

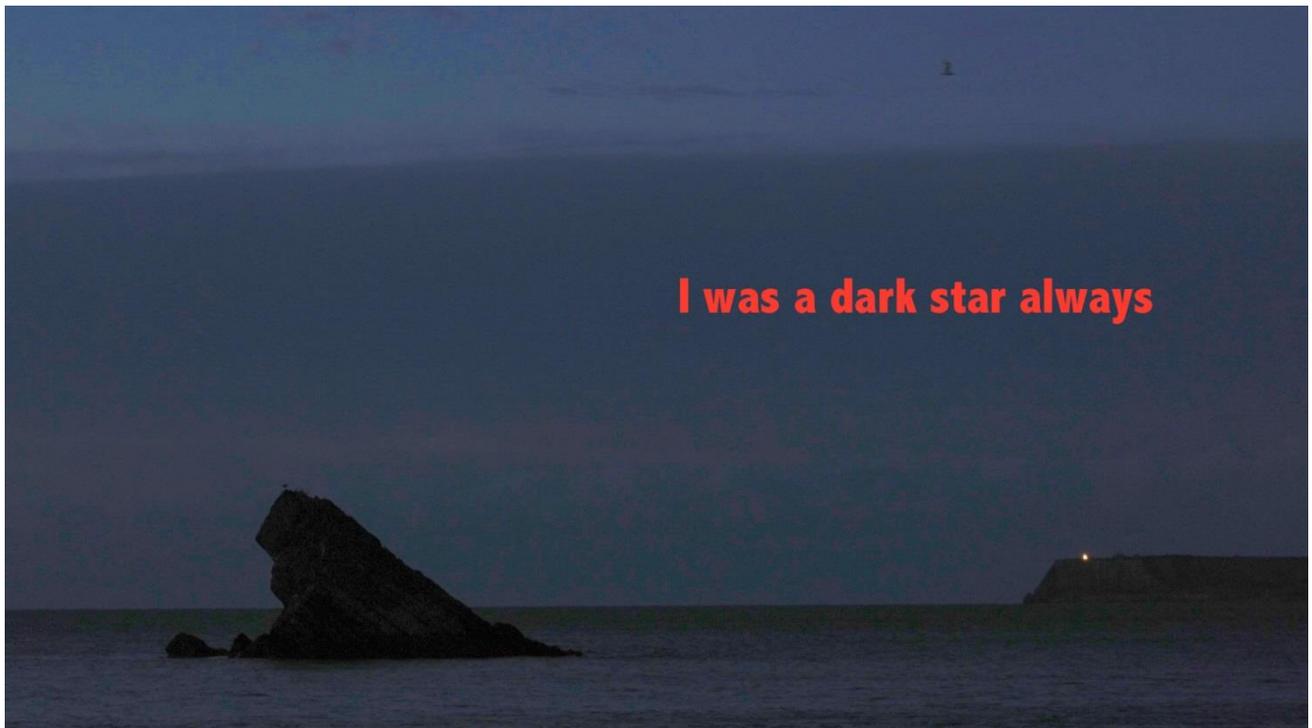
For immediate release, 10 October 2018

John Hansard Gallery

I was a dark star always

A tribute in film to the life of Wilfred Owen
with readings by Ben Whishaw

4 November 2018 to 25 January 2019



John Hansard Gallery, part of the University of Southampton, is pleased to present *I WAS A DARK STAR ALWAYS*, a new film installation marking the centenary of the death of Wilfred Owen, opening 4 November 2018.

The film, written by Philip Hoare and directed by Adam Low, incorporates readings by Ben Whishaw of both letters and poems by Owen, and is filmed at key locations from his life, including the beach in Torquay where he swam as a child, and the canal in northern France where he died, on 4 November 1918, aged just 25.

Wilfred Owen only happened to be a war poet. A century on, he peers at us, over-shadowed by his death. We see a doomed poet, not an ambitious, sensual young man with a brilliant future. History and tradition has removed him from us. In life, Owen represented not the unnatural struggle of trench life or macabre themes of war, rather a young man seeking his own identity through words, a most natural and admirable pursuit. 'I was a dark star always', Owen told Siegfried Sassoon, a year before he died.

I WAS A DARK STAR ALWAYS lifts Owen out of the pen to which he is frequently confined, and projects him into our time. What would he have made of life after the war, had he survived? Using words from the poet himself, Hoare re-imagines him out of history's sepia and into a bright blue sea.

I WAS A DARK STAR ALWAYS uses water as a motif and theme to explore Owen's life and represent his fluid sexuality. He swam whenever he could, encouraged by his father, a railway clerk who'd dress up as a sailor and pretend to be a captain in Liverpool docks. Wilfred swam in rivers, pools and the sea; as a teenager in Devon, as an officer in Yorkshire, as a casualty of shellshock in Netley Hospital, near Southampton. Sent to Craiglockhart in Scotland to recuperate, he declared to Sassoon that the water 'never fails to give me a Greek feeling of energy and elemental life.'

