the flap of the banners that flit as they're borne,
And the neigh of the steed and the multitudes' hum,
And the clash of the shout, "They come, They come!"
The horsetails are plucked from the ground and the sword
From its sheath; and they form and but wait for the word'.

There is a song in John Fletcher's play, 'The Mad Lover' which is equally minute in its details:

'Arm, arm, arm, arm! the scouts are all come in;
Keep your ranks close, and now your honours win.
Behold from yonder hill the foe appears;
Bows, bills, glaives, arrows, shields, and spears!'
They meet, they meet, and now the battle comes:
See how the arrows fly
That darken all the sky!
Hark how the trumpets sound
Hark how the hills rebound!

Sir Walter Scott describes the ‘Battle of Bannockburn’ in these lines:

‘Unflinching foot against foot was set,
Unciasing blow by blow was met;
The groans of those who fell
Were drown’d amid the shriller clang
That from the blades and harness rang,
And in the battle yell.
Yet fast they fell, unheard, forgot,
Both southern fierce and hasty Scot’.

In Macaulay’s ‘Battle of Naseby’ a soldier says,

‘Crimson was the juice of vintage that we trod;
For we trampled on the throng of the haughty and the strong’

Thomas Campbell’s well-known poem, ‘Hohenlinden’ raises before our imagination an impressive picture of the battle of that name. The entire poem deserves to be quoted. The following are the first six stanzas in it:

‘On Linden, when the sun was low,
All bloodless lay the untrodden snow,
And dark as winter was the flow
Of Iser, rolling rapidly.

‘But Linden saw another sight,
When the drum beat at dead of night,
Commanding fires of death to light
The darkness of her scenery.

‘By torch and trumpet fast arrayed,
Each horseman drew his battle-blade,
And furious every charger neighed,
To join the dreadful revelry.

‘Then shook the hills with thunder riven,
Then rushed the steed to battle driven,
And louder than the bolts of heaven,
Far flashed the red artillery.

‘But redder yet that light shall glow
On Linden’s hills of stained snow,
And bloodier yet the torrent flow
Of Iser, rolling rapidly.'
‘ ’Tis morn, but scarce yon level sun
Can pierce the war-clouds, rolling dun,
Where furious Frank and fiery Hun
Shout in their sulph’rous canopy’.

Tennyson’s ‘Charge of the Heavy Brigade’ with its line

‘The trumpet, the gallop, the charge, and the might of the fight’
is another excellent poem of this kind. But I shall close this topic
with a line from his ‘Defence of Lucknow’ in which a soldier says,

‘Each of us fought as if hope for the garrison hung but on him’.

It is difficult to come across a terser and more suggestive description
of the soldier par excellence than this line. Equally cryptic is Tennyson’s
picture at the beginning of ‘Morte D’ Arthur’—

‘So all day long the noise of battle roll’d
Among the mountains by the winter sea;
Until King Arthur’s table, man by man,
Had fallen in Lyonesse about their Lord’.

Tennyson’s own magnificent poem ‘The Revenge’ illustrates the
fact that poets have indulged in spirited and detailed descriptions of not
only land-battles but of fighting in other theatres also. ‘The Revenge’
is a glorification of the gallant conduct of a battle ship of that
name belonging to the English navy in Elizabethan times. It is an
immortal tribute paid by the poet to the memorable courage, self
confidence and patriotism of Sir Richard Grenville, the great Captain
of the vessel. Stanza IX of the poem lingers in one’s mind unforgettably:

‘And the sun went down, and the stars came out far over the
summer sea,
But never a moment ceased the fight of the one and the fifty
three.
Ship after ship, the whole night long, their high-built galleons came,
Ship after ship, the whole night long, with her battle thunder and flame;
Ship after ship, the whole night long, drew back with her dead and her shame.
For some were sunk and many were shatter’d, and could
fight us no more—
God of battles, was ever a battle like this in the world before’.

