

# In Fierce Light



John E. Stewart  
Coatbridge's War Poet

## On Revisiting the Somme

*If I were but a Journalist,  
And had a heading every day  
In double-column caps, I wist  
I, too, could make it pay;*

*But still for me the shadow lies  
Of tragedy. I cannot write  
Of these so many Calvaries  
As of a pageant fight;*

*For dead men look me through  
and through*

*With their blind eyes, and mutely cry  
My name, as I were one they knew  
In that red-rimmed July;*

*Others on new sensation bent  
Will wander here, with some glib guide  
Insufferably eloquent  
Of secrets we would hide –*

*Hide in this battered crumbling line  
Hide in these promiscuous graves,  
Till one shall make our story shine  
In the fierce light it craves.*

**John E. Stewart**

John Ebenezer Stewart was born in Coatbridge in 1888. His father was a roofer and plasterer, who was able to send John to Glasgow University in 1907. After graduation, John returned to Coatbridge to teach at Langloan School, however, in 1914, he enlisted in the army to fight in the First World War.

John served in the Border Regiment and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery during the Battle of Messines in 1916. Later, John was tragically killed in action (April 1918), months before the end of the war.

John was a keen poet and writer, and had many poems published in newspapers and magazines, as well as a column in the Coatbridge Advertiser. In 1916, his own book of poetry, *Grapes of Thorns*, was published and dedicated to his school friend, Frederick Dixon, who had been killed in action in 1916.

Grant funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund has enabled staff at Summerlee Museum of Scottish Industrial Life to complete research into the life of John Stewart, and to develop displays and educational resources to help the people of North Lanarkshire get to know their local war poet.

Coatbridge Canal



## John Stewart the Writer

Throughout his teenage years, John wrote poems and sent them to magazines and newspapers around the country. Many of these were printed, and John proudly collected them in a scrapbook, alongside some children's songs which he had written with his friend, Frederick Dixon, which were published in a children's magazine.

As an adult, John wrote a series of articles for the Coatbridge Express, which were collected and published in 1912 as *The Iron Burgh*, and other sketches. In these writings, John shows his great pride in Coatbridge as a place of industry and commerce, though a dirty and noisy one.

He wrote:

*We lose the Sun in the density of smoke, and  
we are glad, for sunbeams feed not hungry  
mouths.*

*When the smoke is thick the children have  
bread. That is sunshine.*

John continued to write after he had enlisted in the army, providing his regiment with a history of their time at the front, as well as contributing poems to anthologies of war poetry and publishing his own collection, *Grapes of Thorn*, in 1916.



*John E. Stewart*



# John Stewart the Soldier

In 1914, John decided to leave his teaching job at Langloan and enlisted in the Highland Light Infantry. He was quickly transferred to the Border Regiment, where he spent the majority of the war, rising through the ranks to Captain by July 1916.

In October 1916, John's Battalion took part in the attack on Regina Trench during the Battle of the Ancre Heights. His group successfully invaded a part of the trench, but John spotted a German machine gun and prevented his men from advancing further, undoubtedly saving their lives. John then ordered the men to secure the trench whilst they awaited reinforcements. Once reinforced, John's company cleared out the trench, capturing 60 enemy soldiers and two machine guns. John's presence of mind meant his men avoided disaster and exceeded their objectives, and for these actions, he was awarded the Military Cross.

Modestly, John seems not to have written anything of his own brave actions, preferring instead to highlight those of his men. He did say he was glad to be awarded the M.C., but only because, he said, it showed that "...we fellows who write verse are not softies".

In 1918, John was transferred to the South Staffordshire Regiment and promoted to Major. Sadly, only a few days after taking command there, he was killed during a bombardment of his trench. John's body was never recovered, but he is commemorated on the war memorial in Coatbridge.



*Regina Trench Stump Road*  
Courtesy of The National Library of Scotland

# Selected Poems of John Stewart

## Courage

I was afraid of Fear,  
Not of the foe;  
And when I thought that those I hold most dear  
My craven soul would know  
And turn away ashamed, who praised before,  
Ashamed and deep distressed to find it so,  
I was afraid the more.

Lo, when I joined the fight,  
And bared my breast  
To all the darts of that wild hellish night,  
I, only, stood the test,  
For Fear, which I had feared, deserted then,  
And forward blithely at the foe I prest  
King of myself again.

## If I Should Fall

If I should fall upon the field  
And lie amongst the slain,  
Then mine will be the victory  
And yours the pain;  
For this in prospect comforts me  
Against all sadd'ning fears  
That, dying so, I make myself  
Worthy of your tears.

