

Sassoon's Fox-Hunting Man: The Sporting Character in *The Memoirs of George Sherston*

Philip Wedge

Much has been made of the autobiographical nature of Siegfried Sassoon's trilogy of novels about the fox-hunting, cricket and golf-playing George Sherston, whose notions of self and nation change in experiencing the horrors of World War I. But it seems to me that critics have given too much attention to the autobiographical side of Sassoon's sporting character,¹ George Sherston, and not explored enough how Sherston's sporting experiences influence his responses to the war, sometimes in ways quite different from the responses Sassoon himself recorded in his war journals. Despite these journals often providing the narrative structure and descriptive details for war scenes in the novels, close comparison of Sassoon's journals and the novels derived from them shows Sassoon carefully crafting George Sherston as a fictional sporting type different from himself. Not simply the "alter ego" of Sassoon, as biographer Max Egremont and John Stuart Roberts have described him,² and not simply the "sensitive but mindless athlete"³ Paul Fussell has described him as, George Sherston evolves from a fairly timid boy who gains confidence and self-assurance through fox-hunting and cricket to an officer in the war, whose love for sport helps him focus and perform some daring exploits in battle, yet also helps him at times to escape the physical and mental strains of that war experience.

The Memoirs of George Sherston is the composite title of Sassoon's novel trilogy focused on George Sherston's experiences before and during World War I. The first volume of the trilogy, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928),

covers Sherston's Kent life through his first experiences as an officer in the War. *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and *Sherston's Progress* (1936) describe Sherston's remaining experiences in the War in France, Ireland, Egypt, and Palestine. While the pattern of experiences Sherston has before and during the War certainly follows Sassoon's own pattern, as traced effectively by such biographers as Egremont and Jean Moorcroft Wilson,⁴ and in Sassoon's later autobiographies,⁵ what seems overlooked, at times, is Sassoon's crafting the fictional character of Sherston to represent more than the author's "alter ego," especially regarding how sport shapes him and at times helps him cope with his war experiences.

In his introduction to Sassoon's collection *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918), Robert Nichols describes the Sassoon he knew during the War: "he likes to speak of hunting (he will shout of it!), of open air mornings when the gorse alone flames brighter than the sky, of country quiet, of his mother, of poetry ... and last and chiefly ... of soldiers. For the incubus of war is on him so that his days are shot with anguish and his nights with horror."⁶ While the mixture of subjects in Sassoon's journals of the war⁷ may vary from Nichols' description, their focus on his life in the army (training, supporting or operating at the Front, recovering from wounds/illness); his writing and study of poetry; reflections on home life and hunting all play significant parts in the war journals. But the journals reveal Sassoon did not just speak and write of hunting; he also continued to participate in fox-hunts whenever possible, not just on leave in Kent but also while stationed elsewhere in England and Ireland. Golf played a significant part as well in helping Sassoon cope with the mental strain of the war while he convalesced under the supervision of Dr. Rivers at Craiglockhart War Hospital, near Edinburgh (Wilson 243). The varying interests of Sassoon noted by Nichols and substantiated by Sassoon's own journals of the time do reveal what Paul Fussell terms a "double life" of sporting country gentleman and aspiring aesthetic poet (Fussell xx). Fussell rightly notes, I think, that Sassoon creates a character in George Sherston who is "a more representative and ordinary man" than the "rich, literary, musical, arty, careerist" Sassoon was.⁸ But I disagree with Fussell's assessment of Sherston as a "sensitive but mindless athlete" (xx), though Sassoon's own comments in his literary autobiography *Siegfried's Journey: 1916-1920* (1946) probably contribute to this notion when he comments that Sherston "was a simplified version of my 'outdoor self.'"⁹

In *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, the formation of George Sherston's sporting character begins with his growing up in rural Kent and learning about fox-hunting and cricket from his Aunt Evelyn's groom, Tom Dixon. Filled with Dixon's stories about the Dumborough Hunt, Sherston imagines excelling in fox-hunting, rewarded for his athletic exploits with the fox's tail, long before he actually gets the chance to ride in an actual one: "I allowed my imagination to carry me on into fox-hunting adventures, during which I

distinguished myself supremely, and received the brush from the Master after a tremendous gallop over hill and vale" (12). When Sherston finally does get the chance to join a fox-hunt, accompanied by Dixon, he does not begin by distinguishing himself "supremely." Instead, when the riders around him "set off at a gallop," Sherston is "aware of nothing but the breathless flurry of being carried along" (23). To compound his sense of awkwardness, as Sherston later admires the coolness of a fellow youngster, Denis Milden—his "air of self-possessed efficiency," his "movements" "controlled and modest" but with "a suggestion of arrogance" in his "steady, unrecognizing stare" (25)—inevitably, Sherston shifts "uneasily in [his] saddle" and drops his "clumsy unpresentable old hunting-crop" (26).¹⁰ Despite this early embarrassment, by the end of the day Sherston finds himself caught up in the moment when a fox flushes from covert, and he redeems his reputation with some daring riding:

I knew nothing at all except that I was out of breath and that the air was rushing to meet me, but as I hung on to the reins I was aware that Mr Macdoggart was immediately in front of me. My attitude was an acquiescent one. I have always been inclined to accept life in the form in which it has imposed itself upon me, and on that particular occasion, no doubt, I just felt that I was 'in for it'. It did not so much as occur to me that in following Mr Macdoggart I was setting myself rather a high standard and when he disappeared over a hedge I took it for granted that I must do the same ... as [my horse] landed I left the saddle and flew over her head. (27)

Although Sherston feels "utterly ashamed" (28) for falling off his horse, the Master of the Hunt comments to Dixon, "I hear [Sherston's] quite a young thruster," and Milden later encourages him to attend the Heron's Gate hunt: "They say it's one of the best meets" (32). Sherston's willingness to accept being "in for it," to set himself "a high standard" for jumping in his first hunt, even though he fails, leads to admiration and encouragement from the Hunt Master and from the "controlled and modest" Milden. Already, Sherston is encouraged to embrace a sporting persona more daring and aggressive than the generally timid and reflective one readers encounter at the outset of the novel.

