

LIKE US: AN EDWARDIAN PICTURE BOOK



colin john holcombe

ocaso press 2009

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by Colin John Holcombe

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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 purging 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.

Beyond the Baltic stood the frost-starved 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.

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.

5. 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,
there 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.

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.

10. 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.

Setting

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.

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.

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.

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.

15. 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.

As agitation mounted, indeed the threat
of outright revolution, the Tsar 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
at 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.

20. 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 an hour but needed eight.

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

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:
four 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.
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.

25. 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 Tsar 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 stem the Prussian force, 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: Opening Moves

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?

'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 Tsar 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 voices congregate, which war will send
its docket on for when the galas end.

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.

30. 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?

War: First Disappointments

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.

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.

War in Earnest

35. In Flanders fell 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.

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 conquering 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.

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.

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.

War: Homefront

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 quaking 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.

40. 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.

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, daring grown
but still 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.

War: New Realities

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 Tsar then wrote.

A time of putsch and counter-putsch, in which
the Bolsheviki 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.

45. With Tobol frozen and the ways snow-swept
Yakovlev came out on his crazy mission.
The Tsar 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, half-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.

War: Concluding Phase

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 good
if time could serve for them, and fortune would.

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.

50. So was the old world levelled to its core,
the dual monarchy now 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.

Peace

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.

55. Gingerly they move their gauze-wrapped limbs
to new positions in the slanting 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.

Suetonius'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

The war's long memories assume the land
in massed chrysanthemums and dark-mired ways.
Gilt-rimmed in solitude, the figures stand
as propped-up regiments in window 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.

Upon 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: materiel
occasionally to come up with the plough
as though admonishing how many fell
from comradeship to sacrifice, when now
what's left of empires and of serving men
is words and gestures at a loss again.

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 we were before,
and have the precedent, the pent-up surge
propelling animosities to war,
we find we do not understand it or the men
who dragged their lives out entertaining not
one word of it. 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.

60. 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 well could 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 war's ingenuous and murdering hand —
when all forgiving of those gone before
are bugles calling on some darkened shore.