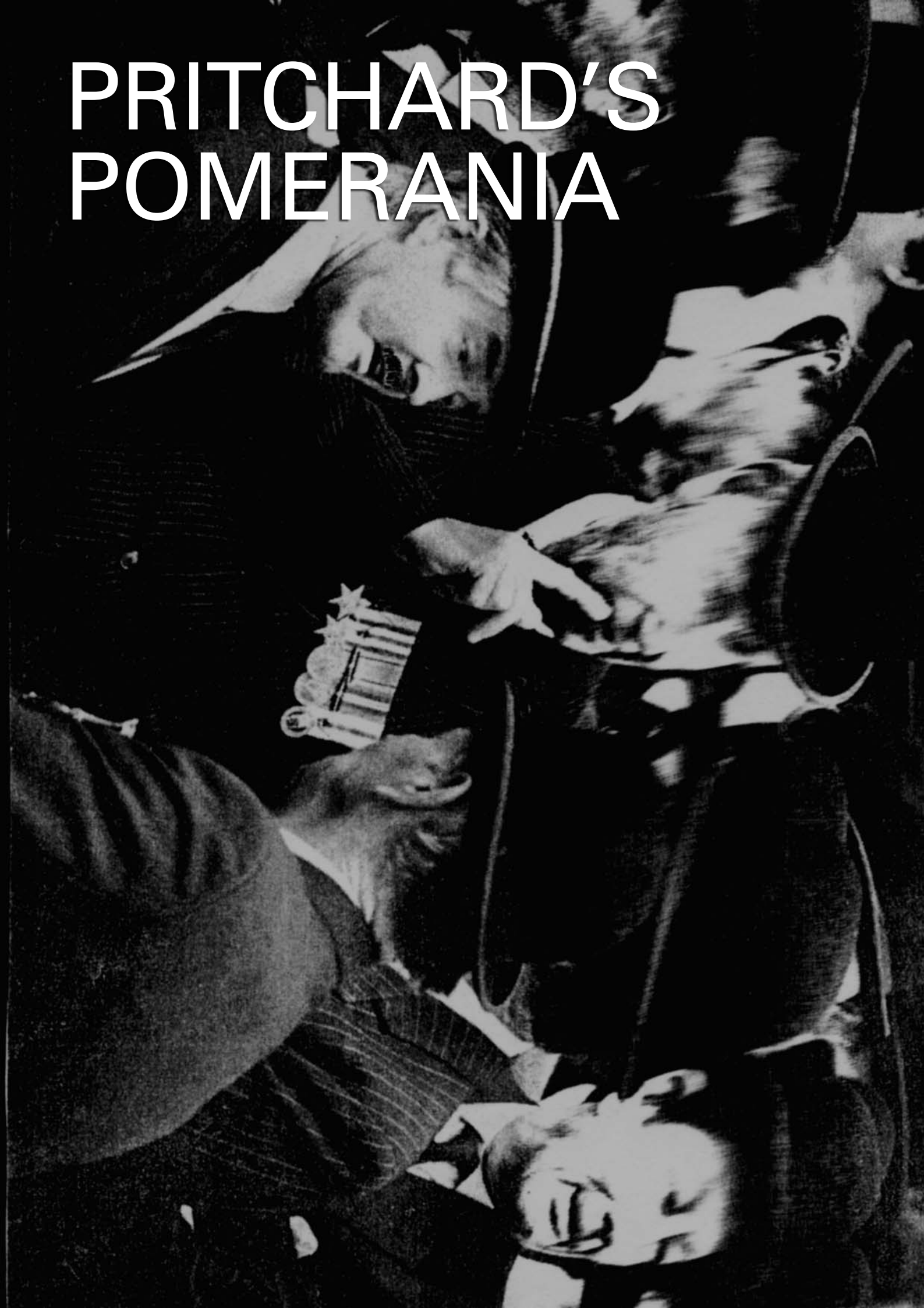


PRITCHARD'S POMERANIA



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a letter to a London plutocrat
a letter to a Chinese scholar
concerning the last fifty years of the second millennium

by
Selwyn Pritchard

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MY DEAR WRAITH,

Anger? Embarrassment! Look, I'm no pining exile
dying to hear who's in or out, nor of the airy way
of merchant bankers with billions on top floors who grace
your city days...nor even of ex-Stalinists who
want your transnational for their new 'democratic' state...

My roof's not quilled with barbarian's arrows; Thatchered
England is not Imperial Rome.

I don't even wish
it was good manners, rather than indifference, which
causes us to fail to contradict your daft belief
all things English provide, as G.M.T. once did, a
datum for the world. That hour is past...

I tell you what,
old fantasist, the time we met fifty years ago,
I had a foray on the English Meridian
in Greenwich Park. The palace she called 'home' lay amber
in the river smog below where the Admiral, her dad, maybe
telescoped my fleet manoeuvres: we twain did
not meet again...I don't think you were with the regiment
in Bermuda? (How very *Kipling* it now all seems).

Senile Churchill; Eisenhower, who wanted to play
the Mid-Ocean Golf Club course where the talks were held, met...

Monsieur Bidet? One night on guard, watching searchlights sweep
the links (planes droned, warships boated back and to) Eden
stepped out, was briefly civil to the chaps.

I glowed, meeting that Great Subaltern.

Each afternoon
I'd take a taxi out to Admiralty House, nod
to the Marine sentries' salute, sprint down the steep path
between royal palms to where she sleekly lay at anchor
on a raft suspended on the green and limpid sea,
so brown, or mostly so (Where are the snows of yesteryear?)
and beautiful, I'd change and somersault off the quay.

What poems ABAB I wrote in those equine
iambics she knew between the thighs! (Fashion is strange:
now it's cow poets who have the world off pat, milk sermons,
jackboot about in wellies, dig fame with their pens,
tell auguries from guts...) And that tender meridian
between white hemispheres! Such a medieval nonsense

we endured then with our chaste and unrequited loves!
How I secretly longed to play Mellors and stop her
lovely ladylike chatter with fork-legged lust! Just once,
by accident (Silence Sigmund!) whilst frolicking in
the foam, she put her innocent hand upon my sex
and I saw her eyes-closed, inward gloat, but I could not
think that *she* might fancy *me*, such was my opinion
of myself. (It took me years to grasp proximity
is everything!) Repressed I lay, one eye peeled for
her dad's spyglass glint, ears cocked for Lady X's cough.
(What a culture! I dared nothing, totally oppressed:
'N.Q.O.C.' they thought, but quite tame. They were not wrong!)
I lay pent and priapic upon the tropic sea,
grinding my teeth with lust, incapable of dreaming
her thoughts matched, only of imagining I might wake
for work on a rainy Monday morning in Manchester.

I bet you would have gone at her like a big, brown dog!
I was her poodle. For six weeks I wagged my tail and
rhumbaed about dance floors, did the slow trot of the fox
in my white d.j. in clubs, and she was beautiful.
If I got frisky taking her home, "N.S.I.T,"
"Not safe in taxis" she would say (so debs' escorts' cards
were marked) and "Don't spoil everything", but then I
found mine fixed by Major Beasthurst, that sadistic sod,
my company commander, who gave me every
duty that he could, from extra guards to organising
cricket teas. He specialised in torments of young men.
(We each had to guard a cashiered national service
subaltern who got in hot water, even take him
to the loo to ensure he did not bolt or kill himself.)
Perhaps Beasthurst had been told to keep me busy, or
took the chance to suppress an uppity arriviste?
On the palmy lawn at Admiralty House with the
Commander of West Indies and Bermuda Station,
his lady and his daughter, all *seemed* serene. He told
me stories and the ladies smiled. (When he commanded
the Allied Korean fleet, Intelligence requested
a fleet bombardment where Chinese general staff were

meeting. It was done: the battleships blew the place away.

Later it was found to be a money-lender's hut...)

One afternoon the Colonel paid his duty call

and found me taking tea. Beasthurst laid off me at last,

but I had got everything done and lost none of

the regiment's baggage when we flew back to Kingston...

And that was that until that Greenwich

afternoon about the time you joined the regiment on

Salisbury Plain. Four battalions had new colours

from H.M., who was so small for a 'Britannic Majesty'

that thrice times, after she had lunched with the officers,

I dashed and stood at the salute, stared in disbelief

down my nose at the dwarfish empress of an empire

that had been the biggest since Rome's. Extraordinary:

small, grey islands and a grumpy little Queen, but our

deference was bred in the bone ('make thee mightier yet!').

I was a fool until I met those wooden-tops from
public school who were off to Oxbridge as if by right.

When I got in and told my Dad, he said, "I know it,
Oxford University - near the bus stop, isn't it?"

If Dad saw someone he took to be a toff, he grasped
his hand and shook it: "All the best" he'd say. "Who was that?
I've seen him on TV." I loved him.

You told me once
you loved me like a brother. I was most embarrassed,
couldn't cope with such feelings in my duplicitous state.
The first time I spoke to you, on the London train,
senior subaltern by then, I tried to put you down
for whistling in the Mess, as bloody Beasthurst required:
("Bloody errandboy, that chap! Tell him." I complied with glee.)
You told me to go forth and multiply. I was shocked.

The others blushed and swallowed, you spat street-wise, strode off
down the steamy corridor; I never had you sussed,
still don't. Like me you went to a school best left unnamed;
had no university place and extended your
commission before swinging through the colonial police;
vaulting off the proceeds to the Bar, climbing on the Board
of Imperial Chemicals... You won an O.B.E.
for services to some obscure and mysterious cause...

Hoop-la! Your life's trajectory! And all applaud.

When I joined the regiment *nobody* spoke
to *me* for six weeks. Everything I had was filched
the night I arrived, but I was so terrified of
saying the wrong thing, I said nothing. Money and clothes,
a silver cigarette case with my name engraved...gone!
I bit my tongue in powerless anguish, completely dumb.
In Jamaica the regiment relived the pre-war Raj.
I had to learn to be a pukah sahib: talk posh,
dissemble, tie a double-ended bow tie in the dark!

Fetch

Bowlered and bare-foot, Buller
was deployed under the royal palms to roll
the polo pills for us to smack,
whirling malacca-handled mallets,
taking turns on the wooden horse's back,
trying to clout the thing to hell,
so that Buller padded, pale-soled off
among his bougainvillea, poinsettia,
the variegated Spanish bayonets,
and we could pose and smoke.

"Character-forming," said Half-Colonel Centaur,
D.S.O, M.C., but our pay was half-a-crown a day:
enough for a whisky tot, and we hadn't the resources
for polo horses, or 'ponies', as we were required
to say. It never entered my national service head
that the Commanding Officer meant
what he had said.

Terrified actor, I had off the right voice, cant phrase,
or so I thought. Such pleasure I must have given to
some: think of me, putting you right on the train.

Floreat Pomerania! Determinations so deep
they haunt me still with guilt, but only now, in writing

to you at the age my Dad was then, do I perceive
how many weeks' work the silver cigarette case cost.
...I announced its loss off-hand: how else? There's not much left
of the truth of tender feeling (we are strong on hate,
envy, lust, rehearsed and reinforced by day and night
on video in our commodified, decadent world)
other than our love for our children. Our marriages
disintegrate; that does not. Those bonds of family,
of kith and kin, which shaped us formerly, are tenuous -
my brothers are racists in Transvaal and nowhere's home -
but my old man said nothing. I could not explain that
I dare not report the theft or accuse anyone,
that my crucial concern was to be ignored, to merge,
cause no fuss, draw no attention to my anxious self.

Now we forget that merciless imperial world
in which male Brits born for eighty years from 1880
had to stand to attention, salute, respond to orders,
recognise the tone of command, authority, or
ape it and the arrogance of the officer class.

Joining the Imperial Bourgeoisie

i.m. Max Rainjill (1933-1953)

Bright as the sun on their regimental cap badges
morning sun shines on crop-headed conscripts,
officer-cadets, temporary gentlemen,
oiling their rifle bolts and easing springs.
All is good chappery: some brown-nose
instructors making up teams..."Flower
of the Fucking Country!" the R.S.M. screamed
at us on the Drill Square. Oh it is just 'not on'
not to be keen on shooting, hitting the bull.

The wind cracks red flags down the range,
snatches officerly cant; details march...
Under the cloudy mystery of Wales,
beyond the bucking company marquee,
estuarine lawns run emerald down,
ravined and mollusced to the Celtic Sea.

Smartly we slip away, employ the fieldcraft
we have been taught, below the banks of streams
build dams, play like kids all day: Max, a farmer's
only son, so soon to die in the Penang jungle;
myself, the poet, gagging thirty years on ideas
de trop before Australia; both eighteen, enjoying
the higher talk of God and Englit, while brine winds blew
and bullets flew...then sliding back like spies,
happy as the keenest shot among the rank and file.

As I was learning to be ashamed of them, my parents
were so proud of me. The regiment was a mythical
world. My Dad enlisted under age, sixteen, preferred
the Somme to his step-mother, and spent his life amazed
that he'd survived when men, his heroes, were blown away.
He kept regimental buttons, badges, photographs
I still have, and a dream of dead comrades' brotherhood,
gallant officers...It grew glorious as Troy for him.

I expect that he hoped that I would take him in the Mess
but I knew that he would stand at attention, call my
friends 'Sir' or some mad thing. I had already snubbed
my Mum in Chester when, as an officer-cadet
aboard a truck, I had all but ignored her shouted delight
from the pavement as we passed. Aussies would disbelieve
such cold viciousness. I wince. Poor Mum, she would have watched
each army truck. She would forgive me. (Can I do so?)

What did I expect that Caribbean afternoon
when the York touched down, having flown at ten thousand feet
around the Atlantic: Iceland; stuck in Gander fogs
for days; bounced on Bermuda? What I got was Minto,
handsome, tanned, stiff with starch in khaki drill and Sam Browne
and wooden-faced to my salute and smile: "Sandhurst? No?
Hop in, we've got a bunch of them back there...GET FELL IN!"
he yelled at the fusiliers. Now he deals in antiques,
no doubt adds a little polish to some small Welsh town,
but then he was Orderly Officer. On bubbling
tarmac in dishevelled battledress, the sweating troops
had to wait upon him as he looked them up and down.

Kingston was dust and motor horns, a thousand sorts of
face which found our pink complexions fun above our
thick uniforms, shite hawks soaring, high mountains, crazy
driving, all made the straight roads edged by whitewashed stones,
banana trees right-dressed by verandahed barrack blocks,
the bugles in the sudden dark and men, brown-chested,
muscular and fit, shouting to mates among recruits,
seem for a while like home. I was dropped with Minto at
the Officers' Mess, which stood on pillars, walls louvred
for the breeze which, in the Ante Room was aided by
ceiling fans as big as the propellers of the York.

An officer stood up from a deep armchair, folding
the airmail edition of The Times. A major, one-armed,
an eyepatch, an MC. "Charlie, here is a new boy.
What's your name?" I told them. "Major the Lord Erbistock."

Did I speak? From my breast-pocket, stylishly no doubt,
I slipped my silver cigarette case. The Major sat,
shook out The Times, Minto left, I poured myself some tea,
stood and watched ants stealing sugar from the silver bowl.