The adrenaline-producing runs and jumps in hunting become a central part of the appeal of fox-hunting for Sherston, and he soon becomes enamored with the point-to-point races (steeple-chasing) that often end the hunting season. The same was true for Sassoon. In fact, Wilson argues that Sassoon's reckless athleticism in fox-hunting revealed a character trait that wins him the nickname "Mad Jack" for his daring actions under fire in the War (34). For Sherston, after seeing college friend Stephen Colwood win the

Ringwell point-to-point race (97), competing in point-to-points becomes another priority, and with his new horse, Cockbird, he does just that at the next year's Ringwell race, beating Colwood and a pack of others, including the, to Sherston's eyes at least, "undefeatable" (169) Brownrigg, to win his first race. By the time they reach the last half mile of the course, according to Sherston, "it was obvious that Cockbird and Mikado were the only ones left in it. I was alone with the formidable Brownrigg. The difference between us was that he was quite self-contained and I was palpitating with excitement" (171). After nearly losing his balance on a mistimed jump, Sherston and Cockbird surge forward to victory:

life became lyrical, beatified, ecstatic, or anything you care to call it. To put it tersely, I just galloped past Brownrigg, sailed over the last two fences, and won by ten lengths. Stephen came in a bad third As for Cockbird, no words could ever express what we felt about him. He had become the equine equivalent of Divinity. (172)

As with his early experiences fox-hunting as a child, Sherston has again gained confidence through an experience "palpitating with excitement," his victory making life "lyrical, beatified, ecstatic." Earlier in the race, Colwood, seeing he cannot keep up, urges Sherston on, saying, "Go on, George; you've got 'em stone-cold" (171). Thanks to the support and training of Dixon, who Sherston knows is "relying on [him] to put up a creditable performance" (167), thanks to Colwood's encouragement and friendship, and thanks to a renewed friendship with Denis Milden when he becomes Master of the Ringwell Hunt, Sherston has truly become a "fox-hunting man." As when he became a "thruster" with the Dumborough Hunt, in the Ringwell point-to-point, Sherston responds positively to the pressure to succeed in sport, exceeding the "undefeatable" Brownrigg. This testing aspect of sporting competition will stand him well on the cricket pitch as well.

The most important cricketing moment for Sherston in *Memoirs of the Fox-Hunting Man* occurs when he returns home from "Balboro" (41) on his school holidays and Dixon gets him a place on the Butley village team for "The Flower Show Match" against Rotherden, "the match of the year" (42). In a similar manner to Sherston's hunting experiences, Sherston is tested in a competition for the first time under the eyes of a sportsman he admires, for Dixon "was one of the mainstays of the village team—a left-hand bat and a steady right-arm bowler" (42). In fact, as Butley approaches victory, Sherston becomes Dixon's batting partner, but after Dixon "smote [a ball] clean out of the ground," he is bowled out, and the pressure to win falls on the schoolboy Sherston to score the deciding run (61). As with his hunting experiences, the pressure to succeed brings a burst of adrenaline and focus:

The game was now a tie. Through some obscure psychological process my whole being now became clarified. I remembered Shrewsbury's century [in professional cricket] and became bold as brass. There was the enormous auctioneer with the ball in his hand. And there I calmly resolved to look lively and defeat his destructive aim. The ball hit my bat and trickled slowly up the pitch. 'Come on!' I shouted and Peter came gallantly on. Crump was so taken by surprise that we were safe home before he'd picked up the ball. And that was the end of the Flower Show Match. (61)

Sherston didn't score a century, but pluck and hustle compensate for the cricket equivalent of a dribbler in baseball, as Sherston urges his new batting partner to come "gallantly" on.

With the advent of the War, Sherston, like so many others, immediately enlists and "fe[els] a hero ... lying awake ... on the first night of the war," but within weeks, homesick, he reflects on the loss of sport in his life: "There was no hope of sitting by the fire with a book after a good day's hunting" (233). He then reflects on his final cricket match: "playing for the Rector's eleven against the village, and how old Colonel Hesmon had patted me on the back because I'd enlisted on the Saturday before. Outwardly the match had been normally conducted, but there was something in the sunshine which none of us had ever known before that calamitous Monday" (233). Yet his sporting experiences help sustain Sherston in the Army. At Clitherland Camp, near Liverpool, where he receives training before posting, Sherston may regret that he lacks a voice of command of "fire and ferocity" such as fellow officer Mansfield manages, despite Sherston "having acquired a passable 'view holloa' during [his] fox-hunting life" (248). But he still finds solace in "batting and bowling at the nets for an hour" for "the War hadn't killed cricket yet" (249). Sherston also befriends another officer, Sandhurst-trained Dick Tiltwood, who had "hunted very little" but "regarded it as very important" (250).

In the end Sherston, Mansfield and Tiltwood are all stationed together in France, and Sherston continues Tiltwood's hunting education by taking him on imaginary hunting forays reminiscent, to some degree, of the ones the boyhood Sherston took before being initiated by Dixon (and Milden) in his own first hunt:

... it wasn't easy to think of dying Still less so when Dick was with me, and we were having an imitation hunt. I used to pretend to be hunting a pack of hounds, with him as my whipper-in. Assuming a Denis Milden manner (Denis was at Rouen with the cavalry ...) I would go solemnly through a wood, cheering imaginary hounds. After an imaginary

fox had been found, away we'd scuttle, looking in vain for a fence to jump, making imaginary casts after an imaginary check, and losing our fox when the horses had done enough galloping. An imaginary kill didn't appeal to me, somehow Dick enjoyed these outings enormously and was much impressed by my hunting noises. The black mare [I rode] seemed to enjoy it also.

