*Dweller in Shadows: A Life of Ivor Gurney*. Kate Kennedy. Princeton, 2021. 488pp. 3 b/w maps and 53 b/w ill. Hardback £30.00. **[ISBN 978-0-912127-8-4]**

Ivor Bertie Gurney, poet and composer, was born in Gloucester in 1890 and died of tuberculosis, following years of mental illness, in Dartford in 1937. His father, David, was a tailor on what is now Eastgate Street. His mother was a seamstress.

Gurney was fond of his father. When he died in 1919 aged 57, Gurney wrote a poem “Petersburg” in which he says “he was the friendliness of every hill and tree”. The relationship with his mother was more difficult. She was a woman who did not smile. She survived Gurney but did not attend his funeral in 1937 – due, as Kate Kennedy describes it, to “a rather ambiguous indisposition”.

Gurney had good relations with his two sisters. His brother Ronald, however, was unsympathetic to his mental situation and regarded music as “a dead horse”.

Gurney’s life included Gloucester Cathedral, a scholarship to the Royal College of Music, service in the First World War, being wounded and gassed, various hospitals and, for his last 15 years, Barnwood House Hospital and an asylum in Dartmouth. It was followed by a place in the War Poets section of Westminster Abbey plus a vast volume of poems and music- the list of them takes up 34 pages of Kate Kennedy’s book.

Attention to Gurney has grown following promotion by his friends, the work of the Ivor Gurney Society, scholars such as Kelsey Thornton and Anthony Boden, also through Gloucester Archives (the “Heritage Hub”) which holds the Gurney Archives and the attention of performers such as Sarah Connolly. His reputation has been enhanced with the excellent biographies in 1978 by Michael Hurd, *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), and  in 2008 by Pamela Blevins, *Ivor Gurney and Marion Scott, Song of Pain and Beauty* (Boydell Press).

Now comes Kate Kennedy with a book based on deep research  providing  not only  analysis of Gurney’s work and life but also contributing to our knowledge of the life of a First World War soldier, the countryside and buildings of Gloucestershire - ranging from the Cathedral to the Lock Cottage at Framilode - and the history of mental health treatment. It is the most comprehensive biography of Gurney to date.

Although often a lonely man, Gurney had a remarkable range of friends who not only recognised his genius but provided comfort, support and welfare to him. From his childhood he had the friendship of the Rev Cheesman, his godfather and the vicar who presided over Gurney’s funeral at Twigworth Church. He introduced Gurney to literature. There were his friends the Hunts and the Chapmans. Marion Scott was a supporter from the days she first met him at the Royal College of Music until his death. She was his friend, business manager and financial supporter. After his death she was his executor. There are suggestions that she loved him. Gurney had a short romance with Annie Drummond, a nurse at Bangour Hospital in Edinburgh. Eventually she married someone else. There was Gurney’s Gloucester Cathedral friend, the Gloucestershire poet Will Harvey and the Gloucester solicitor Jack Haines (my great uncle)-, “guardian, walking companion (and Gurney did a lot of walking) and source of poetry talk”. There was Herbert Howells (“Howler” as Gurney called him) although in later years Howells did not find being with Gurney comfortable. Through visits to the Poetry Bookshop Gurney met other poets like Walter De La Mare. He was deeply interested in the Dymock Poets - indeed made a visit to Dymock - especially Edward Thomas. When he was in the asylum in Dartford Marion Scott brought Thomas’s widow Helen to visit. He played to her his setting of Thomas’s great poem *Lights Out*. Vaughan Williams was not only to become Gurney’s teacher but remained a friend, mentor and supporter, visiting him in Dartford. He had a considerable influence on Gurney’s work, for example on the *War Elegy*.

Gloucestershire was always a great love and in 1916 he raised a shrine in the trenches to Gloucester. He wrote that Gloucestershire meant “a good tea, clean air, feminine society, a good row on a good stretch of river, Beauty and leisure to enjoy; home and all its meaning.” In writing to Howells about his violin sonata in D Major he said “the first movement is the cathedral and Gloucester, the second is Maisemore. Third: Cranham. Fourth Crickley”.

Some of his friends believed Dartford asylum was not helpful. On the other hand, Marion Scott saw little other solution. But in the end it was tuberculosis that killed him.

It is often assumed that injury and being gassed led to his mental state. It certainly did not help but it is clear there are other factors, including possibly schizophrenia and/or bi-polar disorder.

Kate Kennedy states “This book attempts to reclaim him as an important cultural figure, whose work helps us to understand something about the intersections between mental illness, human relationships, and the traumatic experience of war”. The attempt is definitely successful. One is left with Gurney as an engaging man with a number of very devoted friends who could not in the end save him.

ROBERT MORELAND