Fans whirled rhythmically. A servant came to tell me
that my quarters were ready, my bags already there.

Outside stars glared, Insects screamed and drilled. I showered; tired,
dared not sleep in case I missed dinner; then dared not speak.
That was my induction to the officer caste:

I turned invisible. Soldier-servants busied about
the long table where silver shone, at its head
the colours, with their centuries of battle honours,
and everything as it always had been, will still be...

I learned the repertoire of acceptable tones: rude
bantering, mincing coyness, callous scorn, knowing
superiority... pent silence, blurted questions.

After, airless and hot under a mosquito net,

I remember wondering who had unpacked my bags,
set my alarm for six, nineteen and far from home, slept.

I seldom speak of my five years' military stint

since I was talked down by a bloke who had done three weeks

as a 'digger', which counted more because Australians
believe their troops are the best and the rest a rabble.

At Tobruk on its own the ANZAC division beat,
destroyed, an Italian army; the First World War
was won by Australian infantry; Gallipoli
was a triumph where a quarter of a million Brits
and French let the diggers down...It's a psychosis born
of timid xenophobia, a vainglorious need
to idolise the military and offset our
small population and colonial economy.

(Without some statesmanship reality will come hard.)

The Returned Servicemen's League has shrines to the cult of
war dead and more bull than the Pope, bellicosity
towards our neighbours, most immigrants, sustains the myth
that convicts' original sin was expiated
by young men's sacrificial blood: so many slaughtered,
their bravery leaving them enfiladed in defence
as inferior troops on their flanks fell back, and now
historians claim proof that when they appeared in the line,
the Germans knew that there would be an attack. 'How brave,
these colonial troops,' British politicians said.

As for me, I have spent my life in full retreat from
The British army and the English officer class.

*

Branches bucking, gutters spill: a Bass Strait battering
with rain drumming on our tin roof all night, so I pitch
and toss on dreams your letter summons from the vasty
deep of long ago. (We're almost dead, you know.) Then calm,
night drenched with blossom, beyond the curtains the moon's balm
and dawn silent but for the sea's detonations.

At six I get up to write for two hours before school.

I'm a minor poet and poetry's a minor art.

There's no money in it, unless you market yourself
as a kind of shamanistic monster, get about
the world striking poses. Not my scene. I hope to write
some poems that will outlast me and those I love.

I spent twenty years on prose, eight finely written and
over-wrought left-wing novels which publishers read to bits

but never bought. All the literary icons...Yeats,
 Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, Waugh, were fascistic flatterers
 of publishers' prejudices, then grist to the mills
 of academia, who ground them small and made them
 staple fare for years when Englit was the staff of life.
 This ideological industry force-fed sixth-forms
 nearly as successfully as the movies and TV
 fixed those like me, who left before they got their shot
 of Eliot, their dose of Milton, course of Wordsworth and
 the Bard. *Their* lucubrations are selected problems:
 'There are no questions on John Donne's life in the paper,
 no need to talk of that. Stick to the text!' one idiot
 yelled at me. He copied dog-eared notes on the blackboard
 and his students wrote them down, thus got good scores he said.
 He could have been training dogs. I looked for the pleasure of the text:
 It 'must delight before it may instruct', as Sidney said.
 Now 'Education' as valuable for itself
 has gone and universities are inimical
 to writing, to art. Critics, cadres of the state, or
 act like priests and speak the good word in a holy voice.
 Much of the best that is written is suppressed as 'not
 commercial', that is, failing to celebrate the crass
 consciousness of commuters on the Tunbridge Wells train.
 Englit set out to gentle the rough commercial class
 a century ago. Has any class ever been as
 politically costive as the English middle class?
 They could have extruded endless substitute Thatchers!
 That greedy grabber is still no aberration and
 I'm glad I got my children out of that grotesque land.

So I lurk at the periphery, poet, battered
 teacher, published around the world with a nom-de-plume,
 finding my name here had an Aboriginal poet
 in occupation, and a glad sense, just now and then
 that a poem might outlive me...a shrugging fatalist...
 Quite unlike you with your centripetal ambitions,
 displaying your insouciance, Irish Icon O'Clast,
 by passing 'Switching Off' around with the port after
 some regimental feast. (I was really pleased: thank you!)
 Some poet said waiting for response to a poem

was like listening for the echo of a feather
striking the Grand Canyon's floor, but thanks to your sang-froid
my poem caused a small uproar! What wild delight to have
those bastions on the sharp end of my pen: excellent!

Switching Off

A silent tableau on the verandah,
sepia now in a regimental album,
then spurs, red jackets, gold piping and pink gin;
carols over seas of static, the sun
stooping over the hot plain's rim with none
of our British twilight; stars, streets, fireflies
switching on...Decorations, Christmas begun.
Bowtied, cigared and drunk on life, I posed.

At fifty I groan still to remember
how, temporary gentleman, I stood
and chunnered through their shibboleths and codes
until one said "Oh do shut up! ('Not a bad chap'
they said, 'plebeian of speech but could,
with effort, talk, walk, act like an officer.)
Cambridge choired Christ: chill keening. I understood
that public school ghost amongst His colonial troops.

I learned to command, charge, snub, dissemble
from Old Etonians and suave Wykhamists
Dad had obeyed, crawling over clay comrades,
amazed to survive their orders, be missed
by death; shell-shocked-loyal to the flag; pissed
on deference every Remembrance day;
council yard 'Right Marker' shoving a fist
in the Union man's face...Dear dead daft Dad!

Did he stand keen in the ranks in Guyana?
(The elected Blacks turned out too red
until one dawn we called for a recount.)
Finger on trigger at the Berlin Wall said:
'Ours is not to reason why, Sir. Better dead

than slave in mind-forged manacles!' At Ground
Zero cheered President Lemming who led
world taste in candy, missiles and old films.

I could never excuse my sad, sour shame
at his fond pride, nor the need to conceal
family and school. 'A chip-on-the-shoulder'?
Pomeranian crap! What we feel
for our kids is our essence. What ideal
could need its sacrifice? Only the interests
of the powerful to whom such truths reveal
Red Heresy: stubborn, alarming, clearly mad!

And in that charmed group from thirty years
a General, telly star, tycoon: no surprise,
a bland and desiccated Thatcherite
strutting the steps of Number Ten, cold eyes
set on a shop-keepers' nation suffice
for hard-nosed pigs and crabbed elite to prosper,
the holy Hidden Hand (a fist) his device
to let men like Dad enjoy 'Free Enterprise.'

All night the morepork muttered, Tasman hushed.
On a summer morning over static
come fascist carols from that stone cold town
where breeding and logic are emphatic:
no votes for the shiftless! Welfare
thus, like envy, is undemocratic.
I flick the switch. My sons sleep undisturbed.

That poem began one hot Christmas morning in Enzed,
in the Wanganui Quaker Settlement, hearing
the carols from King's College, Cambridge, remembering
the first time I heard them at the hill station, Newcastle,
high in the Jamaican Blue Mountains, where I had marched
my platoon, swinging down the dusty roads like Alexander,
singing and looking tough, then bashed straight up through the bush,
four thousand feet on the tropical southern slope up into cool air.
(What energy! "Fall out!" And then a foot inspection.)

Dinner done, puffing a cheroot with Mike Whatsit-Jones
under lustrous Christmas stars, Kingston far-flickering,
fireflies signalling mass desire, my companion
fell silent and, from his room I heard the boys' voices
pure Englishness like a dream of sad love for something
I did not know and he was in the army to preserve
(Joan Hunter-Dunne or choirboys; the Cotswolds opulent
under snow...) I shut up. His version mattered; the rest
could die for it as had my father's and brothers' friends
in two world wars, and I might still get the chance to do.

Thumped out, published in 'Southerly', in Sydney, for you
to arrange for it to be read, for puce jowls to shake,
bloodshot bull-eyes to start, hairy nostrils snort, brows to
furrow and go down to my red rag, is excellent!

*

Hail yesterday driving home, flailing, flashing, turning
paddocks briefly white whilst down below in Westernport Bay
Southern Ocean swells explode, make a rocking-horse of
a tanker, the pilot boat surf home to the surging quay.
Such a wind, tearing the heads off waves, recalling our seven
Old Testament years on the Orkney shore whence we fled
from suburban death and Philosophy.

There we met
Husband Number Two, a contumacious painter who,
on being displaced by Husband Number Three, took off
with a lovely Sixth-Former he'd taught, did a frigid
Gauguin admirably. Number Three I met on the set
of 'This Is Your Life', a short, fierce tenor who plays giants
(photographed by dwarfs). When I returned to Tasmania
I told this odd fact to a paunchy drama teacher
whose professional skill moved me across Bass Strait: "I
was," he said, "Husband Number One!" Orkney, UK, Tas:
bizarre. A trio of tyro Falstaffs of the same
age, girth and height and a querulous disposition,
to frame the lady's performance on the silver screen.
Ah such nonsense cutting through life's crass contingencies!
How many mad coincidences do we just miss?

Why does the distant, massive sun fit snugly under
our tiny moon? Some non-causal law rough hews our ends;
a spooky morphology of events beyond our sense.

(The Unified Field Theory posits eight dimensions;
perhaps we can only ever know a half of it!)

I mention this because, when I last saw you, you told me that,
haphazard, you became fate's fickle finger to us all,
when posted as Liaison Officer to Brigade.

On exercise somewhere in Westphalia, you turned
a verbal order, 1630, the time to attack,
into four-thirty, then captured a Flemish driver
who was so scared he left his handbrake off so his jeep
went smashing from one tree to the next, told the Colonel
1430, bit your lip and fled. So did he! **FLAP!**

I had six ant-tank guns dug in deep in a wood
to extract, stores and ammunition to load, carriers
to couple up...We needed those two hours you misplaced,
but hit the start-line flat out. It was a bloody rout!

I recall a golden, Autumn afternoon, shadows
stroboscopic as we bashed through woods, peaceful hamlets,
gears screaming, tracks churning dust, and nothing to stop us,
opposition absent, umpires unprepared...

We shot
straight through some Belgian outfit, led by that swine Oojah
announcing his code named objectives on the Command Net
like Montgomery, whilst you, back at Brigade hid in a shed,
spied on the orchard where the Brigadier, deck-chaired, snored,
stalked the while by that six-foot-six mantis from The Buffs,
the Brigade Major, rubbing his anxious hands, his war map
gone berserk, smelling a rat. Behind his back 'Sunray'
woke up, saw our success, got on net without looking
at the time, and handed out bouquets. Other units,
grinding their teeth, could but applaud what was recorded
by then at Division and Army Corps. Stiff upper.

You never said. Some might have thought you had contrived a
crafty coup, but what we all knew was hero Oojah
got promoted, jumped the queue, then did for those poor sods
he had at last surpassed. Vaughan, who had always pipped him

at the post, got posted to Oman; Bray grabbed his bowler;
Beasthurst disappeared into admin. Oojah, meantime,
Oinked in triumph, both feet in the trough, and quite believed
his latent abilities had at last shone through. Porcine ploys
ensued. I got the usual: every job he
could arrange: on top of commanding the anti-tank
platoon, I was in charge of Civil Labour, Messing
for eight hundred other ranks...and the Officers' Mess too.
I was Fire officer; in charge of the Pioneers,
and on the First Fifteen too, which trained hard each day, played
twice a week and usually won. 'Uppity', I was.
I think it meant I was not well enough bred to be
a good example as Senior Subaltern to the rest.
He was a bachelor, a 'food-porn freak' now we'd say.
I only have to think of him ladling his soup from
the tureen a waiter held, his pinkie crooked, to feel ill.
Ach-y-fe!

In some areas I was vulnerable
to a serious charge if there were problems in accounts,
but I worked out that if I walked out late from the Mess,
up his window would go, he'd scream my name, I'd salute,
accept three extra orderly officers, knowing
for that week I was off his list and had time to set
my affairs straight whilst he was tormenting someone else.
He was the pits. I saw murder in mess servants' eyes
at his drunken : "Best army in the world? Brish offsaahs;
Jarman trups!" Well the old guard did for Oojah at last.
"His father was an agent: the sort of chap you might
ask to tea, but not to dinner," said Charlie Bingham.
So major was the peak of his brilliant career and then
he ended as a swineherd in Kent, courtesy of you.

*

Four a.m. Silence so complete the pulse drums in my ear.
My wife is curled against the fact of a liver biopsy
next week. I'm careful getting up, go out, take a pee
(Isn't it supposed to be good for a lemon tree?)
myopia making snowflakes of stars, a blizzard
of the night. Lenin's headmaster was Kerensky's dad

(uniqueness is our eternity) at Simbirsk,
in Middle Volga, middle of nowhere, and argued
that the bright lad should have a university place,
although his elder brother had been executed
for anti-tsarist violence. In such punishments,
internal exile, gulags, use of secret police,
Lenin's Bolsheviks were traditionalists, of course,
and put a stop to abstract nonsense like Kerensky's
democracy, fought off Brits, Yanks, Japs, the White armies,
and took the Soviet Union from scythes to space,
from a medieval state to a super power
in fifty years, defeating the Nazis in world war -
our part in that was a side-show. Let me tell you of
my Russian 'Addlestrop': the train stopped in birch woods in
the middle of the night. The line ran thousands of miles
East/West; in a hut below the track a light shone bright:
two railwaymen played chess and a woman watched; no one
moved for long minutes before we left. Again I slept.

It's odd how Marx's ideas about revolution -
based on the bourgeoisie having played its mad role
in the industrial West until nothing's left to sell
('the cash-register on the ash heap', as Morris said)
and institutions start to collapse (marriage, the church,
democracy, the family, 'education') and
politics to stink - became a 'red-print' to yoke the peasants
of the agrarian East, involve them in 'progress',
and a moral cause to keep cadres honest.
for a time, and when that was up, a terrible template
to reveal counter-revolutionary values,
incompetence, corruption, sloth, as the Party required...
When Gorbachev stopped terror state capitalism collapsed
into Russia's reality: a drunken chaos.

Do you think, when Raygun spent two trillion
on 'defence' and read the script they gave him about 'Gard',
'Evil Empires', 'Armageddon' and being 'raptured'
straight up to heaven with true believers the minute
he pressed the tit, the Russians concluded that that culture

was also mad? Perhaps they understood that those
who had bank-rolled the dude would now not only make vast
profits and get their taxes cut, but by Keynesian
state spending, soak up the world's credit, accelerate
U.S.growth, and win the armaments race. 'Greed is good.'
When Gorbachev offered a total nuclear ban,
the President Ray Gun's cue cards slipped from his shocked hands.
On his knees in Icelandic snow Ronnie scabbled for
the right reply but came up inarticulate, so
power, unmediated by property, was snatched
from Gorbachev. Economic Rationalism won,
freeing the rich from socialist vertigo, allowing
them back to the good old days of cutting welfare and
taxes, selling national assets to their mates, and
outlawing trade unions whilst tuning the right-wing press.

I must say, the only time I went to America,
the Boeing dropped through cloudy Californian skies and
wham! **BETHLEHEM STEEL** glared from a roof like a slogan
in the long war in Arabia about Jewish
and US interests, and especially oil.

I bet half that hi-tech weaponry, made for profit,
not for use, will fail to function in the desert sand...