Thus, in those delusive surroundings, I reverted fictitiously to the jaunts and jollities of peace time, fabricating for my young friend a light-hearted fragment of the sport which he had not lived long enough to share. It was queer, though, when we met some of the black-bearded Bengal Lancers who were quartered in one of the neighboring villages. What were they doing among those wooded ridges, with the little roads winding away over the slopes toward a yellow sunset and the nowhere of life deprived to live out its allotted span? (266-67)

This rich passage reinforces the theme of escaping war through sport that is pervasive in *The Memoirs of George Sherston*. Sherston initiates Tiltwood in the rituals of the hunt, complete with dragging the covert for scent of the fox, a la Master of the Hunt Milden, making the appropriate hunting noises, a few "view halloas"—no doubt with Marsden-like command in a hunting context—only hesitating from imagining in detail the eventual killing of the fox. And to dampen this "fictitiously" "light-hearted fragment of the sport" and their consequent escape from the War, and its, at this point, nearby front, the passage closes with the "queer" encounter of Bengal Lancers, mounted for war duty and definitely not for sport. This is a powerful moment in the novel, especially since by the close of *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, Tom Dixon, Steven Colwood and Dick Tiltwood all have died at the front, of pneumonia, in the case of Dixon,¹¹ and in battle in the case of the other two.¹²

It is important to note at this point, however, how differently Sassoon described the imaginary hunt in his own journal of the time, for though Sassoon at times gives almost a word-by-word transcription from journal to novel—inviting critics such as Egremont and Fussell to see Sherston, respectively, as his "alter ego" or as the "mindless athlete" half of his double self; in this instance and in a number of others, Sassoon employs the craft of fiction to create a fictional character out of his own experiences. Sassoon's journal entry for December 8, 1915 gives this account:

Fine weather. South wind. Did outpost scheme on the hills north of the village. After lunch I rode the black pony for one and a half hours, out beyond Warlus, over the ploughlands and hills and made hunting noises and was quite happy with

the corky little animal under me going so nicely. Saw no one but a few Bengal Lancers, very fine fellows, well mounted.
(Sassoon, Siegfried Sassoon Diaries: 1915-1918 25)

Although this journal entry includes Sassoon's riding "the black pony," making "hunting noises" and seeing "a few Bengal Lancers," the autobiographical kernel of a novel scene, in other words, the powerful scene in the novel describing his imaginary hunt in detail, while teaching a companion who soon after dies at the front, and the "queer"—because too real and not imaginary—encounter of Bengal Lancers, making the country hunting scene vanish before the menace of war—"the nowhere of life reprieved to live out its allotted span"—this is the crafting of a fictive world in which George Sherston has become his own character, not simply the "alter ego" of Siegfried Sassoon.

After hearing of Dixon's death and before the death of Tiltwood, Sherston is sent to England on a short leave when heavy snow "knocked my hopes of hunting on the head" (179). At home at his Aunt Evelyn's, he reflects as well on the dwindling importance of hunting to his life: "Looking round the room at the enlarged photographs of my hunters, I realized that my past was wearing a bit thin. The War seemed to have made up its mind to obliterate all those early adventures of mine. Point-to-point cups shone, but without conviction. And Dixon was dead" (280). The War overshadows trophies and memorabilia of his hunting days and point-to-point victories, especially as home reminds him of the mentoring groom also taken by the War. He sees the irony too in Stephen Colwood's renewed subscription to the Ringwood Hunt: "the late Mr S. Colwood had subscribed ten pounds. He must have sent it early in September, just before he was killed. No doubt he wrote the cheque in a day dream about hunting ..." (286). Certainly, in the second and third volumes of *The Memoirs of George Sherston*, Sherston at times wonders what place sport has in the midst of war, but again and again, *he* will "day dream about hunting," as he imagines Stephen had done; he will also draw on that experience in the War and use real sport as an escape from thoughts of the War as well.

Early in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Sherston, having just returned to his Battalion from a training course, once again links sport with war as he contemplates an expected "Raid" in the battle of the Somme:

Six years before I had been ambitious of winning races because that seemed a significant way of demonstrating my equality with my contemporaries. And now I wanted to make the World War serve a similar purpose, for if only I could get a Military Cross I should feel comparatively safe and confident. (At the time the Doctor was the only man in the Battalion who'd got one.) Trench warfare was mostly monotonous

drudgery, and I preferred the exciting idea of crossing the mine-craters and getting into the German front line. (17)

When last on leave at home, Sherston had noted that his point-to-point trophies had shone “without conviction.” In anticipation of the raid, which had been in the planning for some time, his ambition for “winning races,” for earning the accolades and hardware that come with them, has been supplanted by the desire to prove his capabilities, his worth, through earning a Military Cross.¹³ Like Sassoon himself, Sherston earns that medal through bravery while trying to recover dead and wounded from the Raid, which had been repelled (26).

A later sortie in which Sherston single-handedly captures a trench at Mametz Wood while trying to take out a sniper killing his men also reveals the “Mad Jack” attitude Wilson attributes to Sassoon’s own reckless athleticism. Sherston narrates,

Then I rushed at the bank, vaguely expecting some sort of scuffle with my imagined enemy. I had lost my temper with the man who had shot Kettle; quite unexpectedly, I found myself looking down into a well-conducted trench with a great many Germans in it. Fortunately for me, they were already retreating. It had not occurred to them that they were being attacked by a single fool I slung a few more bombs, but they fell short of the clumsy field-grey figures, some of whom half turned to fire their rifles over the left shoulder as they ran across the open toward the wood, while a crowd of jostling helmets vanished along the trench. Idiotically elated, I stood there with my finger in my right ear and emitted a series of ‘view-holloas’ (a gesture which ought to win the approval of people who still regard war as a form of outdoor sport). Having thus failed to commit suicide, I proceeded to occupy the trench—that is to say, I sat down on the fire-step, very much out of breath, and hoped to God the Germans wouldn’t come back again. (67)

