

LIKE US: AN EDWARDIAN PICTURE BOOK



colin john holcombe

ocaso press 2009

LIKE US: AN EDWARDIAN PICTURE BOOK

Colin John Holcombe

Ocaso Press 2009

Like Us: An Edwardian Picture Book

by Colin John Holcombe

© Ocaso Press 2009

Published by Ocaso Press Ltda.

Santiago, Chile. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles and reviews.

Contents

Players	1
Pistol Shot	13
War	15
Peace	35
Aftermath	38

Like Us

Players

Like us they had their skimped and fitful schemes,
their bouts of passion and their loneliness,
and no more fanciful than ours were dreams
of modish parties at the new address.

Their laughter used our very words, though those
were not so compromised, and not in fee
to purges, wars and holocausts, could pose
throughout as breathy, sun-blessed honesty.

True, that old man of the sea in pink
still placed his burden on the continents,
but this they rose to and at times could think
was God-inspired, or honourable at all events.

Poor as many were, they still could bear
their name with dignity in common prayer.

A patchwork country, lacking cult
of monarchy or great ambitions, one
whose small-town vote was often difficult,
and loath to mobilize thought often won
when all its diffidence was locked in place
and each man acted for his own good self.
Until then awkward, fractious, not a trace
of history's destiny but commonwealth
of guilds or manufactures, local pride,
rich brews of long-digested superstitions,
but above all fair, and cheered its side
in unfenced football grounds through strange divisions.
No standing army, caste of officers or cause
beyond their birthright in its ancient laws.

Beyond the Baltic stood the frost-starched lands,
the haunt of mink and wolf where no one went
except to set odd traps on esker sands.
Where light on summer nights was silver-bent
on birch and pine tree that the Christian faith
had carved in settlement but barely held
against the shamans and the forest wraith,
though crops were planted and the larch trees felled.
Russia, holy Russia, on whose soil
was set the Romanov's twin-headed claim.
Swift springs, short summers and long-bruising toil
when men were animals, and wore the same
thin shreds or caftans over matted hair:
and cunning in their smiling, gap-toothed stare.

An upstart dynasty at best, with sights
set on the old, rich, princely south. A spread
of sand and pinewood the Teutonic Knights
in fiefdom forged together, which had led
in turn to Marburgs, Hohenzollerns, kings
of doubled Prussia, with a thirst for fame
and men and raw materials — all things
the Hapsburgs had in plenty, but the same
were not committed to, and did not view
as more than blood-rants under chandeliers,
the sort of baubles which their leaders knew
could feed the nightmares of the coming years:
vast aberrations blessed as second sight,
and barbarisms lit by neon light.

5. Perhaps, when all was said, it was not sane
to think these hotchpotch lands could hold together.
From glittering Adriatic to the steeped plain
of central Austria was such racial weather
that storms were kinder on the Istrian hills.
Mixed races bristling with imagined slights,
or not imagined, made of inbred wills
to curse the double monarchy where rights
were half inherited and half conceded.
It tired the emperor to hold the hands
of ministers who smiled at him or frankly pleaded.
Much was strange and intricate in Hapsburg lands
of high Baroque and Viennese schlamperei
that even then was careless as to why.

A bustling capital as Proust portrayed
it: old nobility and parvenus:
much still as villages but now well laid
in squares, apartment blocks and avenues.
And fashion bound, to France's cultural wealth
in writers, gaiety, the latest play:
an inbred cultivation of the self,
which soon would be the questing, modern way.
But through it all, the promenades at Cannes,
the prosperous countryside, the smiling whole,
there stood the shameful Battle of Sedan
and northern territories the Prussians stole.
A slight of history they'd reverse, and must
if God or Liberty deserved their trust.

Blenheim born and empire bred, he served
in India, Sudan and the Boer Wars:
a pushy, brash young subaltern who nerved
to meet his angry failures with a cause.
Gibbon, the Bible, Sandhurst's manliness,
a sense of fair play to the working class,
but in that inmost heart of his, the press
of self-hood's destiny though empires pass.
A man companionable who lacked good friends,
ambitious, irresolute and still bullying
to be the first wherever country send
to outposts of its empire, where he'd bring
a sense of comradeship that counted cost
of ribbons in the battles won or lost.

The yellowing police files show him well enough,
the Tartar cunning and the eyes high-set,
also a precise, dry seriousness in stuff
he wrote, but no more threatening than the wet-
behind-the-ears devotees of a god
called economics, which had sent them forth
to theorize, and therefore, on the nod,
to be transported to the taigra north
to fish or hunt or, if confined to cell,
to read the literature His Grace allowed —
incendiary, much of it, but written well.
An always changing, self-convincing crowd
the Okhrana kept the drop on: in advance
they took out firing pin, or spiked the chance.

A Little Fritz who lacked his father's charm,
and whom the empress could not bear to see,
the tetchy first-born with his palsied arm,
which God ordained, and so would have to be.
Augusta did not love him: no one did
except on duty or parade-ground horse.
Not stupid, quite the contrary, but, chid
by Wilhelm Wonderful to plan a course,
he bolstered Prussia with outlandish speeches
in various uniforms and hats and guns.
'For China, gentlemen, our history teaches
us to stay as warlike as the Huns.'
So full ahead it was, let engines rip:
a byword for disastrous brinkmanship.

10. Plus Abdul Hamid, Europe's sick old man
who held the Bosphorus, Osmali lands
that flew the crescent and the Shia ban:
what riches lay beneath the Arab sands?
All wanted access, of these Russia most
to anchorage in warm, all-weather ports.
A frail and heavy-lidded, hook-nosed ghost
who won through sly intrigue, though still of sorts
the Caliph, shadow on the earth of God
and therefore all-important — indeed he ruled
from Java to Morocco, though ill-shod
in modern learning, being quite unschooled
until the Young Turks sent him out to pine
in cypress walks with wife and concubine.

A man of God, they called him. What they got
was gross depravity on such a scale
that even die-hard drunkards called him sot
and prophesied his unwashed cheek would fail.
He cured the Grand Duke Nicholas's dog,
seduced admirers, whose soft voices won
him hearing through the self- and all-too righteous fog
that clothed their majesties. They'd have a son,
a haemophiliac, if truth to tell,
but heir at least, though needing such good care
that here the gifted one would help as well.
Through friends his word went everywhere,
and ministers depending on his grace
made sure they never crossed him to his face.

