

# Dulce et Decorum Est

By [Wilfred Owen](#)

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—  
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*

NOTES: Latin phrase is from the Roman poet Horace: "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

Source: *Poems* (Viking Press, 1921)

Thought to have been written between 8 October 1917 and March, 1918

## **Notes on Dulce et Decorum Est**

1. DULCE ET DECORUM EST - the first words of a Latin saying (taken from an ode by Horace). The words were widely understood and often quoted at the start of the First World War. They mean "It is sweet and right." The full saying ends the poem:  
Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori - it is sweet and right to die  
for your country. In other words, it is a wonderful and great honour  
to fight and die for your country.
2. Flares - rockets which were sent up to burn with a brilliant glare to light up men and other targets in the area between the front lines (See illustration, page 118 of Out in the Dark.)
3. Distant rest - a camp away from the front line where exhausted soldiers might rest for a few days, or longer
4. Hoots - the noise made by the shells rushing through the air
5. Outstripped - outpaced, the soldiers have struggled beyond the reach of these shells which are now falling behind them as they struggle away from the scene of battle
6. Five-Nines - 5.9 calibre explosive shells
7. Gas! - poison gas. From the symptoms it would appear to be chlorine or phosgene gas. The filling of the lungs with fluid had the same effects as when a person drowned
8. Helmets - the early name for gas masks
9. Lime - a white chalky substance which can burn live tissue
10. Panes - the glass in the eyepieces of the gas masks
11. Guttering - Owen probably meant flickering out like a candle or gurgling like water draining down a gutter, referring to the sounds in the throat of the choking man, or it might be a sound partly like stuttering and partly like gurgling
12. Cud - normally the regurgitated grass that cows chew usually green and bubbling. Here a similar looking material was issuing from the soldier's mouth
13. High zest - idealistic enthusiasm, keenly believing in the rightness of the idea

14. ardent - keen

15. Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori - see note 1 above.

**These notes are taken from the book, *Out in the Dark, Poetry of the First World War*, where other war poems that need special explanations are similarly annotated. The ideal book for students getting to grips with the poetry of the First World War.**

### **Pronunciation**

The pronunciation of Dulce is DULKAY. The letter C in Latin was pronounced like the C in "car". The word is often given an Italian pronunciation pronouncing the C like the C in cello, but this is wrong. Try checking this out in a Latin dictionary! - David Roberts.

This poem appears in both **Out in the Dark** and **Minds at War**, but the notes are found only in *Out in the Dark*. *Minds at War* has much more background information, for example, more poets' letters, biographical and historical information, etc than *Out in the Dark*. *Out in the Dark* has 192 pages. *Minds at War* has 410 pages.

**To understand more** about Wilfred Owen's war experience, his breakdown, how his poetry developed rapidly after meeting another British war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, it may be worth reading one of these two books. Both contain many more poems by Wilfred Owen and extracts from his letters.

Both books provide a substantial selection of the greatest war poetry of the First World War and fascinating insights into the experience of one of the most terrible wars in the history of mankind.