Many stanzas in Dryden’s ‘Annum Mirabilis’ contain an interesting account of the battle which took place between the English and the Dutch
navies in 1665. This is how Dryden describes the way in which the English ships fought:

‘Our little fleet was now engaged so far
That like the sword-fish in the whale they fought,
The combat only seemed a civil-war,
Till through their bowels we our passage wrought’.
(Stanza 79)

Maurice Baring’s ‘In Memorium to A. H.’ deals with a modern air-battle:

‘You had died fighting, fighting against odds,
Such as in war the gods
Aetheral dared when all the world was young;
Such fighting as blind Homer never sung,
Nor Hector nor Achilles never knew,
High in the empty blue.
High, high, above the clouds, against the setting sun,
The fight was fought and your great task was done’.

Duels between individual soldiers are not uncommon in battles, and consequently, it is not surprising that poet’s have described such fights too in moving and dramatic language. Here are some lines from Matthew Arnold’s account of the duel between Sohrab and Rustum:

‘... Rustum answered not, but hurl’d
His spear: down from the shoulder, down it came,
As on some partridge in the corn a hawk
That long has tower’d in the airy clouds
Drops like a plummet: Sohrab saw it come,
And sprang aside, quick as a flash: the spear
Hiss’d, and went quivering down into the sand,
Which it sent flying wide: then Sohrab threw
In turn, and full struck Rustum’s shield: sharp rang;
The iron plates ran sharp, but turn’d the spear.
And Rustum seiz’d the club, which none but he
Could wield: an unlapp’d trunk it was and huge,

Which Rustum lifted now, and struck
One stroke; but again Sohrab sprang aside
Lithe as the glancing snake, and the club came
Thundering to earth, and leapt from Rustum’s hand.
And Rustum followed his own blow, and fell
To his knees, and with his fingers clutched the sand’.

(‘Sohrab and Rustum’, LL. 399-421)
Sacrifices made by loyal soldiers for the sake of their masters have deservedly been praised by poets. The following lines from Sir Walter Scott’s ‘The Cavalier’ describe a soldier of the Royalist Party during the Civil War between Charles I and his Parliament:

‘While the dawn on the mountain was misty and gray,
My true love has mounted his steed, and away
Over hill, over valley, o’ver dale and o’ver down—
Heaven shield the brave Gallant that fights for the Crown!
He has doffed the silk doublet the breastplate to bear,
He has placed the steel cap over his long flowing hair,
From his belt to his stirrup his broadsword hangs down—
Heaven shield the brave gallant that fights for the Crown!
For the rights of fair England that broadsword he draws;
Her King is his leader, her Church is his cause,
His watchword is honour, his pay is renown—
God strike with the Gallant that strikes for the Crown! * * * *

Now joy to the crest of the brave Cavalier!
Be his banner unconquered, resistless his spear,
Till in peace and in triumph his toils he may drown,
In a pledge to far England, her Church, and her Crown’.

Browning’s poem, ‘Marching Along’, which begins with the famous line

‘Kentish Sir Byng stood for his King’,
deals with a similar theme.

The heroism of individual soldiers has also been immortalised by poets. Walter Thorbury’s ‘The Cavalier’s Escape’ describes in stirring words how a follower of Charles escaped from falling into the hands of the Puritan soldiers:

‘But one long bound, and I passed the gate
Safe from the canting band’.

Browning’s ‘An Incident of the French Camp’ and ‘How They brought the Good News from Ghent’ are too well known to require quotation. Equally striking are Swinburne’s ‘Jacobite’s Exile’ and ‘A Huguenot’ by Mary E. Coleridge. In the last stanza of the latter poem a soldier recollects with pardonable pride how he fought against his enemies in spite of heavy odds:

‘But I never loved more
On sea or on shore
The ringing of my own true blade,
Like lightning it quivered,
And the hard helms shivered,
As I sang, “None maketh me afraid!”’
There is a beautiful—almost romantic—poem by the American poet and famous writer of short stories, Bret Harte, on the way in which a bullet flies out at its predestined victim and rejoices in the fulfilment of its desire. The bullet itself is made to speak in the poem, the first stanza of which runs thus:

'O joy of creation
To be!
O rapture to fly
And be free!
Be the battle lost or won,
Though its smoke shall hide the sun,
I shall find my love—the one Born for me!