Like rushing recklessly over a blind hedge in a point-to-point race, Sherston has managed to startle the enemy into retreating with a few bombs, the “field-grey figures” unaware “they were being attacked by a single fool”! Note that as soon as the Germans abandon the trench, Sherston, “idiotically elated,” reverts to his hunting self, emitting “a series of ‘view-holloas’”¹⁴ in celebration and, perhaps, in defiance. Sherston’s crying “view-halloa”—indicating he’s sighted the fox—does not, of course, bring him supporting troops, and he eventually withdraws from the trench to a safer position. In his journals Sassoon describes the same attack, which took place on July 6,

1916—"I chucked four Mills bombs into the trench and to my surprise fifty or sixty ... ran away like hell into Mametz Wood" (89)—without referencing sport at all, but in a letter to Edward Marsh, Sassoon does report that he "chucked bombs and made hunting noises"¹⁵ in capturing the trench, which earned him recommendation for a further decoration (Wilson 166). Over a year earlier (Mar. 31, 1915) Sassoon had written in his journal,

Tonight I'm going to try and spot one of their working-parties and chuck some bombs at them. Better to get a sling at them in the open—even if on one's belly—than to sit here and have a great thing drop on one's head. I found it most exhilarating—just like starting for a race. Great thing is to get as many sensations as possible. No good being out here unless one takes the full amount of risks, and I want to get a good name in the Battalion, for the sake of poetry and poets, whom I represent." (51)

This passage provides an interesting link between the passage in which Sherston desires war accolades similar to racing cups and his later desire to take risks which can lead to "idiotic elation" when successful. Here is further evidence of Sassoon's crafting fiction. He incorporates the sporting aspect of racing and gets "as many sensations as possible" into Sherston's single-handed capture of the German trench, but he also strategically omits this particular journal entry of March 1915 from the novel and makes no reference to fighting "for the sake of poetry and poets." As Fussell points out, Sherston is meant to be a "representative and ordinary man" (xx).

Escape through sport is a central theme of *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, both when soldiers are in France, at the front or in relief camps, and when they are home on leave, Sherston having spent extended time at home twice in this volume due to illness and wounding. As his battalion is repositioning for "the Spring Offensive" at Arras, Sherston remembers walking with the "second in command," who "consol[es] himself with reminiscences of cricket and hunting" (150).¹⁶ But the difficulty of escaping for long through thoughts of sport is perhaps best illustrated by this passage in the novel:

the thought of the cook suggested the gardener clumping in with a trug of vegetables, and the gardener suggested birds in the strawberry nets, and altogether there was no definite end to that sort of day dream of an England where there was no war on and the village cricket ground was still being mown by a man who didn't know that he would some day join 'the Buffs', migrate to Mesopotamia, and march to Bagdad. (73)

Similar to Stephen Colwood's "day dream" of subscribing to the Ringwood Hunt in case he returns home on leave or because the War has ended,

Sherston's "sort of day dream" is of an England *before* the War when the cricket groundskeeper has no thought of migrating to the Middle East to wage war. At another point, Sherston is taking part in an impromptu cricket match when an order to march abruptly stops it:

we were having an eleven-a-side single-brazier cricket match on a flat piece of ground in the chateau garden. The sun was shining between snow showers, and most of the men were watching from the bank above. One of the Company Sergeant-Majors was playing a lively innings, though the ball was beginning to split badly. Then a whistle blew and the match ended abruptly. Less than an hour later the Battalion marched away from Basseux. (155)

Not just Sherston but "most of the men" in his Company are able to escape into a cricket match and their Sergeant-Major's "lively innings" until the whistle blows to end it. Another time, "something in the sober twilight" reminds Sherston "of April evenings in England and the Butley cricket field where a few of us had been having our first knock at the nets. The cricket season had begun But the Company had left the shell-pitted road and was going uphill across open ground" (160).

Perhaps the most poignant passage of all regarding the loss of cricket seasons to the War occurs when Sherston, on leave, glimpses the Kent County Cricket Grounds in a neglected state:

I have seldom felt more dejected than I did when I walked out of Dumbridge Station and looked over the fence of the County Cricket Ground. The afternoon was desolately fine and the ground, with its pavilion and enclosures, looked blighted and forsaken. Here, in pre-eminently happier times, I had played in many a club match and had attentively watched the varying fortunes of the Kent Eleven; but now no one had even troubled to wind up the pavilion clock. (233-234)

The county cricket ground is "desolate," the pavilion clock has stopped, literally and figuratively, and no one has "troubled to wind [it] up," yet the Battalion will stop to watch an impromptu match with a charcoal brazier for a wicket. This sets up an interesting conflict between the hope of peace and a return to past pursuits and the reality that whistles will blow to announce a march or an assault in the trenches, so that, in the bleakest moments a soldier may wonder if anyone will be left to tend to cricket pitches and wind back up the clocks, a modernist theme surely, and one which seems most clearly to separate the fictional Sherston from his autobiographical progenitor. It also reveals the reflective side of Sherston's character, more than a "mindless athlete," after all.¹⁷

An entry in Sassoon's journal shortly after the Mametz Wood raid perhaps underscores this dichotomy best. Sassoon feels at this point that he will not go back to his life as a country sporting gentleman (although he actually does continue to hunt and play cricket well beyond the end of the War¹⁸). On July 16, 1916, ten days after his capture of that German trench, Sassoon wrote,

It's a drizzly cool evening and the Battalion are still up by Mametz Wood and there's no fresh news to speak of. And the others are sitting about the tent talking futile stuff, and the servants are singing together rather nicely by their light shell-box-wood fire outside in the gusty twilight.