I don't suppose that Adolf Hitler planned to increase
aggregate demand and climb out the slump by spending
on 'defence' any more than Reagan has. Listen, I recall
Colonel Bivouac, at dawn on the Teuterborgerwald,
sipping a steaming mug of tea against the frost - poor
old guy, all of forty-three. We had slept under pines,
digging a hollow for the hip, making a mound for
the head, ice on a chap's moustache,,,. Staring down at an
autobahn, he said: "Two legions and their Eagles
the Romans lost here. Never got much beyond the Rhine
after that...Huns waited another two thousand years
for a spot of firm government and straight roads."

Then he bent his big Huguenot head to the mug's rim.
He is dead now, I suppose. Why didn't you like him?

Did you not know that his dear wife called him 'My angel'?

*

It recommends you to me that you met my first son.
His life was so brief that so few will remember him.
Haydn and Katie sat round-eyed together to see
this old army friend of their father's who had arrived
from nowhere. It was evening and the yellow leaves
outside were full of Autumn sun. You were successful,
I was in despair because, after all my efforts at
Oxford, I could not get a job I wanted, taught kids
part-time and wrote a novel that took almost four years...

You told me how some managing director that day,
had tried to commandeer the desk at which he had sat
for years until your company took over. You said
you had been obliged to point out that it was not his,
but had taken it upon yourself to give it him:
display corporate magnanimity, I supposed.

Had I known what was coming, I should have despised my
vapourings, the sense that the world was unjust to me,
as if something else was to blame other than myself.
I was bitter, hateful, harsh: a fool to think there was
purpose in the plot...Life and death's gratuitousness
was demonstrated by an old man in a Renault
who could not miss a nine-year old running for his life.

I can still see him walking away with his sister
and his mum, all holding hands and hurrying for the train
and me so grumpy about nothing, I hardly said
goodbye. Two nights later, miles away, I kicked the leaves
I kicked before, crisp chestnut hands along stone walls
around my school next to the hospital, squeezed my heart
into the Pennine night in an anguish for my son.

I found I believed that if everyone who knew him
prayed, all might be well. I went back to the porters' room,
wanting a light for my cigarette, opened the door
and found an old man, porn. mag, propped, strumming his banjo,
gaping like a Francis Bacon pope, fright made him come.
Beyond the wall my wife was hunched under the weight of
grief; nearby our lovely boy lay critically ill.

I walked away, stood and watched a cold Sunday dawning
over the slates.

For six-and-a-half weeks his grey eyes
saw nothing, the green hose in his throat sustained him, but
a week before Christmas under balloons and holly
caring nurses hung, he died. Sometimes I remember
something that he said, or did, and gasp his name, as if
he hears me still.

Family Album

Dead son, dead son, I can no longer
hold you in my mind
as once I held you in my arms:
it can't be done, it can't be done.

So I arrange your smiles,
print dates, chart your curve
beyond our knowing, only here
in God's gravity record the faint pulse
of love's disproof of time and space.

Do you want me to explain about
the pointless talk of Beckett's trousered apes? Poems
left running with reason disconnected? Warhol's films
of six hours of urban nothing? Paintings without skill
or content? Music without a hope or harmony?

*

Time in Australia's out of joint: September's Spring
and nursery rhymes don't work; as I write, up early,
you are off to bed; this carved chair, this gate-legged table,
like much else we inherited, have become antique,
as old, older, than the settlement itself, but not
the land, which will not imitate our art, is remote
and endless bush, desert scrub, unremitting ranges.

The biblical flood breached low hills at river mouths to
flood great plains and make the peninsula where we live
between these bays: ten thousand years ago. At that time
the landbridge South went down and Tasmanian Aborigines,
by generations, came to believe they were alone

until we brought them siphilisation, another gulag.

I'll swear Wells took the scenario for 'War of the Worlds'
from the way the aliens made a killing line, advanced,

but *their* viruses triumphed too: thus a most efficient
genocide would ensue. Floreat Pomerania!

Tasmanian skulls were curios, hacked off.

They even sent pickled dicks back into the lovely

sunset of the Pax Britannica. When I arrived

I could not understand the 'Greenie' fuss about tree-felling

until I saw runty hard-hats with tatts, Mexican

mo's and chain saws, or even worse, in huge machines with

smokes in gobs and six-packs, trashing ancient woods, in line
slaughtering everything alive. What's left of settlement

is often trees, huge macrocarpas, stands of conifers

to shield the green paddocks of their families who, now

it's easy and they've nothing else to do, saw them down,

then up. (Some hate pines and cats because they say that

they displace native species, a kind of displaced guilt

for the racism many project on real Australians.)

The candles of the conifers became, via Albert,

the wax variety for Christmas, which here is cotton wool

stuck on shop windows in forty degree heat. I heard

that in Japan yule symbolism is further confused:

shop windows have displayed Santa crucified like an
unfortunate garden gnome. There is a drawing of

Jupiter Capitolinus...some listless Romans

lingering by the enormous god's absurd bare foot.

Quite mad.

We're in a similar sad stretch of history.

Here a hundred generations sang the same songlines.

The Bunurong drifted along the track which balanced
their lives easily, used half-a-day to hunt or gather,

the rest was spent, like our surfies, on the beach.

Their songs sang sense into this land, harmonised birth, death,

stars like megaliths in Orkney, enduring in that

wind-thrashed, treeless land, tethering a cosmology

which grew in the fifteen-sixteenths of our species' time

before the Bronze Age. Maeshowe, a Neolithic tump

like an earthen belly, had a womb of corbelled stone

long before the Egyptians had their building blocks, and
a passage, a vagina, which took in the red light
of the sun's mid-winter death to warm the cold bones stored:
the year turned, days lengthened, crops and sun resurrected
like Jesus from the earth...eventually summer,
when brief night burned golden and the seas like glory shone
before the quickening decline back to Arctic dark
(the flower turned fruit lay underground) when the kids' bus
lights shone first and last and crazy weather screamed, spume flew
inland, fragrant peats burned bright in the hearth, windows flexed.
What a place! The best and brightest, year by year, leave school
for the South and leave the rest to buy and sell what's left,
a duplicitous peasantry, never missing a chance.
We went there at forty, after that suburban death
and three years of bitter academic fights, turned left
on the Great North Road for John o'Groats, caravan behind.
In eight years I had gone from Oxford undergraduate
to Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, and I
had had enough of charming liberal ideologues,
who claimed, and had academic grunt to make it good,
that their usage was universalizable, was
good as logic itself. It's a kind of derangement,
akin to Heidegger's claim for echt deutsch at the time
of the Third Reich, of course, but it had the functional
virtue of reaching the excellent conclusion that
only the educated could be good, because they could
explain their moral reasons for doing what they did,
an inversion of Lukac's belief that reality
is only apparent to proles at the bottom of
the heap...

All my life I have wanted to write and paint.
What was I doing there, proving myself yet again!
Exit left, and the bliss of days with our three children
spent in such silence that gulls' wings were loud, and bubbles
popping from soft drinks in the mouth made sounds never heard,
delighting children. When it wasn't raining. you could
see Dounreay's fast-breeder's diabolical balls white in
Sutherland across the Pentland Firth...Orcadians think
La Dolce Vita starts about Perth, the tropics at
Edinburgh. (It is odd, this psychic geography

of the Northern Yob and Southern Slob, one hard, one soft,
work and sloth...Italy, Germany, France...Wasn't there
somewhere like Alsace which found its veggie trade came late,
instead of first, after the border moved? Nobody
knew where they were! Many were beside themselves. Some
were so lost that they never quite found themselves again.

From here the Northern hemisphere is where those cold, grim
Protestants come from to force-feed us Christmas pud and
all that heavy tucker when the thermometer is
pushing over forty; worse still, insist that everyone
does what they are second-best at as it's harder work
(like philosophy) than what comes easiest but best
(like art): 'no gain without pain'. We resist ('She'll be right!
Bloody oath, cobber, hard yakka's the punishment for
Original Sin, a top lurk for those bishoprics
at Nicaea, no sweat.)

I mean, it's quite plain that you
were not meant to be a millionaire, father of five,
but a parish priest. Without your camel-hump of sin
and swag of guilt, the Gates of Heaven would fly open
and let you in. It doesn't matter how often you
go to church or say your prayers, it is the humble
and meek who get the nod, and you'll be off to hell, poor
sod! Give it away, mate! Do it, dear boy, while there's time!
No longer promising young men, our options foregone,
yet I continue to address you (and our differences)
as you remain in memory, full-lipped and bug-eyed,
high-bummed and bow-legged with a crazy laugh, as you were
when I last saw you in Berlin thirty-odd years ago.
No doubt you are now a grey haired, pin-striped sprawler
at the business end of aircraft, cracking European
skies and Russian markets, cars waiting, aides at your elbow
tapping laptops, whispering on mobiles, and you need
to hold the number of zeroes steady whilst chatting,
waiting for X to say Y to Z as you arranged.
Dear boy, I much admired the way that you handled things
in this matter of the minister defenestrated
by Herself for, not so much breaching cabinet trust
as broaching its dumb golf club bar room banality.

'Krauts are not gentlemen!' Shortly before this leak or
incontinence, finding that you were due to fly back
from Moscow like him, your secretary 'phones his to
find what flight he's on...Begorra, Bog-Trotter, they're
on you like a Basset Hound upon an Irish mole!
You're the IRA planning to blow up another
of the chaps! 'Who me? Yes, you!' Questions begin, but you
explain you only wanted to brown-nose the minister.
Those public school chaps perfectly understood. You were
an absolute Horatio at Heathrow, fending off
the Press with your furled broly while the garrulous ex-
minister runs for it. A bar to your OBE!

I think you have become 'Figaro', our fiction from
Berlin, actor on the world's stage with silver-topped cane,
opera cloak, white gloves, an eyebrow which could cause chaos!
I always wanted to be the famous cricketer,
Sir Compton Mackenzie, but you have carried it through!
'Figaro', like 'Feuer Eins', the u-boat captain, lifting
a chair seat with his head and meeting 'Commander Crab',
the daring diver who spoke in bubbles, were our bored
supplement to that continual mess party on
Sunday mornings for officers and their wives at which
everyone said exactly what they had always said.
A taste for absurdity united us then as
now, when you are a capitalist culture hero
and I'm at the antipodes, teacher, poet, as far
from commodity values and Thatcher as I can get.

We ran Charlie Company together in Berlin;
I was O.C. and got captain's pay. I've a photograph
of us rubbing our white string gloves in self-
congratulation and the Sergeant Major red-sashed,
bright-booted, all rapt attention, but really in charge...
and pallid, autumn sunlight amongst the silver birch
against the Russian Zonal Wire, a wide fire-strip cleared,
the Vopos' weapon slits and two hundred miles before
you reached safety at the British Occupation Zone.
There is my hard-muscled youth, the rugger-player with
a military moustache; company commander

and full of myself; of love's languor, male vanity.
"Can she sing, Sir?" the Sergeant Major asked politely,
"because she's got canary legs." I was not best pleased.
Almost every night I went out shuffling around
nightclubs with all the hysteria of Troy, then at her
Foreign Office requisitioned flat, practised hard our
horizontal rumba. She said she was a widow,
twenty-nine (both untrue) and at dawn I would walk cold,
cobble streets, take a taxi, in my dinner jacket,
wave to those going off early for muster parade.
I thought that I was no end of a dog...

I recall

one hot afternoon at the Kranzler, she told me that
her husband had served with Commander Crabbe, our hero,
who disappeared beneath Kruschev's cruiser at Portsmouth,
and I believed her. The Germans (not Gents) wore jackets
on their shoulders, gulped coloured ice creams; reverentially
with a fork, I ate fruit cake, was nonplussed; flabbergasted
when she took a week's leave and came back engaged: a chap
in the Hussars, she said. She drove out to Kladow in
her new Sunbeam Alpine and we walked along the lake
whilst she told me in phrases she had rehearsed or read,
kissed me benevolently, and drove away. I stood
on a wooden quay in the dusk, water slapping, a
duck quacking, waiting for some pain. It did not arrive.
I walked the miles back in soft rain, told no-one before:
her husband was MI5, had been in Hanover,
now was posted back, and I, a lusty, silly lad,
I had been had.

That sealed train from Charlottenburg out
to the British Zone, where we crossed the tracks and brought
the next back to Berlin, I commanded on the night
after Minto had caused the Russians aggravation
in his Bolshie way. Nobody told me. You remember
it was Suez time and Berlin was a screw the Russians
tightened or released as suited them. Well I got screwed.

I sat in a heap, trying to keep awake, outside
East Germany in deep winter, few lights at 2 a.m....

then the brakes went on...

We were stopped in a snowy cleft:
even when I found the right code the radio was
kaput. The train guards stood by their locked doors. A window
was opened. I looked out, the night ice-cold. Under a
platform light a Russian captain stood with fur-hatted
infantrymen, Kalashnikovs held at the high port.
As he began to shout, I withdrew into the sighing,
sleeping train. I had suspected that I might be a
coward. Now I was sure I would not be able to
speak, went and sat down, and wished there was something to drink.
The Warrant Officer saluted, Interpreter behind.

My chief concern was to climb down icy steps,
not fall down on my arse in snow. Gas guttered above
gothic script, black on yellow, I could not read. Snow fell.
When I stepped forward they began to march. I waited.
Forty booted feet thumped down the train, arms stiff, hard-faced.
One skidded on the halt and cheered me. Face to face
the Russian Captain was taller, red hair, pale blue eyes,
he'd done it all before. I saluted. So did he;
began to shout Slavonic gouts of steam at close range.
Theatre. No one was going to shoot. He shut up.
He had a strong face, a bastard right enough. I said,
over my shoulder, my voice seeming weak, "Interpreter?"
"The Captain wants passports and all travel documents."
I began to protest as Standing Orders on board
required. He turned on his heel, walked off. His troops eyed me.
There was nothing to do but comply.

Back on board, warm,
I left the Sergeant Major to get what was needed
from the passengers, soldiers on leave, in sleepers were
civilians and families. Outside the Russians stamped
and cursed in drifting flakes. I heard the door bang open,
his shouts in the silent train. His eyes glittered, face red,
the sentry's boot was near his head. "Please tell him," I said,
"that as we are by way of doing him a favour,
he might be so good as to control his impatience."
Before the Interpreter could start he slammed the door
like an explosion.

It was easier when we got out

this time. He snatched the papers, then took his hands away.

His men laughed loudly. So did I, aware that I was supposed, on behalf of the Western World, to lose face.

It was absurd. He removed my smile. He tapped his rank epaulette, pointed at mine: captain, first lieutenant.

“He says he ranks you, Sir, so on the way back you must get off first with all the docs collected or he will

shunt us up a siding and uncouple the engine and we can all freeze to death so far as he’s concerned.”

I left him and the W.O. squatting, picking them up, and looked at the Standing Orders, which you will recall were emended and amended, frayed, torn and dog-eared and had been in use for years before Suez started.

They said we stayed on board unless requested to alight. Off we went to Helmstedt, the signaller sending those dumb code words. There was no reply.

Repeat performance.

Exactly, except he did not shout, his points made, waved a salute, lit a smoke, trudged off through the snow. I thought I should hate his job, accepted the passports as they were picked up.