If on the one side the heroism exhibited by warriors has been given due place in poetry, boastful cowards and runaway poltroons have also had their share of recognition by the Muse. The former of these is best illustrated by the inimitable Bobadill of Ben Johnson’s ‘Every Man in His Humour’, and the feelings of the latter are thus tersely put into the mouth of a deserter by John Philpot Curran:

‘But as in wailing
There’s not awaiting,
And Death unfailing
Will strike the blow,
Then for that reason,
And for a season
Let us be merry
Before we go’.

(‘The Deserter’)  

This is how Rupert Brooke wonders at the probable reason which instigated a colleague into desertion:

‘So light we were, so right we were, so fair faith shone,
And the way was laid so certainly, that, when I’d gone,
What dumb thing looked up at you? Was it something heard,
Or a sudden cry, that meekly and without a word
You broke the faith, and strangely, weakly, slipped apart.
You gave in—you, the proud heart, unbowed of heart!
Was this, friend, the end of all that we could do?
And have you found the best for you, the rest for you?
Did you learn so suddenly (and I not by!)
Some whispered story, that stole the glory from the sky,
And ended all the splendid dream, and made you go.
So dully from the fight we know, the light we know?

(‘Desertion’
If desertion is condemned by poets or, at least, wondered at, perseverance in fighting and death on the war-field have been considered honourable. A true soldier is presented as aspiring to laying down his life on the battle-ground. In Herbert Trench’s poem, ‘Musing on a Great Soldier’, the soldier says,

‘I confess to one fear; this
To be buried alive’.

In the ‘Burial March of Dundee’ by William Aytoun, the surviving soldiers who are carrying their master’s dead body out of the field sing:

‘Never from the field of combat,
Never from the deadly fray,
Was nobler trophy carried
Than we bring with us today’.

In his ‘Hail and Farewell’ Byron writes—

‘If thou regrettest thy youth, why live?
The land of honourable death
Is here: up to the field, and give
Away the breath!

‘Seek out—less often sought then found—
A soldier’s grave, for thee the best;
Then look around, and choose thy ground,
And take thy rest.’

A similar glorification of death in the midst of fighting is the burden of many another poem, like ‘A Jacobite’s Epitaph’ by Macaulay, ‘Burial of Sir John Moore’ by Wolfe, ‘Soldier Rest’ by Scott, and the well-known sonnet called ‘Soldier’ by Rupert Brooke. But on the other side, the futility of martial fame has also been referred to by poets, among whom may be mentioned Shirley and Dr Johnson. In a famous passage in his ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’ Dr Johnson describes the lot of Charles XII of Sweden who was defeated at the battle of Pultowa in 1709 and shot dead at Frederickshall on the coast of Norway in 1718. The poet begins with the remark,

‘On what foundation stands the warrior’s pride,
How just his hopes let Swedish Charles decide’

and concludes,

‘He left the name, at which the world grew pale,
To point a moral, or adorn a tale’.

(‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’ LL. 180-190)
But long before Johnson, Shirley the poet and dramatist of the first half of the preceding century had written:

'Some men with swords may reap the field,
And plant fresh laurels where they kill,
But their strong nerves at last must yield,
They tame but one another still.
Early or late
They stoop to fate,
And must give up their murmuring breath
When they, pale captives, creep to death.

'The garlands wither on their brow—
Then boast no more your mighty deeds!
Upon death's purple altar
See where the victor-victim bleeds!
All heads must come
To the cold tomb'.

('The King of Kings', 2nd and 3rd stanzas)

'It is but natural that soldiers who live and work far away from their homelands and hearths, their kith and kin, should entertain nostalgic feelings regarding their homes. The yearning of a soldier for his home has never been more beautifully and touchingly expressed than by Thomas Campbell in his 'Soldier's Dream' in which a soldier recounts how in his dream he 'roamed on a desolate track' to the 'home of my fathers that welcomed me back' and spent some time with his near and dear ones.

'Then pledged we the wine-cup, and fondly I swore
From my home and my weeping friends never to part;
My little ones kiss'd me a thousand times o'er,
And my wife sobb'd aloud in her fulness of heart.