Scene

Old embassies of sense, the delegations
of high-plumed officers that nodded head
towards equalities in other nations,
whose honour held to what was said
in ball or conference or tête-à-tête
as much as any brandished, ink-bound creed
of treaty conjured by the balding set
of politicians and ministers — indeed
was preferable, and forged the personal bond
in men who never lied and never cheated.
True, they fenced a little but, *au fond*,
were honest, principled, and so were treated —
if to a world brought up on different rules
becoming out-of-date and dangerous fools.

They passed their venturing out in nightly haze
of dancing, flirting, partying and eating
as though a brazen creature of those days
must soon cocoon itself from name and seating:
retire, and drag itself aloft, detached
from school and cadet corps on gilded wings,
until came someone whose fine wealth was matched
by name and manners, or by some such things.
It hardly mattered. With their glittering peers
they danced till dawn in costume balls whose prize
would keep a wealthy man in style for years.
Beyond the happiness and smiling eyes,
the dallying, however, and sheer sense of fun,
a hard world waited, and that hard world won.

The red cock spread its flame-wreathed wings across
wide swathes of podsoil to the western borders.
Home troops seemed powerless to stem the loss
that turned the taxable to gross disorders.
Whole towns went up in smoke, the ripening fields,
the gaols and country mansions of the gentry.
The restitution that rough justice yields
seemed barred to action or to even entry.
Riots, mutinies, assassinations — some
fifteen hundred civil servants lost
their lives. Those caught were flayed to kingdom come
but still resistance mounted, added cost.
The Czar despaired as, like a spinning top,
his new laws failed and tottered to a stop.

15. The bite of frosted water, fine champagne
that foams in happy mouths, the warm content
of walking back in well-fed bodies, rain
then falling elsewhere in its own intent
beyond the windows of brocaded rooms,
and almost making up its own evasion —
though these were many, and the breath assumes
a quietness come of lovers' satiation.
Evenings dressing in the stiff-starched shirts,
of English tailoring in beaver skin,
where sumptuousness and cut assert
the modesty of simple diamond pin:
an easy bearing where each joint achieves
the sense of frankness in which body breathes.

Intrigues with subject people, some
conciliatory and some intent on war:
intricately though the channels come
the hopes for Austria or Hungary more.
A wise intelligence is never still
in old bureaucracies with iron lungs,
combating not one constant, single will
but chatter of the strange Slavonic tongues:
all different, irredentist, founding State
on myths of arguments from made-up past:
a mix of sublimation, as of hate —
the which, if voted on, would never last.
All this he knows, the emperor, but waits
on coded whispers from his vast estates.

And yet the epoch following that year of blood
seemed blessed with brightening hopes at every hand.
A Duma was established and a flood
of legislation gave the serfs their land —
which they were happy in, and tilled the soil
in village communes far from agitation.
It's true, no doubt, more workers had to toil
for pittance in factories, and on occasion
broke out in strikes, and there were mutinies,
though soon put down, the standing army drilled
and sensibly equipped. The sciences
saw brilliant flowerings, and posts were filled
before the atheistic modern thought
usurped credentials at the emperor's court.

Unhappily, the Kaiser had to meet
a Germany of changing loyalties.
A splendid army and a steel-clad fleet,
abounding commerce and new colonies.
In lands where old restraints were swept away
and funded universities were turning out
new laws and chemicals, research for pay,
his course was crucial and allowed no doubt,
was even more so as the birth rate climbed
adulterating ancient, princely orders.
And so the nationalism, claims which chimed
with old injustices beyond their borders.
For Bismarck's wily caution, they instead
got Admiral Wilhelm and full steam ahead.

Of course at home the brand-new Emperor's life
was filled with duties and the morning papers,
and with his *Kinder, Kirche, Kuche* wife.
He thought of musical halls and suchlike capers,
especially with a rather dubious hothouse class
of parasites and heavenly scented wits.
With Holstein's files that soon would pass
but not a foreign policy of fits
and starts. Morocco's independence jaunt
upset the French, and more the island nation,
but was a harmless if unneeded taunt
to colonies that caused a great sensation.
What did he want? He never knew, except
to be conquistador as Europe slept.

20. As agitation mounted, indeed the threat
of outright revolution, the Czar took note
of various proposals, but would vet
the ministers by closeness to his words by rote.
He saw his patrimony, ancient right,
as needing patience till resistance ceased.
As given by God and in his family's sight
the land was his, and only could be leased.
The ill-dressed proletariat who trudged on past
were wretched irritants as rains that pass
across the autumn rye and never last.
True sunlight came in orders, class on class.
If change advanced, then surely none knew when
or how as Dumas were dissolved again.

The best of amateurs, His Highest kept
on adding chevrons to his admiral's coat.
His staff prevaricated but still wept
to see the chartings of the grandest salt afloat.
To the Hague Peace Conference the Kaiser said,
'I trust in God and my unsheathed sword.
Parties of convenience are soon unwed.
By iron and destiny we make accord.'
Verbally disgraceful, dangerous too
when such diplomacy sent trust to hell.
Nobody was certain what the man would do,
which parties sail with, or the ones he'd sell.
Some murmured war beneath the summer's lease:
some rose in storm clouds but still wanted peace.

It wasn't justice that most classes sought
but decency, respect, sobriety —
an honest trade at least, where labour brought
a sturdy ruggedness, and could be free.
The poor not even that: enough to eat,
a place to lay their head at night, and hope
of charity if they fell sick, a treat
or two before they felt life's rough-haired rope.
And if they agitated, struck for pay,
they were respectful, stood in Sunday best
to hear their leaders, have their own bands play
and saved their penny for the place of rest.
Such was the engine driving, dawn till late,
that earned six pence a day but wanted eight.

In and out of fashion went the hats.
What length of veil or feather ruled the head
from Mississippi to the Eastern Ghats?
All women followed where the fashions led,
for in that self-reflecting looking-glass
the gross enormities of hoop and frill
held aspirations as the bodies pass
from crisp anatomy to laced-in fill.
In short, it was a dream that breathed on through
each billowing hint of held-in succulence
as hemline dropped about the half-glimpsed shoe:
décolleté to urgent present tense.
It drew them forward in its pointless way
to fret and worry of another day.

Was Russia's government too close to France,
and true that journalists and heads of state
were bribed to mute the discord and enhance
the Romanov's quiet policies, to slate
the scum who wrote of international cause?
But worse than that there was the *Grand Entente* —
murky, dangerous, and brooding wars
if anyone should call out 'won't' or 'can't'.
The British dithered though they cursed their king
for gross philandering that would add
fresh complications to each Paris fling.
Wrong-footed, uncertain, suspicious of what they had,
the nations strengthened treaties, notch by notch,
like fools with matches who forgot to watch.