The next problem was to write the report that went straight in the General’s in-tray, half-asleep.

It was a lovely morning. I strolled down the strasse to the Garrison Officers’ Club, ate breakfast, sat back satisfied the Company was in your safe hands!

I felt I had earned a short break, but when I got back it was straight to the Colonel’s office...My report!

“Oh shit’, I thought, but old Neville was smiling: “Well done!” I remember that I thought at last I had become a part of things just as I was about to depart.

Strange, unreal life! I never knew (Did you?) what Minto had done, but he was an excellent example of the English warrior caste that trembles with self-love or hate and had a stiff-necked need to dominate. (He liked breaking sergeants. I remember his face when he told how he caught out 35 Jones)...It seemed surreal to me. My sole concern had been a view of myself backing

carefully down the steps in my bourgeois British Warm,
the perfumed representative of the effete West,
and debouching arse-first into their cold reality!

The only other time when things got really daft was
beating through the South Atlantic night and swells towards
British Guiana when that part of the Free World elected
some Marxists, I sat loading my pistol in the stern
of a frigate, spray hissing past, the wake white beyond
the thrumming screen rigged with nautical skill so we could
watch 'King Solomon's Mines' instead of the cane fields
burning beyond Georgetown before our smashing bows.
I wondered if the rounds I held were due for some sod's head,
because I would have pulled the trigger: that was the job.
Ridiculous! I bore no animosity, some did,
but my concerns were to understand orders, ensure
thirty fusiliers understood theirs. No cock ups!

I remember one sad soldier lying, turning and
vomiting overboard, then watching the movie of
imperial derring-do and oiling his Bren gun
and stars enormous and paling as dawn pursued us
behind the silver screen. Sunday morning, 5 a.m.
That's the time to invade! Floreat Pomgolia!

*

My wife's in hospital. I saw her last evening,
ribs punctured by a liver probe, white and sickened when
she has been so well, so full of enthusiasm for
her work as a teacher of English and work skills to
Chileans, Vietnamese, Hong Kong Chinese, French speakers from
Mauritius, Jugoslavs...Such an anxious throng impels
her that she leaves at seven, gets home by six, prepares
lessons for next day: an excellent teacher! Her life
has been acts and efforts of the will, she can't be still
if there's work to do. Four children wanted for nothing
in loving care; still don't. We were fourteen when we met,
cycling secretly to Adlington where, with a flourish
at the tearooms, I bought lemonades, gave her a poem

and a kiss when we left, cycled apart, she uphill,
me down to the plain. Who was to know how, years later,
we would glance speechlessly at each other, flying past
that place, trying to keep up with the ambulance which
carried our son?

From the First of November until
December eighteenth each year, I remember how we
held his hands each day, our own, making a circuit of
love, willing him to breath again, but his grey eyes stared,
could not see the last leaves fall beyond the windows
of Intensive Care, first flakes of snow. Poor little boy.
A week before Christmas, in the middle of the night,
we did not hear the telephone in her mother's house.
Her brother came banging: go quick! From Macclesfield to
Manchester: three-quarters of an hour. As we walked in,
his respirator was switched off. His heart had failed once,
his brain was dead. A surgeon, impatient for his kidneys,
paced. They wanted us to go, to save another life.
New snow bandaged the empty streets. On the back seat we
put, the Alan Garner book, his bookmark halfway through
covered in daft drawings, locomotive names; soft toy...

Our bed was still warm. Nothing ever had been so cold
as his sweet face in our hands. Weeping, we made love:
he might intercede. We made him once, might we not again?
My wife conceived that dawn. Nine months to the day, Emrys
was born. A year and a month after him, Llywelyn.
One pace would have kept Haydn from death, these two from life.
Now Emrys takes part in History, bashes at
the Berlin Wall we helped to build when we were that age.
(He went back to Orkney, found our old house run down, sat
an hour in the ruined Earl's Palace, hoping for a sense
of his childhood there, found familiarity only
in the ageless dipping flow, from Brough to loch and back,
of the sharp-winged kittiwakes; bicycled back to his
future, called his linguist brother in Tokyo...

It is
twenty years ago since we left England to escape
that beastly bourgeoisie: Edinburgh was as distant

as Bergen from Orkney, the hub of the Viking world,
and still Norse inflections confused our ears, but our kids
soon talked like natives and the Ola boomed deep as Bach,
churning the Sound of Hoy, so Stromness town came to life
and far off crofters paused, building beehive stacks beneath
the cloudless, high, immaculate skies of Northern blue...
but when the Autumn gales began our poor caravan
had to be roped down lest, like the washing, it took off
for Scandinavia; the days and nights were rent and torn
by crazy winds, the treeless islands hosed by stinging
rain and hail. Sudden frost made ice-storms, downed power lines
and glazed the roads. We rented a cottage, walked stiff shores
for kindling and bought peats.

On bonfire night the sparks
went flying pagan down the stubble like burning thatch
and the Merry Dancers swished and reeled about the Pole.
Frost sculpted Skara Brae, the turf hard as the stones laid
four thousand years ago, the space between the houses
foul midden, silted warmth; chambers neat with box-beds, shelves.
The bay they walked to now at the doors, moon-bitten, white;
curlews in hundreds desolate above the waves' roar.

*

Rugged up in the tethered caravan I tapped away
at Novel Number Six (about an academic
who escapes everything but his mid-life crisis...)
and applications for jobs to get a mortgage for
a place big enough to accommodate university,
college, school groups, establish a field and arts centre.
I wanted to teach English, as I had taught before
Oxfraud, and found I could once more for Francis Cammaerts,

Such a man! A hero of the Resistance, the sort
you hope will give you an order to die or something!
He began the last war a pacifist, ended it
with a breast full of medals from Allied Powers;
commanded the Maquis, outwitted Klaus Barbie and
sabotaged the German retreat from American
landings in the South of France; went back to the classroom,

became a Head, then at the 'Trial of Lady Chat,' was amazed by the question: "Would you allow your womenfolk or servants to read this book?" Floreat Pomerania.

At least in Australia nobody tries much to hand down the word on morals, taste, or Grod. We quite enjoyed those screams of 'Antichrist!' from High Tories at some bishop who dared suggest their policies for screwing the poor were unchristian, and the way Thatcher called down lightning to blast his belfry the next night. (No wonder the Left's got the shits!) I sometimes think reality occurs elsewhere, via the TV screen and satellites, and that's why Australian life has this fictional nature, but I think it's so everywhere: civilisation is a kind of trance in which people drift, demanding 'entertainment': vicarious excitements, drugs of various sorts, and the rest of the world's a theme park!

Prior to Oxford I worked for Francis at Leicester Teachers' College. In Kenya he became Professor of Education; returned to Rolle College where, for three years, I worked for him, and then at sixty-five, he went to Botswana, set up teacher training there. Quel homme! At seventy-odd he lurks, a Forest Troll, in Southern France in the woods where once he ran, never slept twice in the same place, one jump ahead of Barbie, satanic torturer and future CIA man.

*

So I was a termly commuter between Orkney and Devon: left home at seven, took the Scrabster ferry; began South at eleven on moorland roads...Brora, Golspie, Tain; Inverness for lunch and off again on the new oil roads through the Grampians to Perth, Stirling and the Borders; dinner on the M6; Carlisle, South in the dark through the Fells and then the sprawl where one place is another, is a blur; there's rain, smog trucks ignore; Spaghetti Junction and the M5 empty, country sleeping, maybe a moon and Concert Programme soothing

through Bristol, Somerset, balmy air of Devon... Sleep
until the afternoon in the silence of my room...

Sometimes I took the train from Exmouth, where the station
no longer was the point where the parallel lines of
the posters of my youth arrived with families, bags,
exhausted kids, for their week or two of holiday
each year. Now litter blew, glass was smashed and palm trees drooped
neglected...A single-track to Exeter, express
to Crewe, then at midnight, a sleeper to Inverness,
woken like a Buchan hero with tea and biscuits,
outside often low sun wincing off the snowfields where
white hares ran, the air keen...And the epic flight Northwards
to the islands through iron skies above Pentland Firth,
squat crofts on Hoy and fat black careless cows on Mainland
as we came down, and there was Mim and the children so
pleased to see me home again, smiling and hugging, telling
me everything that had happened as Mim drove the car.
How poignant these moments which return to parents long
after children have grown up and away, or are dead.

Ah, that numbing air, the bleak Atlantic winds about
the remote house above the Orkney shore where my wife
organised courses, cooked for thirty plus, kept accounts,
cared for our wee bairns with Katie's help from late June to
early September. Such arduous times. We took in groups
for art, archaeology, botany, birds...all stations
to zoology, from Britain and the United States,
and like the rest of nature, had only a few months
to get our business done before the Autumn gales.

Meantime I kept terms as a temporary lecturer
in one of those tired seaside towns where bowls click all day
and trim municipal gardens' benches are well filled
with dreaming wrinklies. I had a unit in a mansion's
mellow gardens full of high old trees and established
shrubs and plants which enchanted my Orkney children
who trotted the mossy paths and climbed...Warden, I was,
of hostels full of charming girls, student-teachers, who
went off to practise in Devon and Cornwall, where I

drifted among empty hotels, watched them teach, then walked
tourist-free shores, gull-fluttered empty streets, lay in starched,
cold sheets and listened to church clocks strike the hours.
There was a sense of ending even then, something gone
otiose and strange as bean-counters assembled.
Sometimes in the corridors of the old house where we
taught English I'd hear my colleagues going on about
'Tess', 'Maggie Tulliver', 'The Fisher-King' and linger:
that was what I was supposed to do, display a kind
of professional familiarity, treat these
fictive icons as old friends to whom students might be
introduced. One chap, 'The Anaesthetist' the students
called him, I could see across an angle of the walls,
head back, addressing the high ceiling about Wordsworth,
students staring vacant, doodling notes, having a doze.

One day, zooming along on the dual carriageway
which swerved round Herrick's church, by coincidence listening
to Quirk singing a Herrick song, the radio broke;
at Launceston the starter stopped; in St. Ives the Rover's
timing-chain gave way. That was that. "A Doctor's car",
my mother said. Every Sunday afternoon I drove
to Tiverton where, for fifteen years, my parents lived,
retired, growing their flowers, watching TV, the Exe,
and for the post for letters from my brothers in Transvaal.

The Solace of Art

There should come a time when life would resolve
simple as astronauts' Earth ...but the parent beyond
the morning mirror stares back baffled still.
'Dad..?' I always got the same reply: 'Keep carrying on.
Say nowt.'

By my age, his muscles gone
thanks to the market's munificence, he was off on his bike,
by six at his offices, his morning humiliations,
the man-of-the-house 'off the tools, on the dusters and vac.'
He was rough on Mum's expert advice until he pitched

face-first in the ditch, heart-broken. 'Tat-ta, May,'
but they got him back, grey-faced until he could grasp
his pension.

Again and again he met Spring's offensive with his spade,
retreating only before Winter to his hearth;
except on Thursdays every blaspheming week for Evensong
from some cathedral up and down the land,
basso profundo in his armchair, echoing those last
sounds of Christendom, sense worn away like stone with use,
tunes shaped sure and strange as scythes,
sunset guady above the rows of empty pews.

'Christ!' he said, when I drove him up the Malverns,
all Wales at his back, and pointed out Worcester,
Hereford, Gloucester, spires Langland would have seen,
sharp above the Midlands' fug. 'Space rockets
to search for a sky god,' I suggested,
'stuck on millennial hold.'

He said nothing at first,
squinting across the shires, then softly,
'Talk bloody sense.'

Dad died at eighty; Mother continues, ninety next
in Boksburg, but then, Sunday by Sunday, off we went
by Bampton to Watchet or Minehead for tea, or South
to Dartmouth and Torbay, enjoying the walnut dash
and leather of 'the doctor's car' which I left for scrap
in St. Ives, where I often stayed... and once
attended a debate, organised by furious Auty,
in which luminaries like Colin Wilson took part.
The gallery was crammed. I remember a model,
or so I guessed, advertising, striking a pose by
a pillar in front of the bearded and arty mob,
and then a most vehement and baffled argument
which galloped around the landscape with many bangs, no blood,
before someone realised that the published topic
to do with the role of 'art history' had been heard

by most as 'artistry'! They hardly paused, talked rubbish,
lost the plot, insulted each other...Excellent stuff!

*

After three years I went back to help run the Centre,
to paint and write, play with my kids, count the waves and clouds...
There were two one-man shows in Edinburgh, a TV interview...
The boys spoke broad, at Stromness Academy Katie did well...

Then Pandora released the Furies of the English:
the taxes of the rich were cut by adding to an
inflation of eight percent a further seven via
Value Added Tax - pure class war. More income causes
the wealthy to work harder and invest more (abroad);
less purchasing power has the same effect on proles.
The Treasury's operational Keynesian
model of the economy was defenestrated,
public wealth scheduled to be expropriated; unions
liquidated, 'wet' liberal values attacked. Thus
'efficiency', defined by profit, replaced ethics;
vulgarity, venality held sway: invasion
by 'economic rationalists' was underway.
Which swine said 'If you have them by the balls their hearts
and minds will follow?' Returning, it seems to me plain
he wasn't wrong. Friends display a jovial ruthlessness
and old acquaintances are better not trusted much.

*

& In Orcadia

20th August, 1908

'Between weathers calm in the world's afternoon.
One smokes and ponders probability; the other
lays down a wash, high Northern blue
over Scapa Flow's imperial depths,
the braided race, the glittering shores of Hoy

his Mummy's friend has bought, where they will stay:
Duncan, juiciest of the Bloomsberries,
long of life and limb (six-five and 93)
has slipped from cousin Lytton, on Brinkie's Brae
sees peat smoke colonnade his huge view

of rounded hills and the far-off southern isles,
Cava and Flotta, then starts again, diluting
from the zenith, his charged brush steady
as it still will be when he is kilted among
the Clan Incontinent, Edwardian relic.

White-maas plane about the shrouded herring fleet
Bare foot below on Third World wharves salt-sharp
fishwives get to the guts of things and Maynard's mind
bursts into algebraic flower. 'In the long-run,'
he said, 'we are all dead!' and laughed and reached.

Clever bugger, he could browbeat Bertrand;
at Versailles make plain the reason why;
resign at Germany's blinding (As I write,
after sixty years the walls are falling);
an outsider, rich by insider trading,

he saw the hidden hands, how greed replaced
by reason might let the commonwealth begin.
Ah he would marry a Russian ballerina!
Father the World Bank! Arts Council! I.M.F!
...but on that far Orcadian afternoon,
loud with the beat of wings, in Duncan's arms he slept.

There's an Orcadian shell which, being pink,
Is called a 'silver willy' and when I Thatchered off
I took a pocketful. At Terminal Three, Heathrow,
There's one in a shrub tub; Pacific Hotel, L.A.,
By the front door palm; by night in Honolulu I
Contrived to hurl two in the shrubbery; then Nandi, Fiji,

Almost defeated me: it's mithering mynahs
In the grass; at Auckland in a flower bed; lastly
Wellington, Day's Bay: in Bill and Karen's wall...And then
I girdled the Earth with silver willies: a crack in
The sacred Sydney Opera House; down a bog in
Bombay, et viola! My geosculpture positioned
With the spell: 'Silver Willy, Silver Willy, try to
Make the world less silly! Alack, it seems not to have worked!