It was the last thing he ever did in England, bathing off Folkestone beach, watching a handsome young fellow officer wade out of the surf. He was killed in action leading his men across the Sambre-Oise canal in Ors, falling backwards into the water in a poetic and fitting final act.

Wilfred Owen was the first poet Philip Hoare loved. Growing up as a teenager in suburban Southampton in the 70s, Hoare saw him as an icon of otherness, alongside Oscar Wilde and David Bowie. 40 years on, *I WAS A DARK STAR ALWAYS* is an expression of this affinity and an exploration of what Owen truly represented as a modern artist dealing with themes of the natural world set against human frailty.

Philip Hoare's books include biographies of Stephen Tennant and Noël Coward, the historical studies, *Wilde's Last Stand*, *Spike Island*, and *England's Lost Eden*. His book *Leviathan or, The Whale* won the 2009 BBC Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction. *The Sea Inside* was published in 2013 and his most recent book *RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR*, was published in 2017. He is a Professorial Fellow in English at the University of Southampton.

Adam Low is the BAFTA- and Emmy-award winning director of BBC films on T.S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Luchino Visconti, Noël Coward, Francis Bacon, Dirk Bogarde and Alan Bennett.

I WAS A DARK STAR ALWAYS is co-produced with the John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, and will be screened at the gallery itself and other sites in Oxford, Edinburgh, Bristol and London.

Philip Hoare says:

'100 years after he was lost to us, it's time now to see Wilfred Owen in a different way. To rescue him from the perversity of war, and restore his lust for life. *I WAS A DARK ALWAYS* re-imagines the vibrant, brilliant and sensuous young man that he was, and the even greater poet he would have become.'

Woodrow Kernohan. Director of John Hansard Gallery, says:

'Philip Hoare is an extraordinary writer who has a deep connection with Southampton. I am thrilled that we have been able to commission Philip and director Adam Low to create this beautiful new film that reconsiders the narratives surrounding Wilfred Owen, one of the most well-known - but perhaps misunderstood - poets of the twentieth century.'

As part of the University of Southampton, research informs and inspires much of our programme at John Hansard Gallery. Philip Hoare is a Professorial Fellow in English at the University and this project is part of our close ongoing collaborations with the English department.'

Credits: Written by Philip Hoare | Directed by Adam Low | Produced and Photographed by Martin Rosenbaum | Edited by Joanna Crickmay | Assistant Producer, James Norton
A Lone Star / John Hansard Gallery Co-Production
Running time: 10 minutes

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

John Hansard Gallery

John Hansard Gallery is an internationally recognised and locally engaged contemporary art gallery in Southampton. Being part of the University of Southampton, the Gallery aims to change the world for the better through great art. To realise this the Gallery creates innovative and critically acclaimed contemporary art exhibitions, events, engagement and research projects that excite, challenge, represent and reach the widest possible public audience. From 1979 the Gallery was located on the University's Highfield Campus. In 2018 the Gallery relocated to the new purpose-built arts complex Studio 144 in Southampton's city centre, significantly increasing the space available for exhibitions, events and integrated programming. Learning and engagement are at the heart of the Gallery and underpin all its activities. The innovative education and public programme is accompanied by special community-focused projects, including activities for all ages and levels of experience. John Hansard Gallery is supported using public funding as a National Portfolio Organisation by Arts Council England. www.jhg.art

University of Southampton

The University of Southampton is one of the UK's leading teaching and research institutions, with a global reputation for research and scholarship across a wide range of subjects. The University combines academic excellence with an innovative and entrepreneurial approach to research, supporting a culture that engages and challenges students and staff in their pursuit of learning. www.southampton.ac.uk

Arts at University of Southampton - Inspiring arts and culture for everyone

Arts at University of Southampton offers a wealth of inspiring cultural experiences and opportunities, showcasing emerging talent and renowned international artists. From visual arts, music and literature, to theatre and film, there's something for everyone.

The University of Southampton has rich heritage and long-standing commitment to arts and culture as an essential part of university life. The University is proud of its unique relationship with three Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisations. The Nuffield Theatre opened at its Highfield Campus in 1964 and was joined by the University's concert hall Turner Sims and John Hansard Gallery in the 1970s. The relocation of the John Hansard Gallery to its new purpose-built home in the heart of the city's Cultural Quarter increases the University of Southampton's presence in that area, close to its Mayflower Halls and administrative offices in Guildhall Square. The opening of Studio 144 symbolises an extraordinary moment for Southampton and the University will be working closely with John Hansard Gallery, City Eye and NST to deepen public engagement, to share its research and present inspiring and accessible cultural opportunities for all.

www.southampton.ac.uk/arts

Studio 144

Studio 144, Southampton's ambitious new venue for theatre, visual art and film, is now open at the heart of the city's burgeoning Cultural Quarter. Funded by Arts Council England and Southampton City Council, its opening brings three acclaimed arts organisations – City Eye, John Hansard Gallery and Nuffield Southampton Theatres – together for public audiences in the heart of the city centre for the first time.

Arts Council England

Arts Council England champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. We support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2015 and 2018, we plan to invest £1.1 billion of public money from government and an estimated £700 million from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. www.artscouncil.org.uk