Pistol Shot

25. Precipitous green hills enclose the town,
through which a river tumbles, then half-dry.
The minarets from Muslim quarters crown
flat roofs and walls beneath the warm June sky.
Their majesties are stepping from the packed town hall
past dignitaries to where the cavalcade
will take them into history, past a wall
of faces, smiles and drabness, blur and braid.
A pistol shot reverberates around
the world to stunned amazement, peace-hopes checked.
The perpetrator's quickly taken, bound
and dies of prison illness and neglect.
Unknown to him where machinations led:
three mighty empires gone, nine million dead.

Now old and tired, the Emperor found the peace
he sought to close his reign with only grew
the more elusive as the cackling geese
closed off alternatives to what he'd do.
A turbulent Serbia must be forced to pay
with more intelligence and apt contrition.
If not, the Hapsburg Empire ebbed away
into secession and to slow attrition.
They had of course to keep the Russians out,
exert a cleansing, tolerant, moral force
that left the would-be combatants no doubt
that they, and they alone, would find the source.
Besides, the ultimatum had a let-out clause:
who'd ever heard of one man starting wars?

That's what the Kaiser thought, or didn't care
and went off on the usual Baltic cruise,
but then by telegram was made aware
his government had hardly time to lose.
A cloudless summer now was sweltering out
with prospects fading in miasmic haze.
In Wilhelmstrasse all was turn about
as England gave its blank and Sphinx-like gaze.
What could they do but call that double bluff
and hope that common sense would hold the bank?
No doubt a short, sharp war would be enough,
the Balkans settled, with old Franz to thank.
All quite possible. His hand seemed strengthened
as over *Abendlandes* shadows lengthened.

Involving Central Powers, then not so good,
Lord Grey had telegraphed, but all the same
it didn't threaten island livelihood.
But Germany or France? — another game.
Bethmann-Hollweg advised Vienna
against a Prussia seeming combatant.
The emperors too would telephone, or pen the
first of chatty thoughts, both adamant
they were the best of friends, would always be.
The Czar was asked again, but could not say
'we mobilize at once', not totally.
The Kaiser for his part would not delay
with arbitration, thought the British mad.
'Same damn-fool plan the plotters always had.'

Besides he could not weasel out: this war had been anticipated, would be so. Drive hard for Paris, as its planners saw, and then the eastern front should have its go. With each thing plotted to the last detail von Moltke's son had orders: Belgium first would feel its armies, and its borders fail to keep the Prussians out, though *verst on verst* the Russians enter the Galician plain. But still Parisians dithered, Jaurès shot, the last of Socialists, and so the chain unwound predictably, and what they got were armies marching to a buoyant tune: Alsace immediately and Berlin soon.

War

30. A dangerous policy of bluff on bluff, and armies wheeling, marching as the sun picked out the regiments, which soon enough will see more mischief from the heavy gun. A grown-up's party, a gigantic wheeze or rite of passage that would bring them back to small boy's picnic and to decencies: a weekend jaunt for which they'd needn't pack. All was provided for: the troop trains ran bereft of flags or fanfare: there they sat self-conscious with their pack and billycan, the great unknown of it downplayed by chat. Who knew what lay beyond the long goodbyes beneath the faraway, unthreatening skies?

A comradeship it was, and one they'd earned
when marched from each assembly point at dawn,
a route still friendly with them, unconcerned
to point out expectations overdrawn.
They saw the sun come up behind the hill,
and throw its kindly shadows over roads.
The air was fresh and clean, and there were still
the straps that told them of the easy loads
they still could shoulder, no one else, a debt
to England giving them their youthful place,
a sense of happiness they'd not forget
for all it set them in some doubtful case.
England, their England, and for an hour that day
it fell to them to make the new faith pay.

'My friends, my officers: I swear to you
and through assembly here to other ranks
that I will always, singly, hold in view
our final victory, for which great thanks.'
It is the oath of office Alexander gave;
the Gallery erupts in cheers and there,
out on the balcony, the Czar must brave
the wide expanses of the palace square.
A moment, and then the masses find their knees
and move from anthem to the foretold hymn:
'Lord, bless the people whom your goodness sees.'
Immense, across the steppes to tundra's rim
the voice congregate, which war will send
its docket on for when the galas end.

On the east, outnumbered three to one,
the German armies pushed the Russians back,
who charged fanatically, were never done
until the last lay bloodied from attack.
Again, again they come. Beside each trench
the bodies pile up to obstruct the view.
They cleared them in their hundreds, but the stench
was always with them, and the nightmares too.
It seemed unreal as more of Cossack troops
emerged from pine-dark forests, rushed the guns
in desperate silence, not with yells or whoops
but in their ragged, thin-stretched, flickering runs,
which saw the faces rush up; then, it seems,
were falling slowly for them through their dreams.

Across the far west, on the Belgian plains,
the Germans pressed on forwards, then to wheel
on south as their von Schlieffen plan ordains.
Much talk of Hun atrocities, and some were real,
and broken obligations, rules of war,
but doggedly still keeping to his aim
von Moltke neared the end worth fighting for.
The Uhlans riding in advance could claim
to see the Tour Eiffel prick through the sky,
the lines combining for one total win —
and then, and then, though none knew why,
they faltered as the French pulled out the pin
of this their last and desperate attack:
the Germans staggered, halted and fell back.

35. To Flanders generally, but in the east
von Hindenburg had seen the Russians melt
to hill and forest, and all movement cease,
except in casualties, of course, which dealt
on all the battle plans a staggering cost.
Ten thousand disappeared, were maimed or killed
for metres barely held one day and lost.
All knew the folly of it: generals stilled
their consciences, and saw the shell-shocked mud
as holding secrets of a masterstroke
so bold, so overwhelming, that the flood
would sweep to victory as the trenches broke.
What could they hope for but a last push through
to sunlight from the murderous haze they knew?

They dreamt of motherlands, that home is best,
that we are most ourselves in our own hearth
among our inbred consciences, a guest
who takes perpetually the well-worn path
to this or that he knew. Perhaps, if long,
long afterwards, when grown to thinking men,
and hearing snatch of childhood's careless song
which they were happy in, they'll see again
that strange and overpowering push to kill,
that wound-up pendulum that took them on,
past discipline and orders, strength and will
to sense how badly this great war had gone —
when at the worst — retreating, killed, disgraced —
it was to this first home their orders faced.

Advance, retreat, dig in. It never ended,
though with honour, which must add its doubt
to that far ridge-top waiting undefended
for them to seize and hold and turn about.
At last that sickness permeated back
and generals seated with non-fighting men
were forced to justify renewed attack
as want of other options. Once again
the armies locked, stagnated. Still the orders
crackled back and forth along the wires
until there came white noise, the migrained borders
beset with cordite and with smouldering fires
that hung, miles distant and accusingly,
where yet another break-through was to be.