*

I self-efface, apologise too quick
For some Australians. They suspects such quirks,
Cultivate use of their surname by kids:
I can't handle that tough equality;
To me it still demeans as it did when
I was at school. It's deep, such a feeling.
Nor do I much like kids to call me 'sir'.
I must have such things clear.

A legacy

Of Pomerania. The army's 'off'sas
And other ranks' is the essential
Englishness; the rule 'No talk in the Mess
Of politics or ladies or God' is
Conservative hegemony, it is
Suppression, not only of dispute, but
Intelligence. ('Your are not paid to think!)
One aspires to amiable stoicism.
'Good breeding' is this inert, complacent
Response...and the confidence of power.
When it's never questioned, one century
After another, breeds daft flippancy,
Philistinism and a certainty that
Politics is no more than common sense.
Any other idea's ridiculous
In polite society. Ulysses' speech
From 'Troilus and Cressida' on our need
For hierarchy and order in the state
Is all the 'theory' Tories ever had.
(Ethologists have shown baboons taken

From the dominant male's over-bearing
Glare are just as bright as democratic
Chimpanzees.) Imagine then my surprise
To find the Sconcing Rule at Oxford! No
Talk in hall of politics, god or sex
Or you were buying vintage port all round,
So it was said.

In 1968,
Briefly, you might say, red knickers dangled
From the spires instead of piss-pots.
That was the high mark of revolution:
The year that I 'went down', escaped that town.

I went to Oxford when I was thirty-two
By writing to each college. Most did not
Reply; some did dustily; one or two
Were helpful. I drove there one hot June day
To meet the Master of St.Onan's and
Senior Tutor, both M.R.A.: good men.
Their rooms had that apple smell of good books
And polish and I felt oppressed by their
Solemnity and scholarship: "You must
Pass Prelims," taken at the First Year's end,
"In December" (six months time) "in one from":
Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason', in German;
'Democracy In America', by
De Tocqueville, in the French (Hopeless); or Maths.

I got an Algebra, a colleague's help,
Commenced by multiplying a x a
One Saturday in our cottage garden
Which sloped to the stream where Salop turned Worcs
And ran into the wood in Hereford (which once,
In a thunderstorm, lying in bed
With Haydn and Kate, holding a mirror,
We saw lightning hit). By the time frost
Made white filigree with spiders' webs, I
Had the calculus, binomial theorem,
Probability and stuff well enough,
sat the test and passed.

We were elated.

Now I know that time with our little kids
was as good as life ever was for us,
albeit that every morning I took
a look to see where the wind lay in case
of fall-out from the Third World War that day.
How the seasons delighted us in that
simple cottage by the river and woods
with our little children, Haydn and Kate,
troubled by owls, delighted by cuckoos
and cowslips, wood anemones, butterflies,
hedgehogs, foxes, snails and snakes... (*'idle tears'*)
In Autumn Term we drove our old car up
Clee to Cleobury Mortimer, where Mim
taught and the children were cared for, and saw
the shining lake mist made of the Midlands,
the Malverns and Welsh mountains like islands
for us alone... *'the days that are no more'*...

Why did I go? In the last Pelican
of the set in their history of Englit.
the biographies listed Oxbridge in
almost every case. There seemed no doubt
that success as a writer required it.
(Don't ask what class they were nor what they wrote!)
I needed to know their philosophy,
politics, economics (not 'Englit.',
which I felt inimical to writing)
shed at last that petit-bourgeois dread
that my mind, my life, were inferior
as had been so often suggested or
said by my 'betters'. My first form master
took one look : "Great lout", later, "gormless clown."
("How astute!" I hear you think.) They were in
a state, a year after the Butler Act,
and offered some half-fee scholarships to,
what they called 'scruffs'. I sat because the son
of a neighbour was taking it. We lived
in a semi, across the road they were

detached. His mum liked him to play with boys
from the school he went to, a primary
thought better than my C.of E which looked
like a church, brick-buttressed, windows so high,
all we that could see outside was the sky,
All Saint's spire and the tops of horsechestnuts
through glass covered with glued anti-blast net.
The patched tarmac schoolyard had iron spiked
railings, too essential to be taken
away with the rest for the War Effort,
but the wall between girls and boys was brick,
six foot high with broken glass on the top.
I never knew what the girls got up to;
we heard them skip and sing old songs mums knew,
but boys played violently, fought with fists,
never boots or heads, scabbed knees and black eyes,
were commonplace as whips and tops in Spring,
after winter slides and snowballing,
marbles all summer, then Autumn conker
fights. As part of these rituals, air raids came
and went, when we were bundled down the shelter steps,
excited by the crack of guns, bombs' crump.
I wonder if you still hear sirens shrill
'Alert', as I do, with a kind of thrill?
Then there was shrapnel, jagged roof-cracking,
to collect; coppers for the 'Spitfire Fund';
waste-paper...We 'did our bit'. At first there
was a map to show the war's progress, but
it went just before Dunkirk. And we sang
'God Save the King' (please stop him stammering)
at strange times decided by the old Dames,
like Ma Sellars, swift with the ruler on
hands, backs of knees as an aide-Memoir,
whacking the catechism in ('God is Love'),
but there were young women, time on their hands,
who took an interest. Miss Sampson (Are you dead?)
who had pink skin, gold curls about her head,
blue eyes which matched her blue silk dress, I loved.
I read thin pamphlets of missionaries'
derring-do amongst heathen Africans

(On May the twenty-fourth, our 'Empire Day'
the Union Jack flew from what had been
the Maypole on the First, when these ladies
led us a dance of innocence, wrapping
coloured ribbons around its phallic height.)
Otherwise it was rote-learning tables,
mental arithmetic in pounds, shillings
and pence, or pounds and ounces, rods, poles,
perches, furlongs, chains...and singing songs
from the Victorian world the Dames in
their youth had known, then almost gone... hymns? psalms?
Yes, plenty of those... Now that world's gone too.

Wartime

warmed coins melt spy holes
in frost fronds the red sun flames
school milk thaws on pipes

pencil shavings smell
sharp as harvest straws chalk wax
crayon 'Number One'

dad's waistcoat yields pinched
smokes pencil stubs his dad's watch
HUSH! Six-o-clock News

old soldier he hefts
my brother's kitbag through snow
to the train mum cries

by frames memory unwinds from fifty years
railway tracks...snow... buttons bright as tears

Len Harvey taught us languages, tiny,
Lost in his black gown, on a huge gym-shoe
With chalk in mirror-writing he printed
Irregular verbs: it was the bottom form!
He had 'The Key of Knowledge', Victorian

Wrought iron, which raised a welt on the skull,
That he used on me whenever we met
A particular construction: 'Let us
now turn to our expert...' Far worse than pain
was this sarcasm which I had never met.
Fat and cheery prole, I was his butt and
Had no defence against that bourgeois art,
The duplicitous essence of English
Wit and letters, it crimps the souls with sourness,
Cynicism, slights and snobbery, earnest
Little boys (and most Americans!) find
Irony sad. That diction I learned fast.

The school produced the Red Dean; a recent
English rigger captain; and in between
Supplies of anti-idealist money-grubbers
Exemplified at Grantham Girls' Grammar
By Margaret Roberts, grocer's daughter,
Who knew the problem with the working class
Was that they would not work; they had it too
Good: far too much welfare, too much credit.
Middle class taxes bought the shirkers' cars!
The panacea was a little fear. Her kind, with one
foot on the ladder (kicking like hell with the other)
thought her a saint and Tory Grandees thought her a tease!

At sixteen I left that school baffled, good
At games, otherwise a fool. Twice that age,
Put on my Commoner's 'bum-freezer' gown
On the first Saturday morning of term:
By Wednesday the glum Economics don
Required an essay in answer to 'What
Welfare characteristics do the National
Income Statistics reveal?' I knew no
Economics, the rest had passed schols, shrugged.

We had to write, and read aloud, each week,
Two essays. Politics was the other.
The don, about my age, found us boring,
Me an irritating anomaly,

Chiselled away at dusty arguments
In a gloomy room. One of my fellows
Sniffed afterwards: "Didn't like him much -
Workin' Class socks!" Glared when I laughed at him.

Oxford was more traumatic than the army.
The regiment's criterion for success
Was 'breeding': nothing to be done about
That but wince, unless you hoped for a career.
Now I found that one of the young men read
A book in half the time I took and saw
Three times more in it. Like a fool
I took tutorials with him and found
Myself so far behind his argument
With our tutor that I almost gave up,
Began to consider English elsewhere.
"But you would be among second-rate minds!"
Said the Economics don. I blundered on.

One day, from my barrel in the Buttery,
I heard the accent of the burgers of
Macclesfield, where I went to the King's School.
In Australia you can fly by jet
for hours from Melbourne North or West -
As far as London to Bahrain, and not
Think you had moved by local speech: two hundred
Years is not enough to make a difference.
Five miles is enough in Britain to tell
A person's provenance out in the shires.
Accents and dialects are deep in us:
'Barleys!' 'Fainites!' 'Pax!' and 'Kings!' children yell;
In playground games they may still count, perhaps,
In ways they and shepherds kept from Roman times...
I knew at one the voice of my old school,
And recognised by his looks and manner,
That here was my first form master's son!

His father died, I read in St. Onan's
Magazine, last year. He got a 'Second'
There as I was going to do, but I

Confess, I was not pleasant to his son.
Unable to control my vanity,
I avoided him, looked the other way.
...No, that is not true. I was shamed by his
Hot response when I suggested, somehow,
Something of my dislike for his father,
Which did him much credit and me none.

*

I wish (Was Lady Macbeth a Catholic?)
I could discharge remorse; it whips me so
I groan: lies, gaffes, slaps I gave that dead boy.
We Puritans can enjoy hell on Earth.
(Ah, but the night before he left he sat
Upon my knee, put his arm around my neck
For love as we were watching some TV.)

I protest at these sanctions of the Thought
Police. Are there Australian taboos?
Religion is a closed book for most..."Jesus?
Wasn't he born in the Middle Ages?"
(The Queen is 'middle class' like everyone)...
Creation took place in the Garden of Eden..."
Marriages occur in parks, on the beach,
And often, not at all. 'Living in sin',
Mum, that old marriage patroller with her
Scandalous lasso, would have hissed, but in
Australia people would think her cracked!

Sport, I suppose, is the nearest we come
To a state of exaltation: splendid
Young people competing for the nation...
God's a kind of spiritual aspirin
You're unlucky to need before you're old.
Ceremonies at National Shrines to
Celebrate the glorious dead, their blood
As red on foreign fields as any bloody Pom's...
That's sacred, no black laughter about that.

Well, in the UK less than one per cent
Go regularly to church as you do.
I saw it as bells and smells, lunatics
In drag and phallic hats trying to cast spells...

*

*I wrote to everyone when Haydn was knocked down.
I found I believed that if enough people who knew him
thought of him a miracle could occur. At the moment
of his death a plea burst from me to whatever humans
had ever believed in, to care for his spirit because it was
gone, he was elsewhere. His mother held his face and talked
to him but he was so cold. She did not want to let him go,
but his corpse was not Haydn, not him. He was elsewhere
and all right..*

*

The autopsy revealed a rupture
of the brain stem: he could never breathe.
I wrote to you that I hoped to God
he was in heaven. "Of course,"
you replied. That was our last exchange...

*

Daily our eyes opened and closed on grief.
Once I remember standing in a street,
sure any second in the crowds I'd see
his smile...or reading, knew if I looked up
I'd see him sitting reading too. Sometimes
at night I drove into the frosty hills
and yelled and wept at glittering stars.
I should have died first! I should have died first!

Doc Gill wrote from Australia to say
he thought I was unhinged! Another friend
told me to brace up, forget about it,

and I learned there are two sorts of people,
one sort has had no experience of grief.
I told students ever after, that life
is a series of anti-climaxes,
except for the death of those whom one loves.

Only Tolstoy could make a bearable
fictional escape for an hour or two,
and slowly I began to know a day
would come on which I'd not give him a thought,
but when it did it still was treachery.

So we sat in Quaker silence each first
Sunday of the month at...

wait for it lad!

Finkin Street Methodist Church in Grantham.
Such bathos after all our soul-searching!
There where the Blessed Margaret Hilda,
priestess of the English parvenu,
sat at her father's lay-preaching knee.
White-painted tongue-and-groove to dado height,
orange tiles tessellated with pubic
black triangles, where those feet in ancient
time tripped and tottered skipped and stomped as
that mousy prefect in her Sunday Best
listened to the Good Word and dreamed of a
a place among the Methodist Elect
(that pagan breed with their greed sanctified)
of blonde-bombshelldom where she would be Queen,
and sensibly prayed for a millionaire
to sustain her as she prepared to lash
Tory laggards into battle against
assembled hosts of bad-debt customers,
the whole of the ghastly working-class...and
dago juntas, ancient cruisers, and that
Arthur Scargill...

Yes, well only later

did I think of all that!

Then it was just

silence, which seemed the best response, except

for sparrows chirping on the skylight for
a quiet hour of breathing and some sighs,
smell of camphor, rumble of Sunday roast,
and then handshakes all around.

Words were rare,

no magic voice required, a pause before
any response. In Anthony Eden,
in spats, with, stick and gloves, an old GP
drove a motorised barouche from the Wolds,
ninety-three, he never spoke in meeting.
Like Mim and me, he sat waiting on God
as he had each Sunday since 1918.
One day, drinking tea after meeting, he
told me he was due at the hospital
that afternoon for a small operation.
He did not come again before we left.

The Quakers, like Levellers, were part
of the Revolution Cromwell quelled by
summarily shooting some on parade
at Burford to encourage the rest not
to enquire why, when sons had killed fathers,
brothers, innocents, nothing really changed.
'Have an eye to property', said Ireton,
Cromwell's lawyer son-in-law, at Putney.
(cf 'Clause Four'.) Colonel Rainborough's retort
that the 'poorest he hath but one life to
live as hath the richest he' was met with
a sword thrust in his Sunday morning bed.
"Let common people plant, crop common land?
That's quite another matter," Cromwell said.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The Last of England

I remembered Pendle, strapped in. waiting to go,
the low eaves, steep slate roof, miles from the road
under Brown Clee and a smattering of snow.

Flakes floated in the kitchen as we stood
at the door holding hands, Katie, Bu and me,
the roar of the Teme undercutting a hanging wood

on the Hereford bank, windows forced by Autumn bluster,
snow cleanly carpeting flags worn by clod-hopping boots
which once thumped the stream bridge between Salop and Worcester.

At that confluence of waters where old shires met,
we hesitated, turned away in December dusk long ago,
as I gratuitously recalled in the hurtling jet

as it lifted from Heathrow...(Would I come there again?)
climbed over M4, industrial estates and fields of bright rape below,
banked so I saw the spires of Oxford, where I heard urbane

Mozart played by the Warden of Wadham in Jacobean chapel gloom
(Sir Isaiah Berlin had inflated his rubber ring) and the glory
of evening had lit the glass and tune.