And I'm thinking of England, and summer evenings after cricket-matches, and sunset above the tall trees, and village-streets in the dusk, and the clatter of a brake driving home. Perhaps I've made a blob, but we've won the match, and there's another match to-morrow—Blue Mantles against some cheery public-school side, and there's the usual Nevill Ground wicket, and I'll be in first—and old Kelsey and Osmund Scott and all the rest of them. So things went three years ago; and it's all dead and done with. I'll never be there again. If I'm lucky and get through alive, there's another sort of life waiting for me. Travels, adventures, and poetry; and anything but the old groove of cricket and hunting, and dreaming in Weirleigh garden. When war ends I'll be at the crossroads; and I know the path to choose ...

Blighty! What a world of idle nothingness the name stands for; and what a world of familiar delightfulness! O God, when shall I get out of this limbo? For I'm never alone here—never my old self—always acting a part—that of cheery, reckless sportsman—out for a dip at the Bosches. But the men love me, that's one great consolation. (94)

At another point in his journal (Jan. 15, 1917), while back at Litherland Camp (Clitherland of *Memoirs*), Sassoon is still clearly enjoying hunting—describing, for example, a two-hour chase as “Quite good fun but a bad fox” (118)—yet after staying overnight at Wistaston Hall and dancing at Alvaston, he makes it clear he still relishes the sport of hunting but not the gentrified society it's a part of:

what a decayed society, hanging blindly on to the shreds of its traditions. The wet, watery-green meadows and straggling bare hedges and grey winding lanes; the cry of hounds, and thud of hoofs, and people galloping bravely along all around

me; and the ride home with hounds in the chilly dusk—those are *real* things. But comfort and respectable squiredom and the futile chatter of women, and their man-hunting glances, and the pomposity of port-wine-drinking buffers—what’s all that but emptiness? (118)

The adrenaline-producing hunt, “galloping bravely,” and the calming ride home in the country with the hounds, which he often references in his journals and in the novels,¹⁹ these are sporting moments to cherish, for both Sassoon and Sherston. But the “Mad Jack” role-playing soldier Sassoon puts on for the men under his command, which they love in him, the Sassoon who is “always acting a part—that of cheery, reckless sportsman—out for a dip at the Bosches,” when he’d rather be alone, crafting poems, this is George Sherston to a tee, not acting a part but actualizing it, the sporting character Sassoon created out of the kernels of his own sports and war experiences.

By the end of *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Sherston (like Sassoon), has publicly protested the War and refused to serve further, as well as thrown his M.C. ribbon “into the Mersey” while conceding one of his “point-to-point cups would have served [his] purpose more satisfyingly, and they’d meant much the same to [him] as [his] Military Cross” (241). Such actions lead to Sherston being sent to a “shell-shock hospital,” Slateford War Hospital, near Edinburgh (3), as the final volume of the trilogy, *Sherston’s Progress*, opens. At Slateford, with the encouragement of Dr. Rivers (5), Sherston escapes from troubles by playing golf frequently:

in that fourth October of the War I was a better golfer than I’d ever been before—and, I may add, a better one than I’ve ever been since.

I must admit, though, that I wasn’t worrying much about the War when I’d just hit a perfect tee-shot up the charming vista which was the fairway to the first green at Mortonhall. How easy it felt! I scarcely seemed to be gripping the club at all. Afternoon sunshine was slanting through the golden-brown beeches and at last I knew what it was like to hit the ball properly. (21)

By putting energy into improving his game, with the help of a fellow patient,²⁰ Sherston progresses from waking in the morning certain he will die or be maimed in the War to seeing a golf outing as “not a penance” but “a reward” (6). And with his improving game come moments of perfection when a drive leaves him not “worrying much about the War.”

Symbolically, the sport Rivers has encouraged Sherston to pursue, golf, helps him reconcile his anti-war feelings, his fears of maiming or death, with his expected “duty” as an officer in the Royal Flintshire Fusiliers. While

cleaning his clubs one evening, Sherston begins to meditate on his choice to refuse to serve further in the War, and this act of cleaning his equipment serves as an epiphanic moment for him:

While I continued to clean my clubs some inward monitor became uncomfortably candid and remarked "This heroic gesture of yours—"making a separate peace"—is extremely convenient for you, isn't it?"

Everything would be different if I went back to France now—different even from what it was last April. Gas was becoming more and more of a problem—one might almost say, more of a nightmare. *Hadn't I just spent an afternoon playing golf* with a man who'd lost half his company in a gas-bombardment a couple of months ago? ... It seems to amount to this, I ruminated, *twirling my putter as I polished its neck*—that I'm exiled from the troops as a whole rather than from my former fellow-officers and men. And I visualized an endless column of marching soldiers, singing 'Tipperary' on their way up from the back-areas The idea of going back there was indeed like death.

I suppose I ought to have concluded my strenuous wool-gatherings by adding that death is preferable to dishonor. But I didn't By these rather peculiar methods I argued it out with myself in the twilight. And when the windows were dark and I could see the stars, *I still sat there with my golf bag between my knees*, alone with what now seemed an irrefutable assurance that going back to the War as soon as possible was my only chance of peace. (22-26, my italics)

Here, the simple ritual of cleaning his clubs at the end of a day of golf, his golf bag still "between his knees" at the end of his ruminations, helps Sherston decide that returning to the War is the only way he can achieve "peace," not a collective peace, of course, nor a "separate" one, but peace of mind, the willingness to face his fear of death and, as an officer to lead men who of course face the same fear.

Rivers also helps Sherston feel there is more to life after the War than point-to-point races and cricket matches, that Sherston can contribute "useful" achievements:

My talks with Rivers had increased my awareness of the limitations of my pre-war life. He had shown that he believed me to be capable of achieving something useful. He had set me on the right road and made me feel that if the War were to end to-morrow I should be starting on a new life's journey

in which point-to-point races and cricket matches would no longer be supremely important and a strenuous effort must be made to take some small share in the real work of the world.
(33)

Having resolved to return to service and been passed for “general service abroad” (38), Sherston returns to Clitherland Camp and then is posted to Ireland before being sent to Palestine and finally France again.