Before the autumn fell, their world that year
was one of misery in mud and trees:
sharp stumps and rootstocks, and the sheer
imbecility of industries
providing armaments to slaving jaws.
The floundering horses fall into the thick
of it, the stretchers drop, explosions cause
more wild disturbances, and gestures stick
in memory as men go down, there lost
in Charon's blood-red river of the dead.
Around was Hades right enough. It cost
some mental effort to believe it said
that outside waited wives and household fires
that knew no bayonet or corpse-strewn wires.

A changing tide in which a grimy pall
of smoke and enervation fell
on summer lands, and every capital
must douse its gaiety and mask the smell
of fear and cordite and of sudden death.
But still they hoped, and hardened their belief
in final victory, in noble breath
that bore in sacrifice the nations' grief.
In time that turned to flowered poppy fields
and stark memorials and ideal forms
of selflessness and kindness that yields
the longed-for haven in unending storms:
the deathless innocence in women's arms
beyond the blasted hilltops, levelled farms.

40. It seemed impossible: a premier fleet,
the pride of Drake and Nelson, Jellicoe,
prove ineffectual, and a slow defeat
awaited battleships at Scarpa Flow.
The shipping bell grew audible across the land
as one by one the cargo boats were downed,
and Britain faced starvation, could not stand
another year with U-boats packed around.
A guarded convoy system said Lloyd George
(against the Admiralty), is clearly best.
He had no principles or facts to forge
his way, but war's raw logic did the rest.
In truth a narrow margin held them in,
but one that widened and in time would win.

Then, like the sea, the war had sudden swells
in troops, artillery or wit to seize
a new initiative: the Dardanelles,
and bring a sick man tottering to his knees.
The batteries were forced, and unopposed
battalions were landed, fed, withdrawn.
Unadvisedly the Allies then supposed
that Attaturk's were Hamid's troops reborn.
Commanders all fell out and each advance
was countermanded, wilting under fire
so pitiless that even stores were lost.
Disasters where the innocent resign
to let the pushy subaltern's most brilliant plan
be made by dodderers an also ran.

The choking heat, the flies, the sun that shed
at midday not a sabre's slash of shade,
the sky a warped and shining sheet of lead,
the ground a carriageway in which there wade
men, horses, guns, a half-carried boat
upon a sea of yellow, trampled mud.
Such was the first campaign, the easy float
to Baghdad and destroy the Turk. A flood
of orders followed — dig in, retreat, attack —
until at Ctesiphon the columns stopped
and broke upon the Ottomans, when back
they came, disorderly, the wounded propped
by splints of regulars, and then he spoke,
the red Assyrian god, and weather broke.

All that winter long in Kut they starved.
Wind howled about the ramparts; water froze.
The scourge of dysentery continued, carved
its brief epistles with their names. They chose
to wait it out, in hope that Yusuf's men,
as miserable as they were, raked by fire,
as sickened animals in their own small den
might do the sensible: give up, retire.
Surrender was the Allies' own when spring
trooped out its own thin colours on the plain.
Officers were housed, with nought to sing
of, true, but common serving men would gain
a gruelling march through flies and dust
to starve in hovels as good soldiers must.

To Flanders came the strident, beating rain
that warped the gun emplacements, sank their base:
a hem that hardly lifted off the plain
but showed a pitted, wry and wintry face.
In time the fume of warfare furred their tongues,
sank in their bones, a rheumy, chilling breath
that swelled through trenches, filling lungs
with some repugnant, choking phlegm of death.
One caught a rat that tore at bodies, made
a cage for it and trawled it on a length of thread
but even it was cautious, fearful, stayed
unmoving as the barrages loomed overhead.
At last the waterlogged, deep trenches froze,
and stiffening bodies were released to snows.

45. A flash of metal, and the shot's returned
before it issues, and it's out of mind
what deaths eventuate: they're not concerned
a hot trajectory of lead may find
a pregnant woman or a four-year child.
That way lies madness, and such combatants
are never categorised in numbers filed.
For this is war, and those inhabitants
of mudbrick hovels and of blinding streets
are one to one among the hardened blaze
of danger — unless the heart can stop its beats
and with a mindless courage fill the haze
with well-drilled orders. No, it's one more place
until, street-weary, they return to base.

That's what they heard: the dull repetitive
and far-off thunder of the guns that beat
a massed and solemn Marseillaise that, with
its comradeship, could never spell retreat.
Desertions, mutinies: some men were shot,
but still the monster grumbled, never stopped
its heart's arrhythmia: asleep or not
the men remembered it until they dropped.
Long afterwards, when one-time boys were men,
they could not fathom why the autumn tide
of khaki falling did not fill that den
with horror's surfeit, why the furies' ride
of shout and rifle fire, that endless groan
inside them, spoke no hunger but its own.

They had their keepsakes, letters, parent's toys
done up in knapsack or in tunic top
that spoke to them of certain, far-off joys
if orders, ambulance or siren stop.
That's what they hoped for, some unravished land
beyond the rifle fire and shaking ground,
a haunt of peace, with plan and orders banned,
and men trooped quietly, and made no sound.
Otherwise, what was it? Picture show,
a mirage churned up with their rootless lives,
a flagrant nightmare where they couldn't know
what comrades waited for them or what wives:
a further world which guns could never shake,
nor they escape from, or at last awake.

A countryside of peace behind the lines
with homely buttercups and hum of bees:
a distant steeple catching sunlight, shines
with fraying radiance that thins the trees.
A goose now pads about, not plump but slow
among the happiness of farmyard chores,
and women working, singing as they go:
a smiling sanity spread out of doors
which made them think of families and homes
without them working, coping, living on
in frost-crimped hedgerows and in unfarmed loams
beyond the footfalls of the labourers gone.
A French Elysium that for a week
was theirs to wander in, but not to keep.

The days of meets and balls and low-cut frocks,
of boating endlessly while summer glides
towards the cataract of hidden rocks —
all seemed illimitable. The covered rides
to Fontainebleau, the Bois, the Seine
continued as unbridled, reckless fun,
as though the haunting absence of their men
had slipped the last of petticoats undone
and brought a desperate urgency to loose
the stays on camisoles and bodice flare.
Despite the distant guns it was no use
to think of future as the search-lit air
proclaimed one last, high-arched, prodigious fire
before their class would gutter and expire.