Astounding in the streets outside, English beggars sit,
so young and pale, reasonably reciting woe
and only asking for 'a little change.'

Some hopes!

That's it.

We are into clouds and climbing. Eleven hours to go.
Soon drinks and dinner in the sun, Tokyo...then Australia,
but first Siberia's page beneath us blank as Pendle's under snow.

*

About ten years ago we left Day's Bay,
Wellington, to go to live at Wanganui
in a Quaker Settlement: nine houses set
in grassy dunes with the volcano high in
the East; to the West, the Tasman Sea.

We hoped

for means to make sense out of life and death.
Most Settlers were retired; some required loving
support others wished to give; a few were on

a good thing; some liked to keep stock, butcher meat;
gardeners dug. Like many communities
there was a power struggle. Barbarians
v the Rest. These v those. The architect who
had planned the place well, still had designs. Other
Friends looked on austere. We had gone, we thought,
to do what we had done in Orkney
for The Society of Friends, and make good use
of the purpose-built centre. No way, Jose!
Mowing grass was the only successful thing
accomplished fairly harmoniously by men.
Each year the women bottled all the fruit. Shelves
groaned with years of it. The process symbolised
the homely tyranny: as we never had
disputes there were no ways of settling them. Now
and then there was an explosion of bottled
sweetness which everyone jostled to mop up.

Happiness, content, demand white ink. Days, seasons passed;
Kate flourished at university, the boys grew,
played cricket for 'the Districts Reps', soccer as their dead
brother had done. I went to Morning Meeting for a time,
but sensed it was a 'Wrinklies' Muster, when they would
covertly inspect each other for decay. One slept;
another's shorts were prone to reveal his braw Scottish
origins; some never ever showed. I learned to
empty out my head, but then I began to see that
grace doesn't come from keeping still, but rather from an
exercising of the will...And some Friends got ill and died.

Next Door to Death

Surprising that your dust does not quite fill
the small hole in your lawn. The family

tread turf: widow, children, their kids...'Smile please!'
you enjoyed black jokes, your head adjusted

by carcinogenic drugs...Your mother

erected your cross, you said: Old Adam

survived, became a Quaker war hero.
Your brother used his head, Oxford don, left

you the tin tedium of a Kiwi town
and domestic disciplines: a good wife,

God. Failed writer proof-reading classifieds
year on mortgaged year, you mowed down summers

bawling hymns, white-browed, mad-eyed, one hot night
dying, crying your 'Redeemer Liveth.'

*

Sunday mornings at Eleven in the Town Meeting
I stared up at Ruapehu's white omnipotence
presiding over the shudders of a provisional
landscape in which violence was immanent:
long-batoned cops looked for their chance at demonstrations
against the Springbok rugby tour at which, arm-in-arm,
we marched and called Steve Biko's name. (My brothers lived in
Johannesburg: hard Northern voices with racist jokes
upon the telephone). All-Black testosterone toughs
swaggered the culture-hero; in schools canes swished; Maori
mothers smacked their kids; Cold War missiles waited, locked-on.

Imperfect Competition

1859 - 1984

Annus mirabilis! Mill
honed truth bright as liberty;
Marx found Mind (save his)
Society's thing; simian Darwin
opposed bishops with his thumb;
pious Smiles squeezed blood
from the stone whence Disraeli's
angel flew, whilst Karl Marx made

revolutions

in the grave.

Irony

much as the perverse echoes
of Crusaders' cooking cauldrons
clanging comfort as reliquaries
to render their bones to beatitude
...or Gladstone peering up from
sinecurists' piss-pots having
loosed the public school spirit.

Now the competitive paradigm's corrupt:
democratic newspeak shouts voters
to meet the demand of an Elect;
sense is taxed from equilibrium;
truth's is a scarce resource...

Snow shines on the volcanic cone,
but there is summer enough
for cockies to collect;

their kids

to rubbish 'Animal Farm'; me,
chalk in hand, to reflect that today
History's polarities
might fuse

in terminal absurdity.

*

Five years passed. My wife taught, sometimes I did too.
I painted and etched, had prose and poetry
published, elected to the Academy;
had my work hung in Auckland and Wellington;
but I was inventing God, not finding him,
and that life, which my sons rejected, wouldn't do.

Regarding Ruapehu

Mawhiney had it in egg tempera:
Vic. Ave. in the awful afternoons,

the sun flexing iron roofs,
shadows sliding in Chirico silence
across backyard cardboard and trash.

Outside the grid of streets sheep drifted
with their shadows over grassy dunes:
fifteen per person in Enzed,
or so at the time it was said. Beyond them,
above them, the blue vacancy spread.
It was as far as we could get
from where Haydn was dead.

Before the colony was cast off
there was prosperity enough for a square,
wide steps up to an art gallery full of echoes
from elsewhere in glittering sun shafts.

From up there you saw the brown river
slithering from foothills Ruapehu dredged
in minutes from the sea: from the air
seashells glint on flats; scarps uniform
at forty degrees: a provisional landscape.

In schools the earthquake drills are slick;
Vic.Ave. facades are cracked and patched;
on the black, silica coruscating beach
lava bombs crunch in bleached driftwood.

In the first Quaker Meeting in the world
each Sunday, we listened for God
but stared above the punga, manuka,
cabbage palms, the bungalows
with iron butterflies and Santa gnomes,
at that impending presence, huge with hellfire,
ice and snow, sometimes steam gasping,
rolling down from its cone...

Five years of Quaker silence before we quit,
having understood we had no will
for what the holy claim as 'grace'.

Now we hear only humbug concealing
structures of delusion and power
when people make public use of 'god.'

*

Each week at the library I scanned Aussie
newspapers, made applications, was at last
short-listed for Political Theory at
The University of Tasmania...
and shot through...We'd talked enough. Time to go.

*

"You'll not see him again," her mother said
in the taxi for the London express,
the flight to the Brussels convent, seeing
me on the hill to school. (I'd no idea...)
Then ten years later, when we got engaged,
she cried: "He just wants your body!"

Bloody oath!

Does anyone nowadays fall in love?
I suppose they must, and they keep it close
because secrecy is romantic or
the older generation's property
comes into play.

My mother-in-law did
not approve. Cremated on the same day
as our son, we got the house and contents...
over her dead body, you might say.

*

Saturday, Feb 9, 1985,
I get up before dawn to hug Emrys
who bikes off to row. After breakfast hug
Llywelyn, still in his bed; stroke Frank
who sits astonished under the pear tree.
We get my bags to the car via a few

Settlers. "I hope you find what you want," says
my bete noir: a kind of curse. (He hated art,
preferred drains.) At last we are through the gates.

The flight seems a penance of thundery air
down the black sand Manawatu coast, with
yawing gusts and thumping drops boiling off
the Tararuas. We balance into
Wellington where I see a woman we
first met when she came to stay with our friends
who had the top floor of the farmhouse which
we leased when I was at Oxford. She went
along when they paid their rent, left alone
stole a brass ornament...Our friend saw it
in her house years later. No doubt we were
all suspected... An artist of repute,
she sits in a heap and smokes, pretends not
to see me pretending not to see her.

Despondently I wait in the lines of
plastic chairs under what was a hangar roof...
'WILL THE LAST ONE TO LEAVE PUT OUT THE LIGHT'
is said to be written somewhere. (Later,
this was done by that Labour giant, Douglas.)

At Christchurch I regret shorts and straw hat
on a brisk Plains day. I walk about self-
consciously, near the university
meet David, my friend's son, my dead son's friend.
One Autumn day at Christmas Common in
the Chilterns, David and Haydn and Kate
had galloped the stubble, playing knights while
Karen and Bill and Mim and me drank wine
and savoured our time.

One child was dead; Katie
recently diagnosed diabetic;
David, handsome, blond and six-foot-three, at
eighteen, in a crash, had been brain damaged,
but with his parent's patient love, had come through.

After lunch I shook his hand caught the bus,
then a Boeing over the Southern Alps,
flying the backdoor route into Australia.

I had Quaker lodging with a mother
and her two young children in Hobart,
a bedroll in a corner on the floor,
at the library continued reading
the texts in political theory as

I had done every day since Christmas.
The Puritan Imperative of Work!
Hobbes and Hegel, Marx, Burke, Hume; Poggi on
the modern state; Smith on 'The Wealth of Nations';
Milliband and Mill...I sat about in parks
and graveyards solitary and engrossed
until March the sixth when interviews
were postponed again two weeks...So bent back
to the texts, looking for nice assessments
as might impress: something on Hegel's bright
craziness, breathing spirit, then motive into
his personification of the state...

If Marx was right, and it seems that he is,
and consciousness is determined by class,
what might we expect of a lawyer's son,
married to an aristo? Not a life
of abject poverty and years and years
of scholarly endeavour on behalf
of the working class. He was a *good* man!
Or Gramsci honing Marx on Machiavelli's
'force and fraud'...Harnessing inertia
to legitimise the state is the task
of photogenic fools...That standardised
consciousness is the way to optimise
multinational production practices,
and uncoupling the dialectic makes
consciousness sleep (which I could hardly do)
and lets dreams and drugs and fictions seem
as good life itself. It was the horror
Marx foresaw: the human spirit shackled,
blinded by Capital's determinations:

nothing, living organs, babies, cannot
be commodified...I rose exhausted,
went back to the reference library.

At last the day came. The night before I
heard Rachmaninov, changed stations, but there
it was again! The list once more was shortened,
did not contain my name!

Rachmaninov's

Second Piano Concerto haunts us.

It is plangent, romantic, possibly
maudlin stuff we heard when Mimi was at
Cambridge, just before I left for Jamaica,
watching the Ballet Rambert at the Arts.

At Christmas I sent the 78s, listened
myself ..broke them in anguish once or twice,
as she did. On the first night of our marriage,
early to bed, what was that on the radio?

Or on the car radio rushing off
to hospital to have our first son?

What happened when someone whistled a theme
in a quiet studio? I asked him to stop.

He wanted to know when he saw me again.
I thought of the telephone ringing and
footsteps coming to get me while I watched
huge tankers on the horizon of Torbay
in the dressing table mirror. Far away
in South Africa my brother was dead.

I got back in bed. (The blackbird was still
singing. The tankers had hardly moved.)

Leaving our Orkney house for the last time I
turned the ignition key...time and again!

In Tokyo, faced Japanese script on shelves
of CDs, as I reached to buy one for
as a present for Llywelyn, I knew!

In the lift as musak after Katie's
twin boys were born... It does not stop. (I'll have
the first movement at my funeral, please.)

To hear it twice...after six months of effort

ten hours a day at those most rational texts...
I took a bus to Seven Mile Beach and
walked. What would she say? I would have taught well
for years, certain such ideas were vital...
But there was a kind of relief...could I
have buckled to? Aircraft howled low inland
and roared as their thrust reversed. I limped, hip
sore from contact with the floor, red-legged gulls
screaming hoarse along the tide and my life
blowing open and empty as the sea.
I was fifty-two. I had shot my bolt.
I had written seven novels no one
would buy, some poems; exhibited paintings...
The only way forward was to go back
to being a teacher in schools. I did.

*

The train from Cheadle Hulme to Macclesfield stops at Bramhall,
Poynton, Adlington, Prestbury. In 1945 I went that way to school, steam flying, third
class, seats button-clothed, painful leather window straps, brass-handled doors, and
sepia photographs under the luggage-racks: Grange-over-Sands; Weston-Super-
Mare; Llandudno, the Great Orme:
distant resorts before the manufacturing of credit and the family car. Towards the end
of my first year my friend Geoff climbed in with us at Bramhall. That was that: my
mate ever since.

Geoff lived at Launceston in Tasmania's North. The bus wound from Hobart into
ochre hills, set out across the dry plateau, country music whumphling hypnotically on
a hot afternoon, made stops in sheep towns, at last went down into the valley of white
Launceston where Geoff waited with Jean, his stoic, dying wife. (You met them both
so very long ago). At thirteen, gingery and bouncing, Geoff was an expert on
officialdom, always had the right 'parental' note, was last to class,
first in the tuck shop queue; later he had the cool to skip the draft with a fake knee
injury; was first to get a motorbike; first to get his end away; first to get married; have
a kid...Geoff had dash and the success of the brash...forty years on, a smart
developer, he seemed diminished by life, bald and grey. His wife wore a wig, a breast
gone to cancer which now attacked her liver, but she smiled from the car as Geoff
shook my hand,

laughed when home, he leaped out yelling 'Fuck off!', hurling a stone at a kookaburra above his goldfish pond. The house was above the Tamar, which swirled brown as a river-god beneath white mountains.

We helped Jean from the car and up the steps as the kookaburra and its mate did their derisory duet.

Geoff couldn't wear thongs because he bounced, whistled selections from 'The Gondoliers' as he thumped between kitchen and sofa where Jean lay in a nest of cushions with the river view, squatted whilst she tasted, then whistled off to do as she directed, or when she declined it after all, stamp up the waste-bin lid and slam his offering in. It seemed

a private ploy, but at the sink he hissed: "Why her? Never drank, smoked, was a faddist, kept fit. Why her?" She seemed to keep him on the go. Often I heard his perky tunes when she was sick at night. He was glad I was there, to get away, roar out across the braided river's surge, flinging spray.

"He was just like a little boy when he heard you were coming,"

Jean said. "He's a stick-in-the-mud, is Geoff. You've done him good."

A biologist, drawing flowers was the nearest she

got to God, she said; never spoke of death, nor the subtext

of their lives, the hopeless infidelities since forty

when their grown-up kids left home. (Hers was an afternoon a

month with his best friend when Geoff was in Hobart for the night:

"Leonard was very inventive," she told me. I did not

know whether to laugh or cry as she stared solemnly ahead.

I took her drives, watched pelicans, cormorants, terns, black swans down the coast and along the river in the afternoons.

I swam in their blue pool. She had been beautiful and I

was in awe of her when I was sixteen, but now she was

thin, could walk only a few steps, eat a little icecream.

We talked intimately about marriage. She told me that

her fantasy was to be raped by a handsome dentist

whilst pretending to be drugged! When I told her mine, she shrugged.

Such stuff was meaningless although we never spoke of death.

Her real regret was that she had not found something to do

with her life, like art. (She made pottery boots, flowers;

painted water-colour copies of postcards of cottages;

knew her Mozart.) "There's nothing Geoff likes more than me and him

watching the sunset, him getting slightly fuddled, hearing

the piano concerto number twenty-three." Geoff was

an estate agent with 'flu when, one Sunday he was due to sit in a show house on an estate all day. At eight he looked out at deep snow, pulled the curtains, got back in bed. "We are going to bloody emigrate." She said . "Okay."

His dad had retired from ironmongery in Manchester at fifty-one; knew everything there was to know. They were a family of blithe dogmatists. Geoff hoped to escape. "We also," his Dad told him, "will go." Geoff bought a house with a separate flat, but as his car came in the drive, out they came and in they trooped. It drove him mad. He had a workshop just big enough for himself and the boat he was making. There he fled, but his father would come rapping on the glass, grinning and gesturing to show the way it should be done. "Wry amusement, is how they view you, old mate, knowing you since school. You want to change that la-di-dah accent in Oz."... "Manchester and proud of it," said his Dad, "but it's full of bloody wogs and niggers now." Primly his Mum announced "They offered our Len a commission, but he turned them down. He wasn't going to sit about in the Mess all day boozin'. No, he wanted to learn something; did radar, you know."