'Stay-stay with us!—rest! thou art weary and worn!'
And fain was their war-broken soldier to stay;—
But sorrow return'd with the dawning of morn,
And the voice in my dream melted away'

Sir Henry Newbolt's poem, 'He Fell Among Thieves' is a dramatic presentation of the vision of his homeland and family and friends which a British soldier, captured and sentenced to death by the Afghans, saw on the eve of his execution. Rupert Brooke's 'Old Vicarage Grantchester' is an expression of the pang of separation from his native village of Grantchester which the poet experiences at the onset of the spring season, he at that time being in Germany. He recollects the beauties of nature in his place and enthusiastically exclaims,
'God! I will pack, and take a train,  
And get me to England once again!  
For England's the one land I know,  
Where men with splendid hearts may go;  
And Cambridgeshire, of all England,  
The shire for Men who understand;  
And of that district I prefer  
The lovely hamlet Grantchester'.

Siegfried Sassoon also describes soldiers as dreamers who, 'When the guns begin—think of firelit homes, clean beds and waves'.

'I see them in foul dug-outs, graved by rats,  
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,  
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,  
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain  
Bank-holidays, and picture-shows, and spats,  
And going to the office in the train'.

('Dreamers')

If the soldiers on the battle-fields think wistfully of their homes and other scenes of happy by-gone days, people at home do not forget the poor boys either. Every return of a happy occasion brings to their minds the young men who have gone away from them and are deprived of the delight of sharing in it. Here are four lines from Edward Thomas, written in Easter 1951.

'The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood,  
This Easter蒂de call into mind the men,  
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts should  
Have gathered them and will do never again'.

Indeed the pathos of a soldier's life has been touched upon again and again by poets. Herman Melville sings how

'One noonday, at my window in the town,  
I saw a sight—saddest that eyes can see—  
Young soldiers marching lustily  
Unto the wars'.

('Ball's Bluff')

A. E. Houseman:

'And down the distance they  
With dying note and swelling  
Walk the resounding way  
To the still dwelling'.

('In Valleys Green and Still')
John Clare describes how an English soldier in far off India behaves when he receives a letter from home:

‘Friends’ letters coming from his native place
Were like old neighbours with their country face.

* * * * * *

And friendly faces absent many a year
Would from such letters in his mind appear.
And when his pockets, chafing through the case,
Wore it quite out ere others took place,
Right loath to be of company bereft
He kept the fragments while a bit was left’.

(‘The Soldier’)

In her beautiful poem ‘Summer in England’ Alice Meynell describes how the bright season transformed the appearance of everything both in London and in the country districts, and laments thus:

‘And while this rose made round her cup,
The armies died convulsed. And when
This chaste young silver sun went up
Softly, a thousand shattered men,
One wet corruption, heaped the plain
After a league-long throb of pain.

‘Flower following tender flower; and birds
And berries; and benignant skies
Made thrive the serried flocks and herds—
Yonder are men shot through the eyes.
Love hide thy face
From man’s unpardonable race!’

Many times soldiers do not even know why they are fighting and sacrificing their lives. They are victims of exploitation by self-interested ambitious people. Economic necessity also makes them enlist themselves in the army and allow themselves to be driven like dumb cattle into the jaws of Death. This aspect of military life is emphatically put into a little poem by Patrick Dickinson:

‘Cold are the stones
That built the wall of Troy
Cold are the bones
Of the Dead Greek boy.

‘Who for some vague thought
Of honour fell,
Nor why he fought
Could scarcely tell.
'Innocence hired to kill
Lies pitilessly dead.
Stone and bone lie still.
Helen turns in her bed'

('War')

Even more outspoken is Thomas Hardy in whose poem, 'The Man He Killed', a soldier speaks:

'Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

'But ranged as infantry
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in the place.

'I shot him dead because —
Because he was my foe.
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough although

'He thought he'd list perhaps
Off hand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why.

'Yes, quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown'.