As it turns out, before leaving England and especially while in Ireland, Sherston rediscovers his love of fox-hunting and experiences again the excitement of the chase and its contingent value as an escape mechanism. On a brief leave in Sussex, Sherston relates one particular “authentically jolly” hunt:

I can remember one good hunt along the vale below the downs. I hadn't felt so happy since I didn't know when, I thought; which merely meant that while galloping and jumping on a good horse everything else was forgotten—for forty-five minutes of the best, anyhow. And there was no sense in feeling morbid about the dead; they were well out of the war, anyway; and they wouldn't grudge me my one good day in the vale. (48-49)

In Ireland too, he seems to seize every opportunity to be hunting, particularly with the Limerick Hounds, where “Everyone rode as if there wasn't a worry in the world except hounds worrying foxes. Never had I galloped over such richly verdant fields or seen such depth of blue in distant hills” (52). His time with the Limerick Hounds also restores his faith in sport, for “these were happy times, and while they lasted I refused to contemplate my Egyptian future” (61). On his final hunt before departing, Sherston says, “We had a scrambling hunt over a rough country, and I had all the fun I could find, but every stone wall I jumped felt like good-bye for ever to ‘this happy breed of men, this little world’, in other words the Limerick Hunt, which had restored my faith in my capacity to be heedlessly happy. How kind they were, those friendly fox-hunters, and how I hated leaving them” (70). More than an escape from personal troubles and anxiety over the War, fox-hunting has gained a restorative power, rekindled Sherston's “faith” in the ability to be “heedlessly happy.”²¹

While Sassoon records in his journal many references to hunts during his time in Ireland and that they were enjoyable—“Best hunt I've had since the war” (207), “Very amusing day” (207), “Happy days” (209),—and while he also completes one of his finest hunting poems—“Together”²²—during his stay in Ireland,²³ the journal does not have the same sense of closure for Sassoon as *Sherston's Progress* has for George Sherston. Sporting references

become less frequent both in *Sherston's Progress* and in Sassoon's journal entries with his final deployments in Palestine and then France. Hunting is rarely mentioned, though Sherston does have a conversation with a fellow sportsman on the troop ship carrying them from Alexandria to Marseille:

Then my mental equilibrium is restored by a man I used to hunt with in Kent, who comes along and talks about the old days and what fun we used to have. But there is a look in his eyes which reminds me of something. It comes back to me quite clearly; he looked like that when he was waiting to go down to the post for his first point-to-point. And he told me afterwards that he'd been so nervous that he really didn't think he could face doing it again. And being a shrewd sort of character, he never did. (96-97)

Thinking of fox-hunting again is linked with restoring Sherston's mood, his "mental equilibrium" while he also becomes a reflective observer of his companion, recognizing a nervousness that kept him from trying more than one point-to-point race; whereas Sherston thrived on the adrenaline-pumping races, his friend apparently did not relish such challenges after trying once. In a similar vein, Sherston watches other officers concentrating on their card games on board the ship and senses such a "sporting" escape does not really resolve their anxieties about enemy submarines:

I listen to the chink of coins and the jargon of their ejaculative comments on the game, while dusky stewards continually bring them drinks. These are the distractions which drug their exasperation and alarm; for like the boat they are straining forward to safety, environed by the menace of submarines. (98)

As with other sports, Sherston also comes to admire the athleticism displayed by various soldiers while they play football. Of Stonethwaite, he remarks, "I remember watching him playing football at Kantara, and he seemed the embodiment of youthful enterprise" (111). Similarly in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, he had admired David Cromlech, for being "well enough to be able to play an energetic game of football, in spite of having had a bit of shell through his right lung" (107).

During his final deployments to Palestine and France, Sassoon recorded similar sports passages in his journals to the ones he has Sherston relate in the novel—the card-players nervous about submarines, the individual feats of football players—but he makes no mention of point-to-point races or his friend's nervousness when he meets him. Instead, he wonders, not surprisingly, whether they will ever meet again: "Saw Charles Wiggin last night [Apr. 25, 1918] We talked of old hunting days and were very pleased

with life and old brandy supplied by his hosts Charles is just the same nice creature as he was four years ago. Wonder if I'll ever see him again" (239). What I find particularly interesting, though, are the sporting references made in the journals that Sassoon chooses to omit from the final novel of his trilogy. Part of Sherston's "Progress" is to put aside sport, and this is particularly true of "Final Experiences," the last section of the novel, about Sherston's final months at the western front in France. Some of Sassoon's journals covering July to October, 1918, were lost, so Sassoon, writing the novel some fifteen years later, had to rely on his memories and letters to complete Sherston's experience. But even before those months occur in the novel, Sassoon appears to be carefully crafting his fictional character's progress to be different from his own in terms of sports, as evidenced by his rarely thinking of hunting and cricket as he used to do. After returning to the French front in "Final Experiences," Sherston remarks,

Having ceased to wonder when the War would be over, I couldn't imagine myself anywhere else but on active service, and I was no longer able to indulge in reveries about being at home. When I came out this last time I had turned my back on everything connected with peace-time enjoyment. I suppose this meant that I was making a forced effort to keep going till the end. Like many people, I had a feeling that ordinary human existence was being converted into a sort of nightmare. Things were being said and done which would have been considered madness before the War. The effects of the War had been the reverse of ennobling, it seemed. Social historians can decide whether I am wrong about it.