At eighty Geoff's dad would climb on the table and with a fine voice sing 'Amazing Grace'. The only way that Geoff and Jean had moved was topographically.

"*Socialism!* If you'd turned Roman Catholic I'd have been less bloody surprised," said Geoff. "Socialism, it's bloody daft, is that. It's out of date. Jean was vehement: "Miners? *Animals!* That Scargill wants shooting. They've ruined a stalwart nation!"... "A good dose of unemployment," said Dad. "Welfarism. We've always stood on our own two feet." Aborigines copped it sweet on grounds of Social Darwinism, but no one was above them in the Tree of Man except a bunch of 'chinless wonders' who didn't really count.

Jean died about five minutes after I arrived one Friday. Geoff asked me to cook. She did not want to see me as she was quite bald and needed help in all kind of ways. Geoff came back and said, "I think she's gone. I think she's gone.' He took a mirror, came back and cried as I hugged him. He had been detailing the bills he had paid and handing over his pay, as he had always done, when she had slipped from the pillow.

We ate fishcakes I had burned, chips and peas, then their daughter and son arrived with their partners. They tidied Jean up before the undertaker came. I got out of their way, stood under the trees. The undertakers seemed to bump Jean down the steps after the door was closed with

little ceremony. Inside the family were constrained to silence or clichés and offering each other cups of tea.

His parents arrived early. He had boated off, I guessed where. His mother said that they had adored each other. The old man made a list, started to collect for flowers, wreaths, newspaper announcements. I thought that it was strange that they did not question Geoff's absence.

threnody

In the river's flow you saw cloud flight
days spin
out of mind bewigged
cushioned by drugs your violet eyes
huge you kept so still

I wished that I could have told you that
Jesus and all his angels were beyond
the withering of your fair flesh I wished
your uniqueness was solace enough...
but earth's the flat certainty yet nothing
is beyond doubt that's death's crux

Six months later I was a temporary teacher
of English in a college for senior students.
I had discovered Geoff was not completely wrong
about the views of some of my comrades about Poms.
One Saturday morning I left Geoff hammering out
Sullivan on the piano in the empty house;
next day at that time, courtesy of London Weekend
and a Jumbo, I was at Ringway, met by a chauffeur.
The first thing I did, after checking in, was to catch
the Macclesfield train. Gone was the puffer! We slid in
an electric glide from the city. My village was
a suburb. In the Blitz it had seemed so far away.
There, so close, were the city's new towers through the smog
which, everywhere I went, right down to Sussex, people
failed to see, like derelicts and beggars, litter, filth:

the public squalour concomitant with private wealth.

The lineside was bosky still with sycamore, ash and oak,
but the blue hills of childhood had become hilly fields,
and Macclesfield had lost its mills and tall chimney stacks
as Thatcher laid the Northland and all its works to waste.
Sunday in the park, the memorial gardens trim,
so unlike December dawn when we cremated him.

Going back

Late summer: bowls click, Granelli
rings his icecream bell by the school
where I learned 'Death be not proud'
for this memorial curb.

It's midnight my time; your stuck at nine
years and years ago. Oh you were
the boy with the straight bat, the kid
whose goals made me cough with joy!

Listen. Last night I was high hope
over the Alice; a dragon high
in orient dark; in Athens saw
dawn cohere above the wine-dark sea.

If you are anywhere outside
this '1960 - 1969'
it's here where I bow beneath
a monkey puzzler, wait upon

silence, hear sparrow's pleasure
at their small accomplishments,
find myself walking for the train:
the station's changed,
the destination's just the same.

I went and said my lines for my friend at Granada:
he was suitably amazed to hear my voice explain
how, when I was demobilised, I had telephoned

(we had the same date of release) to find he was still
somewhere in the desert with the Trucial Oman Scouts.
I told the Adjutant of the Regimental Depot;
he told the War Office; Bill, who was ordered to hold
some oasis to the last camel (Suez: Floreat
Eden!) found some pink-kneed youth bouncing towards him
in a jeep, said farewell to his T.E.Lawrence role,
threw himself aboard, withdrew to civil life...the stage.

That completed I caught the bus to Nottingham and
saw my daughter and her man at the university;
sweet Stanley Middleton and Margaret, his wife;
rushed down to Sussex to see friends there, who put me on
the Saturday night plane without a moment to spare!

On Monday I was back in class, but still off the ground.
A few expressed interest, but I made the mistake,
in order to get tenure, of applying for Head
of English against the few who had for years been in
the queue for such posts in that tiny state. Even worse,
in the book our colleagues ran on the result, I got
good odds. I suppose I might still be in that awful
system had I won. At the end of two years my wife
moved to Melbourne, released me from a state of misery,
joined Katie who had been at the University of
Nottingham for a post-graduate diploma year.

Dear Kate, kind daughter

I remember mad joy, seeing the sulphur lights
bloom one by one on his hearse, that he was
coming back to us again, our little boy...

In snow-flake silence of the December dawn
in the empty chapel we reached out to him,
but only seemed to push him down:
deus ex-machina hummed assent; flame
annealed him, made a memorial:
a curb like that which killed him...

He has been

alone so long, so far away, his Autumn
our Spring; his cold night our warm day,
but the bulbs you planted bloom, you say,
and year upon year brave crocus will bring
their solace from that artless earth.

*

Melbourne. My wife found she could not teach in schools so I,
perforce, must do so to pay the rent. I cannot for
a moment pretend I enjoyed the ego-bruising
tedium of four years' adolescent rejection.
In Victoria the teaching profession is less
drearily insular and the kids a crazy mix
of street-wise nationalities whose efforts uplift
and leaven anti-idealist Anglo-Celtic dough.

Mooney Down the Pier

I saw Mooney down the pier.
Couldn't avoid him. Got ready
for a swim. Did you teach him?
Six foot, off his face, used his head

to run the Yard from Year Ten.
"Onya, Camel Breath," he said:
"polite for him - all goose-bumped tats
in a tank-top, hand-lining squid.

He lit a fag, blew smoke at me.
I thought I might step past.
No way. "What you doin' here?"
I wouldn't tell *him* where I lived.

I asked him if he'd found a job.
"Christ, you always was a dag.

I just wanted out your fuckin' school."
"We wept to see you go." I said.

He pretended he'd a bite to spin
things out. Odd... He understood.
What is it you need, five
hundred words? He'd those, misspelt,

but try the next five hundred on the sod
or switch on S.B.S...It was an affront!
You got the flick. Was that the bell?
Year Nine next. Best be quick!

*

*I have tried a few lives: soldier, surveyor, sold
money, academic manque, educational tourism
entrepreneur; artist in a religious community...
my life is as centrifugal as yours is centripetal
(WHY?) and I am a peripheralist, looking in.*

*Now I'm a battered teacher in the sticks. I don't
write left-wing novels, smoke, paint, etch, pray,
read improving books, but the poems I write
get published round the English-speaking world,
and I have the respect of writers I respect,
which is success as far as I'm concerned.*

*The cash nexus has no part in what I do: poets earn
nothing and I refuse to work in a private school.
I prefer to give my art away than sell it...I was pleased
to see it still on the walls of my friends when I was in
UK...What was it Romans put on the graves in their
collapsing world? 'I was not; I was: I am not; I
no longer care.' 'Ars longa, vita brevis', I add.*

*

My father's father once took four wickets in five balls

for Denbighshire in the Old Queen's reign. He taught my elder brothers to play, they taught me. I taught my sons, a pitch marked out and hours of happiness on the sheep-cropped links behind our house in Orkney. I played for years - for the regiment in Jamaica, Bermuda, Germany, on Salisbury Plain. Afterwards at college in Yorkshire, then for Lutterworth around villages so quaintly named (Peatling Parva, Appleby Magna, Husbands Bosworth, Willoughby Waterless) and finally for Bewdley and up and down the Severn Valley. I was never fast enough, nor furious to win, and batted down the order on those grounds, surrounded by old trees and mown for decades, on Saturdays or Sundays through the summer months.

The first real match I saw was a Test: Bradman's team playing England at Old Trafford in 1948. I don't know what amazed me most, the huge crowd packed down to the boundary ropes, or the distance Tallon, the Australian wicketkeeper, stood behind the stumps. He was further back than the pitch's length and I guessed, that even with his huge gloves, he must be a complete butterfingers. Then Ray Linwall bowled and Tallon had to leap to keep his name and 'Extras' down. Ah Floreat!

Compton, capless, collected a bouncer off the edge which split his brow, but got up and bloody as Horatio, held on and made a century. Next day Dick Pollard, 'Th'owd Chain-'orse', a red-haired Lancastrian, had Bradman leg-before for seven to such a roar as I had never heard... And those names: Miller, Toshack, Bedser, Laker, many more, are heroic still. For two days my brothers and me lay on the grass and joined in the applause for both sides' excellence. Amazing! All the opposition gets now is a boo or two, obscene abuse from ignorant drunks, which mirrors the foul chat and sour abuse batsmen get as they take cross-bat swipes at yorkers aimed at the leg-stump, wearing helmets and various pads and advertising logos everywhere, even behind the knees, and a species of highly coloured pyjama. It isn't cricket! At the ground commentators scream from transistors and adverts flash between overs from huge 'flash-back' screens.

It isn't cricket!

You see what a reactionary I am, having grown up tuning in with frozen fingers on frigid mornings to the M.C.C. versus Australia at the M.C.G., but when I went there, the boorish ignorance, sexism and racism had me down the road in a couple of hours. What Capital exploits it spoils.

TV provides the market need for numbers, everything must entertain, not even 'News' may be dull, so advertising space can be sold. 'Economic Man is rational', as all the admen know. What shocking nonsense! It's decadence, of course, for all you sneer that 'the masses must be right!' One might almost wish for that old patrician class, the 'Bivouacs', secure and educated, able to refer their lives to classical examples, give charity where justice fails, respect the rights of others, rather than suffer the P.R. manipulations and amoral verisimilitudes of democratic politicians with photogenic looks!

*

Poetry hangs on, valueless in market terms unless it panders, crawls; the novel's almost gone, except as a source of film. Painting splutters and splatters incoherent for the most part, whilst sculpture has no boundaries, certainly from junkyards. Art still measures civilisations and materialism is vulgar and barbaric, and nothing about enterprise is free. Ask Gorbachev.

Night on a Bear Market

'Money is God's love in action.' US evangelist..

Dushka, you speak my language,
the lingua franca, d'accord?
A New World Order, nicht wahr?

Okay, why you do that, I'll
talk. The Cold War's over, credit's
unfrozen, but liquidity's

a problem. The solution?
Like the good book says,
“Everything has its season

and price’: that’s Democracy,
and when I say ‘Democracy”
I mean **business**: cheques

and balances. Vote in the ‘Outs’,
vote out the ‘Ins’: get screwed.
That’s freedom / free enterprise.

It’s human nature! Up and down,
boom and slump. Wow, you Russians
sure like your caviar! Okay, so you

rent me an orifice, but Dushka,
I’m in the market for babies, right?
Top dollar for good Caucasian stock.

And I need agents with access
for the New World Bankers’ Order.
Ja? Da? Oui? Si? Right? Jolly good!

*

When my dad was young, in digs at Buxton, he read a
book halfway, then with the landlady and the rest, had
to go because some duke decided so. He got work
in Gresford, miles off in North Wales. In his new digs, there
the book was on the shelf, his Woodbine packet marked his place.
He searched it three times with a growing sense of injustice.
(Rachmaninov dedicated shhh! to his therapist!)
...‘A tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.’

*

In Australia the cougher thumps his chest and says,
‘Die, you bastard, die!’ They enjoy a good graveyard joke
and they like to bet: even the thickest can handle

the odds and manage complicated gambling systems.
Not that they get rich, but it is a kind of gesture.

There is a nice lack of respect, a rude equality,
but where status does not hold, authority stumbles,
power must run. The police use guns, and there is a
keen legalism such that even a footy match is
followed by a kind of kangaroo court at which fouls
(an umpire, whilst being physically sacrosanct,
is just another bloody bloke, a kind of trusty)
and misdemeanours are penalised by suspensions
and fines...Those with the best university entrance marks
choose law, or medicine. Whitlam was a lawyer done down
by two more. (I have wondered if he had been something
other, he would have been less lawbiding, and caused some
bother to the CIA). And bureaucrats have a
Platonic fervour for the inviolability
of their horrible forms...So my wife, who has taught in
England, Scotland and Enzed, found herself disbarred here.
(There seems to be an unspoken rule that immigrants'
previous experience does not count, their qualifications
are suspect and, I'm afraid, statistics suggest some
racial criteria are operational too).
it's odd that in a land where ' a fair go' is the cry,
the adjective is so enigmatic. And, you know,
'Oxford scholar' for some means no more than a dollar;
for others is a kind of curse...

'Waltzing Matilda',

the real anthem (I'll *swear* the official one was written
by that pretentious drag queen from Oz you meet
at your Athenaeum Gents' Club) was composed by a
Sydney solicitor who styled himself 'Banjo' and wrote some
galloping ballads of the bush, where he went at week-ends,
much as now city people in Akubras send up clouds of dust
in four-wheel drives with shining 'roo-bars on the front,
flying between one cold beer and the next on Sundays.
It needs a Hollywood to make 'reality' of
the heroic, bucolic myth for the urban folk
who are ninety-five percent of Australians,
but many are content to hype it as the Oz sublime,

yet another version of fascistic pastoral.

Oh look, wake up! Go back a step. Can you imagine me (like Dirk Bogarde playing Aschenbach!) reclining in a deckchair, sailing through the Heads as the towers of the city rise golden in the sun? Mmm. I planned never to teach in a school again, but Mim could not, we had no income and rent to pay on a wooden house with dunny down the yard in Williamstown. I had no more to do but go to schools and ask. The North wind blustered out of the haggard desert's heart; in forty degrees I roared. They grinned: Croatians, Serbs, Vietnamese, Phillipinoes, Maltese...'Skins' (true blue bush kangaroos) knew that the thing to do with a bloody Pom was give him hell! Only Ginger Ted, who wound about our legs in the dunny, was pleased to begin each day. (He sleeps as I write, paws up, whiskers a-twitch,) I had to walk first thing on the shore to psyche myself into fronting up.

Late in Cxx

“Hey Professor, you bearded English cunt!
You bald-headed prick!”

The air burns with rubber and offence:
a red car, white pick-up skidding away...
youths I don't know, Year Twelve girl I teach...

'Professor'? They are in some American
teenage dream, slick as a puddled rainbow...
And my offence? Expect too much, assume
hope and a literacy they can't have?

Bond's beery airship blunders overhead;
school windows burn again with Friday sun.
Soon we will be jostling down the freeway
out of the stinking air, fast food video glare...

but not them. This is where they are at. Cursing.
Waiting for uniforms in the net of streets.

The staff at Altona High School were the best: left-wing,
dedicated to a job with kids from families
in various stages of culture-shock. It was said
that the local contingency plan, should the petro-
chemical plants (Do you own them?) go up, is to hose
down whatever remains of those yellow-brick suburbs.