50. Wide plains and flatlands where the marshy fields
were thick with villages and boarded farms.
Bereft of orders here, where fighting yields
at best a sodden horror, rush to arms,
one Brusilov attacked them where he could,
at crossing places, small encampments, lined
redoubts upon the map that hardly stood.
The emperor's army faltered, fell, consigned
itself to history books, its mettle lost,
but when the reinforcements did not come
the Germans rolled them back at fearful cost:
a million men were captured, and the same
Aleksei Brusilov it seems mistook
prestige for purpose in the Soviet's book.

A quietness settling after battle, earth
still thrown up somewhere with exploding shells
but more a waiting interlude and birth
of willed evasiveness that slowly wells
along the lines as far as ear can reach:
a high-pitched shrilling sound, or murky stain
in ambient water depths, a sonic screech
like wetted finger drawn on window-pane,
but faint, continuous and raw with cries
of men stripped clean of country, rank or name.
They howl like animals, but each one dies
beside his well-thumbed bible just the same.
For hours they call, but in retaken ground
will sit there carelessly, and make no sound.

Across the ice-clad Carnic Alps, still more
upon the limestone-fretted Dolomites
partitions held. The Italian war
was one of shelling from preposterous heights
on equally impregnable positions.
That changed. From Caporetto's little town
and bringing up no less than six divisions
of German stiffening, the Austrians bore down
and broke the Allied line, decisively.
Italians, dispirited, war-weary, fled
or gave all up in doltish mutiny.
Half a million fighting souls were led
into surrender, meekly, yet this flight
but strengthened Rome's resolve to fight.

It was the third hard winter of the war.
Nicholas retained his power to rule
a rag-tag army turning fraying sore
as strikes compounded lengthening queues for fuel.
New weeks brought new disturbances, and some-
times more as police were fired on by the troops.
Vast, hungry crowds stood menacing and numb,
still watching like a cornered wolf that stoops
to snarl and spring. It came: an insurrection
so confused and muddling no one knew
what purposes it held to, or direction.
Nicholas to garrison: 'we count on you.'
Reply: 'we have to take this by the throat.'
'I must have order first, the Czar then wrote.

A time of putsch and counter-putsch, in which
the Bolsheviks were carried by default.
Kerensky vanished and on that hitch,
democracy, the Party placed a halt.
Chaotic times require an iron will,
and that had Lenin in his Petrograd.
He sued for peace but found the Germans still
pressed hard for all the industry they had.
A dreary frontier town and shabby mime
where Ludendorff grew adamant, and growled his way
as Trotsky stalled and argued, played for time.
Both mill and coalmine sold to foreign sway:
perhaps of all surrenders put in place
the sorriest, but giving breathing space.

55. With Tobol frozen and the ways snow-swept
Yakovlev came out on his crazy mission.
The Czar was doubtful but the papers kept
the local Soviets in riled suspicion.
A train was ordered, cancelled: the courier fled.
Ekaterinberg became the final stop,
the terminus of railway that the Urals fed,
and in a dingy merchant's house or shop,
the guards, prisoners, doctor and five servants passed
their time in waiting as the rumours came.
With abject dignity they meet their end —
no arguments or pleading — just the same
the Soviets butcher them, but not the clock
that went on counting beating, rope and block.

At last, in quiet despair, Franz Joseph died,
and Karl, the nephew of the Archduke ruled,
or held its mandate in his name and tried
to keep the combatants from being fooled
by talk of breakthrough on another front.
That wildfire talk was like the summer heat,
but it was winter now and, with it, hunt
for something workable, and not defeat.
How hard that was! The Empress Zita sat
with brothers as her chosen emissaries
to learn how Paris would approve off pat
the restitution of old territories.
A proposal only, but a start
for old diplomacy to play its part.

The Kaiser was the first to dash their hopes:
More silly talk from womenfolk, he growled,
and put aside some measures of the Pope's
as round old fortress Europe riot prowled
the more disastrously as armies failed:
Why fight for Austria against our kin?
Romania asked as their reporters railed
against the bloody contest none could win.
No side the guiltier but as war escaped
the curb and snaffle of more thinking men,
with countries devastated, cities raped,
more frequently was sensed the lion's den
of murder or be murdered: life seemed raw,
and man but animal in blood-drenched claw.

Across the rolling Flanders fields they went,
a breakthrough opening into sudden rout:
a German victory seemed heaven-sent
to sow the French lines with a crippling doubt.
It was the Kaiser's Battle, and the last
of great offensives, such this final tryst
of Germany with destiny. They passed
the British outposts in the thick March mist
and pressed on westwards with the Allies sent
in no good order to the Marne. No break-
through, certainly, but still a widening rent
that threatened Paris, and enough to make
that bold von Schlieffen plan at last come true,
for all the mishaps and the bumbling through.

But German reinforcements? None appeared.
Foch waited, struck, and Hindenburg at last
recoiled, retreated and the hope was seared
once more with bloodied phantoms of the past.
Italian victories, then Bulgaria falls,
when through the heartlands conflict swells.
The Austrian Chancellery won't answer calls
and Allied gunboats force the Dardanelles.
Beyond the Western Front the lines still held,
indeed were better dug in and supplied,
but German hearts now saw their truths lay felled
and hatred deepened as their honour died.
A war to end all wars was almost done
with many wondering as to who had won.

60. Retrenched on their more northern ground
the truth was obvious: they couldn't win,
and from Salonika there came the sound
of new encroachments: Allies closing in.
An armistice was needed, breathing space
before the war machine beat down their gates.
Yes, Wilson's fourteen points could form the base
of neutral territories and sovereign states
Prince Max's cabinet could then debate,
supposing armies had the will to fight.
The last was doubtful, and what man could wait
on mischief patiently to come to light.
Throughout all Germany, at fearful cost,
the Marxists surfaced as the autumn frost.

The rule by terror and the millions gone
to earth graves, tortured, mutilated, shot.
The hundred gulags where a new day shone
on age-old tyrannies that Marx forgot.
The Serbian troubles and the civil wars,
the ethnic cleansing and the Nato strikes
the growing militarism without cause,
except to heap the poor with budget hikes.
No Rotterdam or Dresden, Stalingrad,
no continents embroiled in cold-war hate,
no selling short to turn the sane man mad,
no aristocracies that bow to fate.
Yet Karl's initiative had come at cost
of Austria ruined and a new way lost.

In the little watering town of Spa,
a grey-faced Hindenburg receives his guest.
The flinty tinklings of the tea are far
from war's apocalypse. The eyelids rest
on vague and watery emptiness: in years
of service to His Highest this was not
the most expected of his childhood fears.
Death or cowardice or some low plot,
yes, all were possible, for man is man
and all too fallible. He asks again
but Ludendorff is adamant. As best he can
His Highest must retreat and leave his men
upon the field of battle, go and grace
some other capital, a neutral place.