Anyhow, as I was saying, I probably thought vaguely about those kind hunting people at Limerick, and speculated on such problems as what The Mister did with himself during the summer months (137-138)

Sherston tells himself he must "no longer ... indulge in reveries about being at home," reveries which often in the past centered on losing himself in the action of the hunt, on riding homeward with the huntsman or with the cricket team after a day's sport. Although "the effects of the War had been the reverse of ennobling," Sherston had determined on that night at Slatford War Hospital when he cleaned his golf clubs and reflected on what he should do that "going back to the War as soon as possible was [his] only chance of peace." He might have lapses when he thinks "vaguely about those kind hunting people at Limerick" and what "The Mister" did for sport in the summer, but his thoughts remain centered now on losing himself in the action of the War.

This was not exactly the case for Sassoon himself. On Mar. 31, 1918, for example, while at a camp near Ramallah, Sassoon is cheered by a letter from Ireland full of hunting news: "I found a mail and a letter from Dorothea Conyers, the good soul, full of Limerick hunting, and hounds flying over the big green banks and gray walls" (227). And on June 10, in France, Sassoon feels "homesick" after receiving news of the Southdown Hunt: "A dull, rainy morning. Among my letters I find the Southdown Hunt balance sheet. (The late) Capt. G. S. Harbord gave L10. The hunt accounts always make me homesick" (266). Again, the Southdown Hunt account reminds him of the death of his friend Gordon Harbord, model for Stephen Colwood in *The Memoirs of George Sherston*. But only two days later, he reads of another companion's death, a man who had fought with him at Mametz Wood and had gone for his first hunt with Sassoon in Ireland:

After lunch to-day I glanced at *The Times*—killed in action Lt. C. N. Dobell, R.W.F. Little Colin who was with me at Mametz Wood. And I took him out hunting with the Limerick Hounds last February, his first real day hunting. 'It can't be true; it can't be true,' I thought. But it's there in print.

Fool-poems in the *Spectator* about 'our forgotten dead'. 'We must live more nobly, remembering those who fell', etc. Will *that* comfort Colin, or his girl? He wanted life; fox-hunting, and marriage; and peace-soldiering. Now he's lost it all; aged twenty-one. (267)

As Sassoon asserts, Colin Dobell valued life and a future of fox-hunting, marriage, and peace-soldiering over being remembered or inspiring others to "live more nobly."

In *Siegfried's Journey*, the autobiography Sassoon later wrote about this period in his life, he claims Sherston "was a simplified version of my 'outdoor self.' He was denied the complex advantage of being a soldier-poet" (103). It is true Sherston does not draft and compose poems, as Sassoon did in his journals. But this description of Sherston as a "simplified version" of Sassoon may have contributed to the sense that Sherston was either the "alter ego" of Sassoon, as Egremont would have it, or the "sensitive but mindless athlete," as Fussell would have it. Sassoon has created his own fictional character, with a character arc which in the end does not exactly parallel Sassoon's. *Sherston's Progress* may not be, as some have suggested, as effectively realized as the earlier novels, perhaps in part due to the crucial missing journals of Sassoon's last months in the War. During this time, Sherston, as did Sassoon,²⁴ sees action once more at the front and comes away wounded one last time. Before going out on patrol with a plan to attack a machine gun nest "firing outside [the German] trench with the intention of enfilading us" (136), Sherston reflects, "To be outside the trench with the possibility of

bumping into an enemy patrol was at any rate an antidote to my suppressed weariness of the entire bloody business. I wanted to do something definite, and perhaps get free of the whole thing. It was the old story; I could only keep going by doing something spectacular" (137). Once in No Man's Land, Sherston and Corporal Davies crawl less than fifty yards from the target and throw their bombs at it. Although he utters no "view-halloas," Sherston certainly does describe the same sort of adrenaline-pumping excitement he has felt on so many occasions, and that energy has sustained him through so many battles in the War:

we crawled a bit nearer, loosed off the lot, and retreated with the rapidity of a pair of scared badgers ... and when we were more than half-way home I dropped into the sunken road, and only the fact that I was out on a patrol prevented me from slapping my leg with a loud guffaw. (139)

So exciting is this moment that he wants to slap his leg and laugh, but though caution keeps him from doing that, soon after recovering his breath, Sherston has the temerity to remove his helmet, stand up and peer back at the German line, only to get sniped by friendly fire! This would be the last action Sherston (and Sassoon) would see in the War.

Sassoon's "Together," the final poem in his collection *Counter-Attack* (1918), was written with his hunting friend Gordon Harbord's then recent death in the War in mind, and ironically, just after his first hunt with Colin Dobell, who would also die in the War. The actions in the poem's opening stanza in some ways encapsulate the excitement of the hunt, allowing one to forget oneself, to escape into the moment, that seems so central to the character of George Sherston, yet it also contains passages reflecting on the close of the hunt, the slow ride home, when companions lost to the War will be remembered:

Together
 Splashing along the boggy woods all day,
 And over brambled hedge and holding clay,
 I shall not think of him:
 But when the watery fields grow brown and dim,
 And hounds have lost their fox, and horses tire,
 I know that he'll be with me on my way
 Home through the darkness to the evening fire.²⁵

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell asserts that "the further personal written materials move from the form of the daily diary, the closer they approach the figurative and the fictional,"²⁶ yet in his "Afterword," he implies Sassoon's novels are "pseudo-memoirs."²⁷ While it is true that Sassoon relied heavily on his war journals to supply a chronological timeline

and details from his own life in the crafting of *The Memoirs of George Sherston*, as I've shown, close comparison of those journal entries with the novels themselves reveals Sassoon carefully "moving from" diary entry to fiction in crafting George Sherston. Sassoon creates a sporting character who discovers a love for action that helps him cope not only with the challenges of fox-hunt jumps and point-to-point dashes, or with the need to score a decisive run in cricket, but also with the adrenaline-producing challenges of battle at the front. Siegfried Sassoon's journals and later autobiographies show that though at times he himself found an outlet for escape through sport, his journal and poetry writing particularly sustained him in the stress of war. George Sherston, by contrast, finds self-actualization through sport. For Sherston, sport is restorative, at times a means of escape, as when he conducts imaginary hunts with a companion; at times a means of inspiration, as when he captures a German trench, single-handedly, making hunting noises as he watches the enemy retreat.

