

REGENERATION
(British, 1997, 96 Minutes)

“Dulce et Decorum est Pro Patria Mori”

(It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country)

This haunting poem by English World War I poet Wilfred Owen could well serve as a subtheme for *Regeneration*. The film, based on a 1991 novel by Pat Parker which was nominated for Britain’s prestigious Booker Prize, addresses the issue of post traumatic stress syndrome or shell shock as it was known in the First World War. Loosely based on actual medical case files, *Regeneration* is set in Edinburgh’s Craiglockhart Hospital where traumatized soldiers scarred by the horrors of battle are sent to be “cured” before being returned to the war. Current OLLI course R412 (Novels of the First World War) includes *Regeneration* in its reading list.

Military doctor William Rivers (1864-1922) attempts to apply modern psychiatric techniques to a variety of patients under his care. Eminent writer Lt. Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) was sent to Craiglockhart through the influence of Capt Robert Graves (1895-1985 – who later produced *I, Claudius* for the BBC). This was an alternative to court-martial after publishing an open letter in July 1917 protesting the conduct and unjust nature of the war. Poet Lt. Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) has his writing craft transformed into searing anti-war poetry under Sassoon’s tutelage at the hospital. Fictional Lt. Billy Prior, made mute by the trauma of the trenches, is a lower class officer who believes honor requires him to return to the fighting. In attempting to “cure” the incurable by encouraging patients to express their war memories so that they can “heal their nerves,” Dr.

Rivers himself slowly begins to experience a nervous breakdown. The film contrasts his methods with the brutality of electroshock therapy. Especially intriguing are the mental jousts about war and duty between Sassoon and Rivers. In the end, the three main protagonists are “cured” and released from Craiglockhart to different fates.