Against that sovereignty and more the State:
the men are ravenous and turning tail,
but should the Hohenzollerns abdicate,
some bond of common prudence could prevail
despite the red flag everywhere. It's on
the public buildings and in men demobbed.
Its troubling insolence is never gone,
but poisoned arteries, and flamed and bobbed
about the battleships laid out for war
which now lie empty or where fierce fires burn.
Again they tried to make His Highest more
in tune with mood and country, have him learn
that none were for him but the years could bring
a constitution with his son as king.

It finally had come, which from the first
both Marx and Lenin wrote about and willed:
a suffering proletarian with no great thirst
for bourgeois standing but for stomachs filled.
Ad hoc it was, tyrannical and worse
than that repressive rule which it replaced.
That hardly mattered: people fling their curse
upon the legislations all have faced.
The Whites broke through and set the pogroms loose,
the Reds retaliated, had the bourgeois shot.
The Party's proclamations drew the noose
around authority they hadn't got.
Not just a terror state, but one that made
down payments on its future wisely paid.

65. It was the numbing, sordid casualness
that came as last leaves fluttered out in smoke:
a gaunt November where the bitterness
at last fell silent and the nations spoke
across the wastelands and uprooted farms:
that ever latent, glittering, undone flood
of chivalry that urged this race to arms
in flags and gallantry and stoops of blood.
Much worse would come: a nightmare cast
of great dictators, interrogations, deaths
ubiquitous as scents of summers past
that hung upon their all too painful breaths.
A grey world stared at them as daylight veered
from trench to foxhole and the sharp gas cleared.

So passed the last grim autumn of the year,
the dual monarchy was dressed in rags,
and all the nationalities that stood before
the throne of Austria shook their different flags.
Slowly, group by group, that hard cement
which binds in bravery and holds the weak —
the long traditions of the regiment —
dissolved to consciousness, and heard men speak
of lands across the limestone crags and ice.
They looked towards the well-tilled loam,
the smartest regiment, the Edelweiss,
saluted, wheeled about and headed home.
In time they all went, and there opened out
a front that toppled into headlong rout.

Ancient Austria in itself remained
imperial, bulwark of the Hapsburg throne,
but all that Karl's initiatives had gained
was now an ever-lengthening compound loan.
The jurisdictions, precarious at best,
dissolved at border posts and frontier town
as legions of the plundering dispossessed
grew bold with public order breaking down.
The politicians asked him to retire
responsibly, to formally abdicate.
Zita had temperament, Slavonic fire,
but Karl was sensible, and not too late
took leave of everyone, his last words deft
and almost friendly: so the taxis left.

The communists the Germans introduced
via sealed up wagons in that famous train
broke loose, and soon Pandora's box produced
the usual virulence of rule by Cain.
Rapine and plunder, with disdain of rank,
the ill-fed troops came streaming back
and for that anarchy they had to thank
the mindlessness of all-out fresh attack.
Adolf Joffe's work was quickly done
though agitation lingered, festering on.
As Allies had portrayed them, these as Hun
forwent all decency, that time had gone:
an end to rentiers and to the moneybags:
the future marched on under swirling flags.

Berlin was first to have its merry time
of riots, insurrections, requisitions,
random murders and the wave of crime.
The streets grew darker and, with each division
of troops and counter-troops, turned communist.
Or so it seemed, until a panic ruled,
and men grew rabid, having sons enlist
in Freicorps armies, in their thousands schooled
to act as need directed. When the day
arrived they mobilised, and packed the squares.
The printing works, the offices, the railways lay
open to the Spartacists's not tender cares —
who struck but failed, and Noske's army corps
enlarged their curfew into open war.

Peace

70. From that point on, a sudden autumn fell
across the gaming boards, an early frost
on balls, the picnics, parties, meets and pell-
mell happiness of life that knew no cost.
The monuments that stood there in the rain
wept out to patina and copper-lime,
and seemed now fripperies or freakish stain
on obscure idols of another time.
A kinder world appeared, where men could work
and share their place and earnings with the state:
a world of brotherhood where none would shirk
the complex politics that served the great.
But still it shut them out, preserved by class
in shaded intricacies of mirrored glass.

As delegations in their high silk hats
the statesmen met and quarrelled, half agreed
to not agree but hold their frequent chats.
Philanthropy and commerce, age-old greed,
the poor of India and their crushing debts,
the profiteering shouting Boer War,
and temperance movement and the suffragettes,
just who the Black and Tans were fighting for —
all, all kept their minds well exercised.
Beyond lay Soviet Russia, that great game
across the dust-swept Asian steppes that prised
a waiting silence from each fort or name
from India northwards on official maps,
was now confusion and a large perhaps.

Yet what he said, the US President,
was not impracticable, was not unwise:
no back-room treaties, such are heaven-sent
for misread confidence and outright lies.
Be frank with aspirations and restore
past lands to Belgium, Poland, and to France,
give what was Russia back to Russia, for
the rest let nothing fall to slipshod chance.
Indeed make sure there came no new dissensions
in redrawn boundaries nations cannot hold.
In short, no fanciful and frank inventions
statesmen dream up when they're overbold.
And what's most crucial to the fate of nations,
no annexations and no reparations.

Gingerly they move their gauze-wrapped limbs
to new positions in the northern sun.
All have their grouses and their personal whims
in hardship, which as yet are scarce begun.
The nurses push them out on garden slopes
or on the lawn when summer days are long:
a wrecked battalion of blasted hopes,
like patched-up Valkyries without the song.
The months will pass: they'll go in ones or twos
to institutions, families or homes of rest:
the meek and not-well-spoken-of who use
the toilet awkwardly, the shambling guest.
Round dots, they sit out in the shadows crossed
by sunlight in the game they somehow lost.

Suetonious's Rome seemed tame and staid
beside the weekly balls Berliners held:
The rioters put themselves about, got laid
and still the antibourgeois diktat spelled
no end to anarchy or time's disdain
for what was skilled or useful or would last.
These seemed the greatest sinfulness as sane
men saw their savings ebb away and cast
no flicker on the drab, new-painted stage.
Across the shabby lots a mad dog barks,
and Germany must learn to turn the page
from postage stamps that shout a billion marks.
All that was respectable and known was shot
clean through with contradictions art begot.

Aftermath

75. Beyond the Soviet sunrise stood a world
of loan repayments and long labour queues,
where underneath the starched wing-collars swirled
the fumes of gutter press and need to choose
a scapegoat for all-too-present ills.

