

National Heritage Memorial Fund awards £550,000 to help save Siegfried Sassoon's archive

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Today, the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) is announcing its award to Cambridge University of £550,000 towards securing the personal archive of eminent First World War soldier, poet and author, Siegfried Sassoon, for the nation.

Image



Siegfried Sassoon

The grant will help acquire this important collection of Sassoon's private diaries and pocket notebooks compiled while serving on the Western Front. The collection also includes an autograph manuscript of the seminal *A Soldier's Declaration* - the statement Sassoon wrote detailing his refusal to return to duty after being wounded. It caused a storm in Britain during 1917 when it was read out in Parliament as Sassoon claimed that the war was being prolonged by those who had the power to end it.

Award-winning author Michael Morpurgo - whose novel *Private Peaceful* includes excerpts from Sassoon's *A Soldier's Declaration* - said: "The war Siegfried

Sassoon lived through, fought in, and wrote about, was supposed to be the war to end all wars. It wasn't. The reason his words echo down through the decades so powerfully is that they are sadly as relevant to today's wars, and so to us, as they ever were to his. How right and proper then it is that Cambridge University will acquire the papers of this great poet and diarist for the nation, with the help of the National Heritage Memorial Fund. Every generation, all of us, should read, mark, and never forget how it was, how it really is for young men when older men send them off to war. We may then learn."

Jenny Abramsky, Chair of the NHMF said: "This is such wonderful news. The passing of the UK's last surviving First World War veteran earlier this year has brought into sharp focus the sacrifice made by so many in service to the nation during both World Wars and the sacrifice still being made today. The National Heritage Memorial Fund was founded to help safeguard our heritage as a lasting memorial to those men and women. Sassoon's archive - full of fascinating personal accounts of his own experiences at war - provides the perfect tribute."

Once fundraising is complete, the archive is to be held at Cambridge University Library which already has several significant sets of Sassoon's letters and manuscripts accessible to readers. The Library has for many years played a leading role in conserving the records of Sassoon's life and works and this addition will make the Library's Sassoon collection the most significant in the world.

The University Library's £1.25million campaign to purchase the archive launched at Sotheby's in June and is now tantalisingly close to success. The campaign is being led by Max Egremont, Sassoon's official biographer and supported by author Sebastian Faulks, the former Poet Laureate Sir Andrew Motion and military historian Richard Holmes.

Anne Jarvis, Cambridge University Librarian, said: "We are absolutely delighted with this wonderful demonstration of support from the NHMF. This is hugely encouraging news for Cambridge University Library and for all the many donors, large and small, who have given their generous support to the campaign so far. In the current economic climate, it would have been impossible to foresee a successful outcome for the campaign without a substantial grant from the NHMF. Thanks to this outstanding support, we now have a realistic hope that we can secure the Sassoon Archive for the nation. However, we still need to raise the outstanding balance of £110,000 for the purchase, and also raise additional funds for cataloguing, conservation and exhibiting the archive to make it accessible to as wide an audience as possible."

Max Egremont said: "The generosity of the National Heritage Memorial Fund and other donors should now make it possible to save this extraordinary archive for the nation. I was fortunate enough to be able to use the papers for my 2005 biography and to discover what a unique insight they give into Siegfried Sassoon's life and work. The response to the appeal has been heartening in these difficult times and shows Sassoon's popularity and importance as a writer. If the rest of the money can be raised, the papers will soon be available to the public. It is particularly appropriate that they will be in Cambridge, Siegfried Sassoon's old university and a place that he loved."

Notes to editors

Siegfried Loraine Sassoon, CBE, MC (8 September 1886 - 1 September 1967)

Sassoon was born in Kent in 1886. He studied law at Clare College, Cambridge however dropped out of university in 1907 without a degree. He then lived the life of country gentlemen, pursuing his sporting interests and privately publishing volumes of poetry. At the outbreak of the First World War, motivated by patriotism, Sassoon joined the Military, was commissioned to the 3rd Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers as second lieutenant and was sent to France in 1915.

Having struck up a close friendship with Robert Graves, Sassoon was profoundly influenced by the 'realism' of Graves' style and adapted his own to better reflect the truth of war. He documented his experiences on the Front through diaries, sketches and above all poetry.

As war progressed Sassoon became increasingly depressed by the unrelenting horror and misery; a depression which manifested itself in to acts of almost suicidal bravery. His single handed capture of a German trench and his rescue of several wounded men while under heavy bomb and rifle fire earned him the Military Cross in 1916 and the nickname 'Mad Jack' from his platoon.

However, in 1917 following a period of convalescent leave in England, Sassoon declined to return to duty. Encouraged and goaded, dependent on viewpoint, by his pacifist friends, among which was Bernard Shaw, Sassoon threw the ribbon of his Military Cross into the Mersey and sent a letter to his commanding officer. A *Soldier's Declaration* was impassioned, but reasoned, protest against the needless suffering of war. The refusal to return to war was desertion (306 men were shot for desertion in WWI) but Robert Graves successfully intervened and

Sassoon avoided Court Martial and was instead declared unfit for duty. He was sent to Craiglockhart Hospital to recover from 'shell shock'. Here he met Wilfred Owen and became his chief mentor and editor. Sassoon did return to the Front and survived the war.

He died in 1967 having generated sufficient manuscripts, both poetic and prose, and correspondence to furnish collections in 14 different public intuitions.

Funding

The project cost £1,251,235.00

There are 12 funders the most significant being:

National Heritage Memorial Fund - £550,142 (44 per cent of the total value)

Cambridge University - £151,092

The Monument Trust - £150,000

JP Getty Jr Trust - £125,000.

A private viewing of the archive will take place at the Committee Room 16, Houses Parliament at 9:30 – 11am on Wednesday 4th November. Author Michael Morpurgo will be reciting Sassoon's *A Soldier's Declaration* and a number of his unpublished poems. Adham Smart, Foyle's Young Poet of the Year 2009 will be reciting his poem *good morning Palestine*.

Interviews and photo opportunities will be available.

Cambridge University Library

For 600 years the University Library has been central to the support of teaching and research at Cambridge. More than eight million books and periodicals, one million maps and many thousands of manuscripts occupy more than one hundred miles of shelving, which extends by a further two miles every year. The Library collections vary hugely in age and content. Chinese oracle bones from the second millennium BC can be found alongside the latest online scientific journals; illuminated decorations in medieval manuscripts can be studied as originals and as digitised images delivered over the Internet.

Highlights of the University Library's special collections include the papers of Isaac Newton, an archive of Charles Darwin's correspondence, archives of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, the library of the Royal Commonwealth Society and a copy of the Gutenberg Bible from 1455, the earliest European example of a

book produced using moveable type.

As a legal deposit library since 1710, the Library is entitled to acquire a copy of each book and journal published in the UK and Ireland, which results in a rich and diverse collection providing future scholars with the raw materials for research in many fields.

With two million of its volumes on open shelves, readers have the largest open-access collection in Europe immediately available to them.

An exhibition space at the University Library makes a selection of its outstanding collections available for view to the public.

Michael Morpurgo

Michael Morpurgo is an award-winning author of a huge number of outstanding books including *War Horse* and *Private Peaceful*. The latter was inspired by Sassoon's *A Soldier's Declaration*. Michael held the position of Children's Laureate between 2003 and 2005.

Further information

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