The trivial causes for which wars are declared and in which innocent men are sacrificed are finely indicated by Matthew Arnold in his 'The Last Word'. In the second stanza of the poem he says to a soldier,

'Let the long contention cease!
Geese are swans, and swans are geese.
Let them have it how they will!
Thou art tired; best be still! '

Politicians are the wire-pullers when wars take place. They begin them and control them, although they never face the risk of donning the uniform and marching to the field. How touchingly and with what bitter irony does Chesterton refer to this in his 'Elegy in a Country Church Yard'.
"The men that worked for England
They have their graves at home;
And bees and birds of England
About the cross can roam.

'But they that fought for England,
Following a falling star,
Alas, alas for England
They have their graves afar.

'And they that rule in England,
In stately conclave met,
Alas, alas for England
They have no graves as yet'.

Even more sarcastic and bitter is Dylan Thomas in the following poem:

"The hand that signed the paper felled a city;
Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country,
These five Kings did a King to death.

'Thy mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder,
The finger joints are cramped with chalk;
A goose's quill has put an end to murder
That put an end to talk.

'The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,
And famine grew, and locusts came,
Great is the hand that holds dominion over
Man by a scribbled name.

'The five Kings count the dead but do not soften
The crusted wound nor pat the brow,
A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;
Hands have no tears to flow'.

These very politicians who deal with war although they dare not face its rigours in person are the objects of Wordsworth's contemptuous reference in his Sonnet, 'November, 1806'—

'We shall exult, if they who rule the land
Be men who hold its many blessings dear,
Wise, upright, valiant; not the servile bands
Who are to judge of danger which they fear,
And honour which they do not understand'.

These war-mongers neglect the soldier as soon as their purpose is served. When war is over and the soldiers are no longer needed, they
are turned adrift to seek their fortunes as best they can. Wordsworth himself describes one such ex-soldier in the Fourth Book of his ‘Prelude’

‘While thus I wander’d, step by step led on,
It chanc’d a sudden turning of the road
Presented to my view an uncouth shape
So near, that slipping back into the shade
Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,
Myself unseen. He was of stature tall,
A foot above man’s common measure tall,
Stiff in his form, and upright, lank and lean;
A man more meagre, as it seem’d to me,
Was never seen abroad by night or day
His arms were long, and bare his hands; his mouth
Shew’d ghastly in the moonlight: from behind
A milestone propp’d him, and his figure seem’d
Half-sitting and half-standing. I could mark
That he was clad in military garb,
Though faded, yet entire. He was alone,
Had no attendant, neither Dog, nor Staff,
Nor Knapsack; in his very dress appear’d
A desolation, a simplicity
That seem’d akin to solitude’.

similar picture is found in Walter De La Mare’s ‘The Old Soldier’ which begins with the telling stanza:

‘There came an old soldier to my door,
Asked a crust and asked no more;
The wars had thinned him very bare,
Fighting and marching everywhere’.

In his heart-rending poem, ‘Faithless Nelly Gray’ Thomas Hood narrates how a soldier returning from war hanged himself because he had lost both his legs and Nelly Gray, ‘the pretty maid’ he loved, would ‘never have a man with both legs in the grave’, and callously rejected him with his argument:

‘Before you had those timber toes,
Your love I did allow,
But then, you know, you stand upon
Another footing now!’

And here is a much more sarcastic picture by Siegfried Sassoon:

‘Does it matter?—losing your legs? . . .
For people will always be kind,
And you need not show that you mind
When the others come in after football
To gobble their muffins and eggs.’
'Does it matter?—losing your sight? ...
There is such splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be kind,
As you sit on the terrace remembering
And turning your face to the light.

'Do they matter?—these dreams from the pit?
You can drink and forget and be glad,
And people won't say that you are mad
For they'll know that you've fought for your country
And no one will worry a bit'

(‘Does It Matter?’)