Notes

1. As early as 1931, Sassoon's novel was being treated as autobiography by E.J. Harvey Darton in *From Surtees to Sassoon*: "there is no reason to doubt that the *Fox-Hunting Man* is a semi-objective account of his own life up to about 1915" (Darton 84)
2. Egremont 21 and Roberts xi
3. "What [Sassoon] has done in *The Memoirs of George Sherston* is to objectify one-half of the creature leading this double life [of "horseman and artist"], the half identifiable as the sensitive but mindless athlete, and separate it from the other half, that of the much-cossetted aspirant poet" (Fussell xx).
4. Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: Soldier, Poet, Lover, Friend* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2014)
5. *The Old Century and Seven More Years* (1938), *The Weald of Youth* (1942), *Siegfried's Progress* (1945)
6. Nichols 1-2
7. *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries: 1915-1918* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), Rupert Hart-Davis, Ed. Unedited electronic scans of the journals are available as well at the University of Cambridge Digital Collection: <http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/sassoon> (Sassoon, Sassoon Journals).
8. Similarly, Michael Thorpe notes, of Sherston in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, "there is no doubt that Sassoon wishes to portray—as in *Memories of a Fox-Hunting Man*—a character

with whom many readers might find it possible to identify themselves" (Thorpe 96)

9. Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey: 1916-1920* 103
10. In his biography of Sassoon, Egremont cites this incident in the novel as evidence of Sassoon's awkwardness at first seeing Norman Loder, the model for Denis Milden, at Sassoon's first hunt: "[Loder] had confidence founded on impeccable connections and quiet skill as a rider. To the shy Sassoon ... this boy, although only a year older, was awe-inspiring. His immaculate turn-out and 'steady, unrecognizing stare' somehow made Siegfried drop his own 'unpresentable old hunting-crop' and dismount to pick it up" (21). Using passages from a novel, even an autobiographical one, to explain the life of Sassoon is a good example of how critics have had difficulty interpreting George Sherston as a literary character separate from his author.
11. "I received a letter in reply to the one I had sent Dixon. Someone informed me that Sergeant Dixon had died of pneumonia" (278).
12. Colwood "was killed" (286) early in the fall; Tiltwood "had been hit in the throat by a rifle bullet while out with the wiring-party, and had died at the dressing-station a few hours afterwards" (283).
13. Thorpe asserts Sherston "wishes to lead the raid just as, formerly, it had been his ambition to win steeplechases" (98).
14. For a more comic example, Capt. Sir E. Hulse reports giving "one loud 'View Halloa'" at the sight of a rabbit in No Man's Land during the Christmas truce of 1914 when "one and all, British and Germans, rushed about giving chase" (Housman n.p.), as quoted in (Darton 12)
15. Hassall 398
16. In his Journal entry for April 6, 1917, he writes, "And I was walking with nice old Major Poore, and talking about cricket and hunting" (150).
17. For another example of Sherston's reflective, literary narration, see Nils Clauson's "Sassoon's Prose Trench Lyric and the Romantic Tradition: The Ending of *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*" (Clauson).
18. By 1920, Sassoon had bought another hunter, "one of the best he would ever ride," was thinking again about entering point-to-point races (Wilson 408) and, after a long hiatus, "continued to hunt into the mid-1930s" (Wilson 409). Sassoon would also continue to play cricket into the 1960s (Wilson 564).
19. Sassoon writes in his journal on December 17, 1915, for example, "oh the quiet winter mornings when I rode to meet the hounds—and the dear nights when the tired horse walked beside me. Days at Ringmer—days at Witherley—good rides in Kent and Sussex—and the music of the hounds in the autumn woods—and talks by the fire with good old Gordon, and my Nimrod. Good-bye to life, good-bye to Sussex" (27). And in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Sherston, after a day with the Cheshire Hunt, will comment, "the contrast between Clitherland Camp and the Cheshire Saturday country was like the difference between War and Peace—especially when—at the end of a good day—I jogged a few miles homeward with the hounds, conversing with the cheery huntsman in my best pre-war style" (109-110).

20. The man I played with most days was an expert ... he was exercising a greatly improving influence on my iron shots" (10).
21. I disagree then with Thorpe's assessment of the Irish hunting scenes as "responsible for the diminished intensity of this final volume of the trilogy, when it is compared with its predecessors" (n. 10, 103).
22. Published in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918), "Together" is the closing poem of the collection and makes no direct reference to the War, but according to Wilson it references a hunting companion, Gordon Harbord, who had died in August, 1917 (Wilson 251).
23. Wilson claims the poem was drafted in December 1917 (252) at Clitherland, but it is dated Jan. 30 in the journal and occurs immediately after the journal entry of Jan. 30, 1918, describing a hunt with the Limerick Hounds (207).
24. Of this incident, Sassoon wrote in *Siegfried's Journey*, "That inveterate memoirizer George Sherston has already narrated a sequence of infantry experiences—from the end of 1917—which were terminated, on July 13th, by a bullet wound in the head. His experiences were mine, so I am spared the effort of describing them (Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey: 1916-1920* 103)
25. The second stanza reads:
 He's jumped each stile along the glistening lanes;
 His hand will be upon the mud-soaked reins;
 Hearing the saddle creak,
 He'll wonder if the frost will come next week.
 I shall forget him in the morning light;
 And while we gallop on he will not speak:
 But at the stable-door he'll say good-night. (Sassoon, *Counter-Attack* 52)
26. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* 310
27. "I am talking about infantry lieutenants Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, and Edmund Blunden, authors of eminently readable memoirs and pseudo-memoirs about their unforgettable military experiences" (336).

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