After two years we moved down the Peninsula to
Flinders, a small house and garden on a red dirt road
back from the cliff beneath huge cypresses. Once more I
had a job in a school and felt secure enough
to have a heart attack whilst swimming to keep fit and so
avoid a heart attack. It was strange to feel so calm
about the chance of death, it seemed another part of

absurd life. Each morning I wave to her as she leaves
to drive fifty miles to Dandenong where she teaches
English to immigrants (Distances here are different:
the Ash Wednesday fires left a black trail as far as from
London to Berlin) and watches for cockatoos which
she much admires...

Today, being Sunday, she sleeps in
whilst I sit in my blue towelling dressing gown at
my writing-table, solitary as old Nasso,
and stare at the paling moon across the folding bay
and the island where they expect a hundred thousand
for a motor cycle grand prix. These ceremonies,
'sports', fit the culture's centre of gravity around
the 'Bronzed Aussie Hero' who spills blood on field or track
as a libation of some kind to some sort of god.

As we drive towards the city, traffic three abreast
will motor across the plain from high-towered Ilium;
aircraft and helicopters will buzz across the sky
towards the circuit on the island. Flying over
Australia you note the circuits, ovals, race tracks
near every one-horse place (when they had two they raced)
and such was the 'tyranny of distance' and need to
keep in touch, the post offices are the substantial
buildings at the crossroads where distances are measured from.

The land is burned by the fierce sun, hot for the flames which
shaped its ecology for seventy thousand years
until 1788.

Melbourne will seem empty.
In Clifton Hill we will help Kate and Andrew prepare
the twins' third birthday party. Soon the garden will fill
with friends, doctors, lawyers, academics, media folk,
dressed like urban terrorists, holding drinks, swatting flies,
talking coolly and passing the weed, and we will do
our slow dissolve, slip round to the university
and see Emrys, sit at a table in Lygon Street
and talk to him about writing - although he is in
his 'anti' mode he slyly reads Proust, Sartre, Camus,
Derrida, and dreams of Paris.

In Tokyo his brother,

having a year off, teaches English, learns Japanese,
earns four times as much as me.
I love them all, but parenthood is odd: children are
about the future, you are not. The morning I left
for New Zealand, Mugabe won the election in
Zimbabwe. I was pleased. We were with my parents in
Devon. Dad said "You just don't know what's good." His last words
to me: five months later he was dead. My Mum's alive,
near ninety in a nursing home near Johannesburg.
She came to stay with us for six months in NZ, brought
a barometer clutched to her chest in her wheel chair
as a gift. It had not travelled well. We never said.
A short time after she flew back it blew off the wall.
My wife's mother, I think killed herself. I did not go
to stay, the weekend my son was killed, because she did
not care for me. Had I ignored the fact, he might have
lived. We stayed with her whilst visiting him, when he died
drove down to Devon to see my folks. She stopped taking
her pills; was cremated the same morning as our son.

In Aubrey's Place

This was Aubrey's dining-table where he ate alone,
wife and her mother beyond the serving-hatch,
soup and meat for lunch, tea prompt as the News...
but if Nanna set his place he got a knife he'd hate.
He never said, just weighed it like his words.

Hard-headed mill-owner in that Pennine town
at an edge of English reality, elbowing
with his brothers, facing workers down,
it was shout or shut up in that clattering din -
no fudging jokes. They all stayed years, 'respected him.'

Nanna had moved in the first week back from honeymoon.
That was that...Never any tenderness in that house:
I heard them talking only late at night in bed.
Nanna whispered to the kids - never spoke to him.
She'd polish, iron, cook and sew.

He'd bought her houses but she'd turn up every day,
lurk in the kitchen, stay too late to go.
If he saw one of his kids on the road to town
he'd look away, drive past and let them walk...
shine his shoes, his Lanchester, cut the grass.

I recall his blue stare as, poetic youth blithe with love,
I blithered at his table, unaware of the kitchen silence
beyond the hatch: Nanna, Mother, Wife-to-be.
He hardly spoke, embarrassed, but my letters were
intercepted, read, nothing said: but I persisted.

After church on Sunday he'd call at the Masonic Club,
lunch over, hand me a 'Passing Cloud' and tales
of the Great War. It was true that scorpions taught him
to blow in his shoes...A Special in the Second War,
he'd tread the streets in dread when buzz-bombs' engines
stopped.

In town parades he marched, a Tory alderman
in tweed plus-fours, straw boater, Churchill tie,
behind his Worship, whose dyeworks prospered
from vast reservoirs built on the rates; the effluents
made a multi-coloured joke of the local stream.

It was a good century also for the family firm,
punching out army water-bottle corks, life-belt floats,
washers, gaskets for cars, but none of his brothers
had a son. He had two. Bad blood. The business split
broke him. He set his sons up in the next street.

They took the best hands, established customers,
eventually the old firm too and made it pay.
The eldest delivered gasket sets to be separated
to the municipal mental home as therapy,
collected them cheap each week in his Rolls.

It wasn't Aubrey's style. He only had one song,
would quietly sing, "Oh Mr Woo, what shall I do?"
He never saw his brothers, kept up bowls,
but seemed to lose enthusiasm for the Lodge
and even the new Conservative M.P.

Nanna one year dead, he said nowt about the problem
of his 'water-works'. Too late: cancer of the gut.

They cut intestine out, sowed his 'back passage' up
and sent him home. He'd still tell the vicar not to shout,
taking communion in bed. "Know what? I'm shot," he said.

When he sent for me to lift him he was dying of shame,
his wife and two nurses chatting across his bed,
collapsed belly, useless cock and rubber scrotal sac.
His blue eyes burned in his bony head. "Cover him up",
I said, lifting him, choking on the stink of his thanks.

At the last he managed only a nod when I let in the full moon
from which Americans were yet to wave. His reticence then
became complete. His coffin stood on this gate-legged oval oak
beneath which kids yelled as, unsmiling, red-faced little man,
he'd whack the woodwork with his rolled 'Express'.

For years we have polished their furniture,
myself this relentless art. Upon its Australian gleam
I remember and salute them both.

*

The regimental provenence reflects (which is what
You like, I suspect) the Counter ('Great') Revolution
Which it was mustered to protect. I often recall
How, when the MCC were touring the West Indies,
We unmarried officers were invited up to
The Colonel's quarters to meet them one Sunday: May,
Bailey, Palmer...no Compton, Laker, Wardle, Trueman...
No Len Hutton, the Captain? Players, not gentlemen.
Of course! How Mike J., who had ten thousand a year, shoved
my batman in: "I found this creature shitting in our bogs!
He's your servant. I leave you to deal with him." Red faced
Jones 45 said, "The wogs use ours. You don't know where they've been,
Sir."... "The eleventh commandment, Jones," I said.
I stayed once at Mike J's home in its Surrey acres.
The Captain, ex-RWF, had a .22 with shells
By every window to blast at crows and rabbits.
I have a clear memory of helping wash Mike's car,
An Aston-Martin DB4, when a round brought down

Twigs from huge trees above the stable yard and Mike cursed.

I was perfectly amazed to open the front door
Of my parents' semi, which seemed always cold for want
Of coal, austere furnished, small, to discover your
smile, released like me, and instead of being stunned by
Shame, I was delighted by the way you were with them
And me...and thank you for it. I was waiting for that
Facetiousness which I employ at times of social
Awkwardness, a touch of condescension, of bad faith
At Mum and Dad's humbleness, but it was just not there.
In fact, I saw for the first time what a superior
Sort of man you are. Floreat!

You say that I'm a
'Cynical Welsh-Australian bastard', a 'cardboard
Cut-out, kitchen-sink'...'rabid socialist' and do me
Too much honour. Man, I back-slide, tell myself that I
Must write like this, tell it as it is, and that's the best
That I can do, even if it only gets to you,
Censorship being as it is. Maybe I can make
You blink and think, in that dumb world of short-run profits,
Which will do for us all, being convinced that reaching
The GDP with which you began ten years ago,
At the same inflation, but millions of unemployed,
And industries destroyed or flogged off, is some kind of
'ECONOMIC MIRACLE'! The miracle to me
Is that people still do not see that measuring profits
As the criterion of a good society,
Makes the self-interest of your class appear to be
'The National Interest'. Bah! It is the vulgar
Effrontery of Thatcherdom and the heartless greed,
I most despise.

...Doc. Gill was in Australia, but
Is not to be found on state medical lists. Dead, or
Gone Away? He had an odd marriage, was always pissed...
Drinking alone together alone at night in Dortmund,
I was astonished by the heresy of his views:
I had left school at sixteen quite ignorant of Freud
and Marx, but even as I struggled to dispute them,
I understood by hard experience 'class consciousness' grew
from power, or the lack of it; loving my parents,

who now made me ashamed, I grasped how self-hate and lack
of self-worth, I grasped how the oppressed internalised
the opinions of their oppressors. The army was
a stark microcosm of social reality. To say so
was 'conduct unbecoming of an officer and
a (temporary) gentlemen'. Mystification,
with talk of 'esprit-de-corps', 'loyalty', 'morale',
'loyalty', and especially 'the enemy',
was our job, and it seems, sometimes 'friendly fire' accounts
for not a few of the officers. Well, well... Doc Gill:
I much admired his way with dinner nights in the Mess
When we all had to dine in and could not leave before
The Colonel. When he wished to make love with his German girl
He would stand where Bivouac could not miss him, knock back,
It seemed, one pink gin after the next, then stagger in
To dinner and lower his face in the soup when cooled.
Bivouac enjoyed officers, other than his own,
Disgracing themselves, would order the Mess Sergeant to
Bear him away. Shortly after his car would tear out
To 'an urgent call', or so he would say. Nobody asked.

During the war, in Bombay, my brother once told me,
An airman had a similar desire, took his kit
And stood all day whilst a troopship was loading until
He alone was left on the quay. "I don't want to go!"
He yelled up at three thousand or more witnesses, but
The Provost were having none of that: he went aboard!
He was at home with his wife for weeks before the knock!

The Starfighter was a wonderful weapon, rivalling
The B1 bomber in redesigns as it fell out
Of the sky regularly and profitably for
The manufacturers. (How many weapons will fail
When it gets down to use-value in the Gulf? Half the Argie
Bombs which hit the British ships were duds, unlike the pilots
Who often died dropping them.)... Starfighters near Weisbaden
Plagued a Hun by wobbling far too low over his roof.
Complaints had no effect. He announced his plan, began
Firing plumduffs from a Roman ballista at them.
The indignity was such that they changed their flight path.

Floreat! What a man!

At Oxford I heard of a don
Who bought a new house with donations from alumni
To a college fund he ran and no one said a thing.
It is said, and you may know, that computer nerds hack
Millions off companies whose boards dare hardly exclaim.

My best military manoeuvre by far, I think,
Was as an officer cadet on Bickerton Moor.
After two sleepless nights, faced with that ten mile march back,
Keenly I volunteered to wind up all the barbed wire
We had strewn about, then covertly tore the arse right
Out of my pants, but gamely carried on; fell in at the rear.
“That man there,” the Major cried. “Get on the twuck! Can’t march
Back like that.” Reclining, I left their curses in my dust.

*

What you hold, read, I wrote in Autumn
when the sun crosses the Equator
going North. I had a serious purpose:
to assert alternative values
against your class, greedy as Thatcher
when at last she shuts up shop and counts
the takings behind drawn blinds with that
Dennis, before some other sturdy chap
from the shop-keeping class is moved in
(and the show will go on and on like
'Coronation Street'...that parody
of urban life millions find more real
than their own, and send their orders for
Christmas to the trusted corner shop...)
I hold the able responsible
and despise those who exploit the rest.
Freedom for wolves is death to lambs!

*

What is History Coming To?

Today it's Autumn and I'm old
the languor of the morning sun
at the table under the palm
prescribes strides and socks

no more thongs and shorts
bed turning luxurious
coffee steaming honey eaters
wattle birds sharing smashed

pears in wet grass a blackbird
charming my tristesse singing
of old shires in pallid sun
pearling the hibiscus...

Our regimental band is gone
you say...marched off...retrenched
disbanded but you've bought a drum
to serve as a coffee table?...

Well done! Most public spirited...
you paid a 'goodly sum'...Ah yes
(The Empire's done, the Hun has won.)
and more cost-effective use...

I recall a bitter route march
in Westphalia in deep snow
the troops exhausted met by
the drum-and-fife lifting our morale

by faltering after a mile as frost
turned the bandsmen's fingers blue
notes squeaked and we laughed
and slogged on twenty-odd miles done

came to the slope and swaggered
through the barrack gates 'Eyes Right!'
to the Colonel to the bang of the drum...

Postscriptum

Where can you be? Risen through cigar smog
of the Athenaeum, fantastic through low
cloud, Walter Mittied up to the heights of

the Scottish Insurance Company? You know
everything. Your secret satellites watch,
and listen, finger all there is below;

taps and clips and flickering files are yours...
How wonderfully well you have done to be
at such a pinnacle. Floreat democracy!

Of course, I rather thought when you offered
to find a publisher, having read this through
(a 'godchild' at Macmillan owed you one)

I need not have worried that you would sue.
Two years ago I sent it off, got no
response to enquiries, and sort of knew

I had better try it elsewhere...Then at
the last Christ Mass of the century some chick
with a posh name wrote and gave it the flick:

the *coup-de-grace*. Since when silence from you.
I guess you thought it past its use-by date,
and this explains, as much as vanity,

why you explained your role as blundering fate
in the lives of our brother officers,
was surpassed by that of homo-hunter. Mate,

I could hardly credit all that I read...
What possessed you, apart from MI5?

Oojah 'grabbed your vitals'? Strewth! Well, he's dead.

Not having had the advantage of a
boarding school education, I had sensed
nothing as some married quick and others

decamped to avoid any embarrassments
to our new Corps commander, a member
of the regiment who knew them well, hence

I only realise now the Schadenfreude
at how the rape of the padre's batman by
the RSM, screwed things with a porcine sigh.

Ah the beastly bad faith of the bourgeois
under those snobbish disciplines and codes,
dissemblings, duplicities, cover stories...

Bloody beaut to escape to where such modes
of warped being hardly exist...I think
of Fish, handsome, dumb enough to have loads

of self-assurance, a matinee star,
and you took that poor Fish with you a-spying
to East Berlin in ignorance, trying

to quiz and even turn a defector
around the bars. He had not got a word
of German, you are fluent. 'Drunks and queers'

you call them (So our general was not mad.
Were all regiments like ours?) Had the Volks
Politzei collared you, they would have heard

the decent Fish's innocence. "Not true, damn you!"
How lucky the Poms, to have you in control
arranging lives, deaths, so certain in your soul

of the imperial values you live by.
You list those with 'a touch of the tarbrush';

who might even have been a Jew!... For five years

I aped the English Officer Class and blush.
Fifty years later in Australia that drawl
is with me still, but it cannot quite hush

my inner voice, which is as it always was.
You were centripetally programmed; I
cannot get far enough away, old spy.

'For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours,
and laugh at them in our turn?'
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE,
Jane Austen.