In fact, a soldier's life is many times meaningless and mere dull routine which does good neither to his body nor to his soul. In Coleridge's ‘Piccolomini’ a soldier who is 'off duty' for a short while comments on his own profession in these revealing lines—

'Twas the first leisure of my life. O tell me,
What is the need and purpose of the toil,
The painful toil which robbed me of my youth,
Left me a heart unsouled and solitary,
A spirit uninformed, unornamented,
For the camp's stir and crowd and ceaseless larum,
The neighing war-horse, the air-shattering trumpet,
The unvaried, still-returning hour of duty,
Word of command, and exercise of arms—
There's nothing here, there's nothing in all this
To satisfy the heart, the gasping heart!
Mere bustling nothingness, where the soul is not—
This cannot be the sole felicity,
These cannot be men's best and only pleasures'.

Poets have not only exposed the pitiful lot of soldiers but condemned warfare positively and unequivocally. It is true that great warriors have been glorified by them. Spenser praises the Earl of Essex in his 'Prothalamion', Milton eulogises Cromwell and Fairfax in his sonnets, Dryden indulges in a clever and timely panegyric on Cromwell, Tennyson heaps full-throated praise upon the Duke of Wellington, and Cowper immortalises naval heroes like Kempenfelt, the Captain of the 'Royal George,' and Lawrence Binyon pays his tribute to the 'Unknown Warriors' in his poem, ‘For the Fallen'. But equally plentiful are attacks on the reputed heroes of famous battles. The best example of this is Byron's contemptuous lines on the Duke of Wellington in Canto IX of his 'Don Juan'. The poet makes a pun on the name of the famous warrior and calls him ‘Villainton’, and further remarks:
I am no flatterer—you've supped full of flattery:
They say you like it too—'tis no great wonder.
He whose whole life has been assault and battery,
At last may get a little tired of thunder;
And swallowing eulogy much more than satire, he
May like being praised for every lucky blunder,
Call'd "Saviour of the Nations"—not yet saved,
And "Europe's Liberator"—still enslaved.

The unjust exaltation of warriors has been laughed at by poets and they
have not hesitated to expatriate on the wide-spread destruction caused
by warfare. Robert Southey's well-known poem 'Blenheim' contains
a simple but quite impressive presentation of this side of war. So
are Edmund Blunden's 'After the Bombing' and Stanley Smith's
'Hiroshima' and Auden's 'Refugee Blues' with its haunting beginning:

'Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Some of the poets who have strongly condemned war and exposed the
'pity' of it have themselves been soldiers. Among them stands out
Wilfred Owen whose 'Strange Meeting' is a powerful anti-war poem
which reminds us of Hardy's 'The Man He Killed' which has already
been quoted.

But there is no likelihood of war stopping in spite of the attacks
made upon it by poets and philosophers. Hence this poignant stanza in
C. Day Lewis's 'Will It be so Again?'

'Will it be as before—
Peace, with no heart or mind to ensue it,
Guttering down to war
Like a libertine to his grave? We should not be surprised we
knew it
Happen 'before'.

And here is Siegfried Sassoon saying the same thing in a picturesque
manner:

'I saw the Prince of Darkness with his Staff,
Standing bare—headed by the Cenotaph:
Unostentatious and respectful, there
He stood, and offered up the following prayer.
"Make them forget, O Lord, what this memorial
Means; their discredited ideas revive;
Breed new belief that War is purgatorial
Proof of the pride and power of being alive;
Men’s biologic urge to readjust
   The map of Europe, Lord of Hosts, increase;
Lift up their hearts in large destructive lust;
   And crown their heads with blind vindictive Peace’’.
The Prince of Darkness to the Cenotaph
Bowed. As he walked away I heard him laugh’.
   (‘At the Cenotaph’)

*     *     *     *     *

War and the activities of warriors have been used by poets with
excellent effect for metaphorical purposes. Clough’s ‘Say not the
Struggle Not Availeth’, Browning’s ‘Prospice’, Arnold’s ‘The Last
Word’, Longfellow’s ‘The Psalm of Life’, Henley’s ‘Out of the Night
that Covers Me’, and a host of other poems may be mentioned by way
of illustration.

*     *     *     *     *

The increasing possibility of Atomic warfare engulfing the world
raises a doubt whether poets will survive to sing about the glories
of the battle-field. Of course, they may cry out against war itself.
But very few may remain to read their poetry.