So came the curb on unions, Crystalnachts,
thin farming on the upland glacial tills
and dust bowls, liberal tracts, the word of Marx.
And all mixed up, chaotic, settling borders
beyond the possible that men could know
or much remember of the old-world orders,
that gave them bread, security, a place to go.
New man was feral: in his thin-clothed skin
he heard the wastes of Asia drawing in.

There would be more as people used the vote
and were encouraged into this or that.
The truth was always otherwise, and men would note
that new establishments made plutocrat
of politician as they had before,
except there could be now no structure set
beyond what classes could manoeuvre for.
A whole new range of standards would beget
a master-race that now were racially pure,
new ways of thinking and rewarding skills —
which still were God-awarded, not secure
from tampering by Reich or codicils.
They needed one, encompassing, fierce claim
on selfhood where each sacrifice could aim.

The soft-tongued foreigner, conniving Jew:
the walls of stereotypes were dashed with blood,
and through the beer-hall haze there came in view
a people trampled by the lemming flood
of small-boned steppe-land hordes, a yellow tide
perilous to large humanity.

With such a monstrous insult to their pride
and ancient heritage, true men could see
sustained and painful cleansing was required.
It seemed the warfare of the years had shaped
a monstrous blood-lust that the guns had sired,
a carnage such as Mongols hardly aped.
Mind, that would be practical, forsook
the child half starving and its mother's look.

The worst lay all behind them in the roar of guns,
the rape of Belgium, and the millions dead.
What had His Highest said? Fight hard as Huns:
push on to empire where that empire led?
Across the rolling steppe lands they would lead
their armies onward, through the smoke and frost,
and if five million of those kulaks face
a slow extinction it was worth the cost.
Europe, that enfiended and fighting race,
with lust for homeland, and its grasping mind,
would be the prototype and stamp its case
on town and settlement and then mankind.
And so to Stalingrad and snowed-in roar
of lost battalions that no spring will thaw.

The year's last obsequies resume the land
in massed chrysanthemums and dark-mired ways.
Gilt-rimmed in solitude, the figures stand
as propped-up regiments in widow bays,
on mantle-pieces, grand pianos, parlour nooks:
a minatory dynasty of the dead.
The family albums, roll-of-honour books
embalm a generation England bred
to rule her colonies, make good her faiths.
Brave-faced, inured to silence, still they call
on standards trooping out of household wraiths
that march on elsewhere as the empires fall
to new republics and the ranks now thin
to things imagined that are lived within.

80. Perhaps there is no favoured age or time
but lives that criss-cross to their ends,
in part unchosen, odd, but made to chime
with that strange certitude each period sends.
The brimming confidence that empire lent
to balls and titled shoots and debutantes
became misplaced and tawdry and was sent
to rain-sprent cenotaphs and maiden aunts.
But for the rest, the hard-pressed working men
who filled the mines, the factories and high street shop
and trudged from slums and trudged back home again:
their hopes went onward, thinned but didn't stop
in stirred expectancies to press on gates
of board school, factory and the new estates.

Though men in all conditions hold to law —
good souls who divvy up, and pay their dues
to workmates, children, families, and for
the most part sane, moreover, with their views
informed by others, news, the daily round
of TV interview and comments page —
they are perplexed, and doubt the reasons sound
for forging truth within a phantom age.
They trust their leaders, give their institutions
carte blanche to serve them and to sort out fact
from what are lies, distortions and confusions —
let things be clear that forthright men may act —
but find at the peripheries, at borders spilled,
riotous embargoes and the millions killed.

Yet none deliberates, and no one plans
what turns into the unfair trading bloc,
nor inescapable, these self-made bans
that outlaw insight, sense or taking stock.
If people starve it's not because the great
have so occasioned it to those outside
the self-enlightenment of modern state,
and all too often it's their customs hide
long links to inbred rank and servitude.
Or lands intrinsically are poor, the rains
are unreliable, the plans pursued
short-sighted, running not to steady gains
but needless waste, for all no man will chose
to live a moment in another's shoes.

By self-absorption, thinking back degrees,
of being larger than we are in truth,
we find the past we squandered. Summer trees
revive in opening buds the fire of youth.
The swift constructs its nest; the humming bees
collect as ever in the paper cell
the honey for the winter's span; the seas
pour out with nature's mindless brimming well
of water deeps and wealth: they do not change.
But we who enter in our one-time lives
whose very acts of entering rearrange
the strict chronology, know time contrives
to make us blind, oblivious to how
constrained and passing is this space of now.

As evening with its dusk-encumbered leaves
fills passages in streets they will not know
they breathe the same without them, under eaves
unlit by lamps or some veiled window's glow.
Whatever lived in comradeship or wealth of arms
had been accounted for: their thread was spun
in rifle-fire, manoeuvres, fresh alarms
whose ending's fatal and withheld from none.
On all that might have been it was not sane
to think too much, apportion luck or blame.
Upon the field of scripture they're as Cain
and Abel, both together, both the same,
and to that meaning in their lives they brought
occasions tangled with their passing thought.

85. The long, unsettling processions
of leaves that prick the nostrils of the dead,
refolded telegram whose message culls
the unlaced loveliness from women wed
to dull provincial towns where scrape and mould
become respectable in curtained streets,
and staid propriety in each glove sold
withdraws the body from its fervid heats.
Now all of them must cut new cloth to fit,
and play the hand that life has dealt. Across
the interval of fifty years no knit
of fact with fond imaginings can gloss
the long, dull stooping of a life to come
that's stopped on empty and is strangely numb.

Most fought unselfishly for reasons which
had ramified too deep to understand,
but still beneath the raw recruiter's pitch
the sway of conquest, or the motherland,
there were dimensions to it, unsworn oath
to friends and loved-ones, what was held most dear.
Impelled by fear or courage, no doubt both,
they threw themselves in front as death drew near,
unthinkingly, and hardly knowing what
they could or could not do until the count
included them, as, harried by their lot,
they press on endlessly as numbers mount.
We walk, saluting them in row on row
on that grimed journey that we cannot know.

But those whom memories encumber, casting
them in grief to wander after diverse scents,
to evanescent and to everlasting
camps beyond the wreath-hung monuments,
who now sit broken with their patched-up stumps
for company in homes or in the quiet farms,
still hear in broadcasts how the future trumps
the words for vigilance or coming harms:
the helicopters battening off the roofs,
the smoke and terror in those left behind,
oriental bone work, the high reproofs
of brows that could not put it out of mind:
the sudden gasps, incendiary napalm breath
of bodies browned and shrivelling into death.