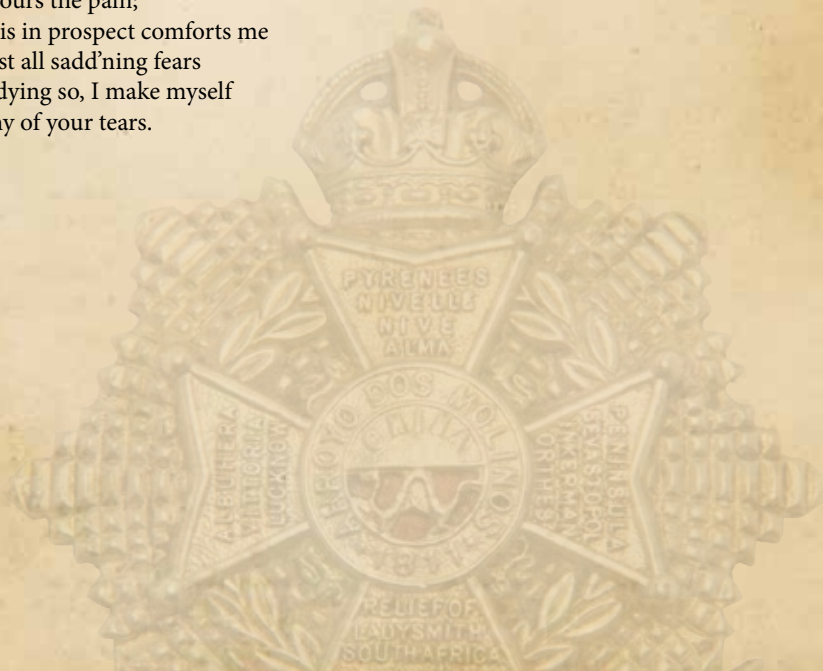
## Before Action

Over the down the road goes winding,  
A ribbon of white in the corn –  
The young, green corn. O, the joy of binding  
The sheaves some harvest morn!

But we are called to another reaping,  
A harvest that will not wait,  
The sheaves will be green. O, the world of  
weeping  
Of those without the gate!

For the road we go they may not travel,  
Nor share our harvesting;  
But watch and weep. O, to unravel  
The riddle of this thing!

Yet over the down the white road leading  
Calls; and who lags behind?  
Stout are our hearts; but O, the bleeding  
Of hearts we may not bind!





# Works by John Stewart

The following books are available at the National Library of Scotland. Please visit [www.nls.uk](http://www.nls.uk) for more information.

- The Iron Burgh and other sketches. A. Pettigrew Ltd., Coatbridge, 1912.
- Grapes of Thorns, Erskine MacDonald Ltd., London, 1917.
- More Songs of the Fighting Men, Erskine MacDonald Ltd., London, 1917. This contains three poems: Before Action, Renascence, and Courage.

Airdrie Local Studies Library, at Airdrie Library, holds copies of The Iron Burgh and other sketches, as well as Verses, a scrapbook kept by John Stewart containing many poems, articles and other writings. A similar volume can be found in the archive at Cumbria's Museum of Military Life at Carlisle Castle, alongside a number of other items pertaining to John Stewart.

## Thanks

We are grateful, primarily, to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the generous grant which enabled this project.

We would also like to thank staff at Cumbria's Museum of Military Life for sharing their own research into John Stewart's life; the poet Ken Cockburn, for his help developing the workshop on John's poetry; staff at Coatbridge High School for their enthusiasm for the project from its earliest days, and the pupils there for their help in developing the accompanying workshop; Lizzie McGregor at the Scottish Poetry Library; and finally to Langloan Primary School for the donation of what may be the desk John Stewart taught from.

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# First World War workshops for Primary and Secondary pupils at Summerlee Museum

## Primary

### FIRST WORLD WAR: HOME AND AWAY

#### Second level P5-7 90 mins

This workshop explores the path that a soldier took from recruitment to the trenches, explaining the reasons behind the outbreak of war and the impact of those at home, as well as on the fighting men. It makes use of a wide number of objects including costumes, replica weapons and documents from the period.

#### SOC 2-01a

## Secondary

### LANARKSHIRE'S GREAT WAR

#### Third/Fourth level S1-4 90 mins

The First World War had a significant impact on everyone in Lanarkshire, whether they fought abroad or stayed at home. In this new workshop, pupils will use museum objects and archive materials to understand how the First World War impacted on life at home in Lanarkshire.

Pupils will research primary sources to discover how people in Lanarkshire were affected by the war, in their home and work



life, to develop an understanding of the lasting social changes brought by the war.  
SOC 3-06b / SOC 4-06b

## JOHN STEWART: LANARKSHIRE'S WAR POET

### Third/Fourth level S1-4 45 mins

This workshop covers the life and poetry of John Stewart and can be delivered in school during a standard lesson, or as an addition to our Lanarkshire's Great War workshop at Summerlee Museum.

## FIRST WORLD WAR LOAN BOX

There is a loan box containing PowerPoint presentations, information, photographs, costumes, flags, posters, postcards and replica items which is available to hire for a term. Please note, that the borrower must collect and return the box.

## FIRST WORLD WAR TRENCH

Summerlee Museum has an accessible trench in the grounds, which can be visited during normal museum hours. Admission to Summerlee Museum for a self-lead visit is free. An illustrated talk on the life and poetry of John Stewart is available to any interested groups in the community.

**For more information, or to make a booking, please call 01236 638460. Please note, fees apply to school workshops, loans boxes and talks.**



“...we fellows who write verse are not softies.”



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