Strange sores and sicknesses, the children born
with gross deformities, dioxin sprayed
on half a country and another sworn
to secrecy with not a red cent paid.
The rain of phosphorous that rots the bones,
uranium that with a bitter taste
infests the craters left by passing drones.
For all once-living that is fretted waste
inhabiting the scattered, cloth-strewn stones,
for idle parables in levelled ground,
companionable with them, and the fading groans
of men expiring where they are not found:
we pray for soldiers shipped across the sea
on statesmen's promises that could not be.

To those, what are our inward, stifled doubts
that, when we give a coin to strangers, feel
in some way pity for the whereabouts
of families lost behind the flickering reel
of great events that light our living room —
though briefly, indistinctly, out of range
and resonating in some half-heard tune
that was too shadowy to make for change.
Then come the insidious, hurtful memories
of someone like us, with a better heart,
who saw through stratagems, the blood-marked lease
inviting us to play our Judas part.
As though that long indifference to themselves
revived some courage in their larger selves.

90. It's not complicity: in fact we care
across the moral hazards of that screen
that lets us duck and weave large issues there.
Where love's companionship is always seen
with tribes of disappointed: at our backs
we hear the strangers raise their stumps of arms:
'Beware the bugle-call to new attacks,
the fake dependencies and false alarms.
We walk in graveyards all our lives, and hold
to things that others saw and loved as well
but though the shepherd wander from the fold
we cleave to others and to what they tell.
All that we had, or hoped for, or we were
becomes but emptiness where ghosts will stir.'

For long, long afterwards on summer days
when evening peopled the unrolled lawn,
the pergola, the ha-ha and the unkempt maze
there all the echoes settling seemed as born
of life they'd lost together, always known,
but which the air still held, and through its arms
flowed on in laughter's' chit-chat, never blown
but as it was: inscrutable, unfading charms.
They read again the telegrams, the rolls
of honour and the village cenotaph,
but all seemed nugatory, thin-grassed knolls
like Samson's victory on the plains of Gath.
A victory that haunted them, a yielding door
to those who, silently, went on before.

Whatever compromises then were made
to give dissatisfaction space to roam
within new boundaries as badly laid,
a new abusiveness was coming home.
Why should they work for pittance, or hire
their calloused, aching hands six days a week
who'd seen their social betters under fire,
and things of which it wasn't wise to speak.
They had the vote but also will to live
in harmony, and ever rue the cost
in future disadvantages that strikes might give
to those already starving with their savings lost.
The Devil take the hindmost: they would vote
as class and paper told them, rote by rote.

There were the Fabians and left-wing tracts
that they could purchase, borrow or contend
with in the hastily amended acts
of policies already patch and mend.
They understood, and didn't strike for pay
or sanitation, forms of benefit.
but something larger that was kept at bay,
which war had fashioned and the times unknit:
a common heritage, that men were men,
or sisters equally beneath the skin.
No future signed off by a thoughtless pen
that unaccountably let one class win.
A surly new awareness strode abroad
with status built by what it might afford.

Across the fortified and dug-up lease
of fields and butterflies and poppy fumes
that summer interval of Allied peace
lies like a coverlet, whose quiet assumes
a happening elsewhere. Here the rounded slopes
fall open to the clouds, the fragrant breeze
lifts up the long-eared barley stems and mopes
about the farmyards and replanted trees.
Otherwise there's nothing: a few munitions
occasionally to come up with the plough
as though the steel on steel were admonitions
to pass from sacrifice and think of how
the fate of empires and of serving men
arise from nothing and are lost again.

95. There would be many more: Algeria,
Malaysia, Congo and Vietnam. The list
grows longer as a xenophobia
of other outlooks — fascist, communist
— maintains its need to fabricate in black
the strange as enemies. 'Why did we?' say
the veterans poring through some almanac
of campaign, phase by phase, and made to play
its song before the supper hour fell due.
There is no answer: only what men do
is always hostage to the plotting few
who take the pulse of history ticking through
a host of expectations as the seed
of long entanglements that others need.

If Austria hadn't fallen, who'd have won
that long delinquency of yields from geld?
Or if the London-Paris bankers hadn't spun
their sorcery would Spartacists have spelt
an end to slavery by other names?
The world is various, and each man lives
by vague, unsettling and unfounded claims
which, as he grows, his settling conscience gives
to life's abundance, charity and will.
It may be, looking in that crystal ball,
we stand on past men's carcasses but still
discern some purpose in it after all:
a Germany weakened by the reckless cost
ensured the second would be also lost.

Or maybe not a putsch at all if France
had not imposed its fines and annexations,
nor tried to undo forty years' advance
a Germany had laid on rural nations.
Perhaps that railway carriage armistice,
that victory for Foch and Clemenceau,
was preferable to what no nations miss:
an occupation with more shame in tow.
It was the end of ornament and laissez-faire,
of aristocracies and sovereign right,
but where was justice in the rallies, where
respect in premises firebombed at night?
The Wilson Plan was freedom's last redoubt,
but Senate spoke for business, threw it out.

So we, who look from forebear's eider beds,
past flags and cedars, pergola and lawns
to empire glittering on the coloured heads
of peoples everywhere, will see their dawns
as more than regimental elegance
retained in passports and in ornate clocks
on sad and loud remembrance days, events
dominioned in that tinkling music box
which pours in bright, ethereal confidence
from jewelled, interlocking, well-cut wheels:
the floods of things we lost, that numbing sense
of wealth that hurts us still, which never heals,
nor finds Elysium in tunes we know
survived beyond the two-bit picture show.

Beyond there is the rain, the rout of seasons,
the impotence of sense, the stabbing pain.
We live our eye-blink and disdain the reasons
that add no tangible or mortal gain.
But come the mornings in the sunlight, urge
to live more fully than was known before,
and have the precedent, the pent-up surge
propelling animosities to war,
we find we do not hold them or the men
who dragged their lives out understanding not
one syllable. We say: no, not again,
and hope, encumbered with our trivial lot,
beyond this long charade of painted show,
to find what's permanent in where we go.

100. Across that blighted interval of time:
depression years, fresh wars, misshapen hopes,
religion in itself but antique rhyme,
and goodness pummelled on the blood-soaked ropes,
we look upon the world which once we were,
a warm and settled one, of human scale,
where truth was knowable, and would incur
a lifetime's following though could well fail.
We're better paid, and cared for, entertained:
we sow our furrows in a stranger land
to reap, pass on or squander what we've gained
from that invisible, obedient hand,
but know the high forgiveness before
can bring no shadows back from that dark shore