

POEMS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Oasis Selection

Editor-in-Chief
Victor Selwyn

Editors
Erik de Mauny, Ian Fletcher, Norman Morris

Advisers
Field Marshal Lord Carver, General Sir John Hackett
Hamish Henderson, William E. Morris

Dent: London and Melbourne
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PR
1195
W66P64
1985

First published in Great Britain 1985.
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The Salamander Oasis Trust 1985

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This book is set in 10 on 11 VIP Bembo by
D. P. Media Limited, Hitchin, Hertfordshire.
Printed in Great Britain by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd, for
J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd
Aldine House, 33 Welbeck Street, London W1M 8LX.

This book if bound as a paperback is subject to the condition that it may not be issued on loan or otherwise except in its original binding.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Poems of the Second World War : the Oasis
selection

I. Selwyn, Victor

821'.914'08 PR6069.E382/

ISBN 0-460-10432-2

ISBN 0-460-01432-3 Pbk

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Henry Reed

Lessons of the War (To Alan Michell)

*Vixi duellis nuper idoneus
Et militavi non sine gloria*

I - Naming of Parts

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens
And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards; we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring

They call it easing the Spring; it is perfectly easy
 If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
 And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
 Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
 Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and
 forwards,
 For today we have naming of parts.

Vernon Scannell

War Song

A lesson that their children knew by heart
 Where it lay stonily in that September.
 Conscripted man, anonymous in hot
 Brown or blue, intoned his rank and number.
 The discs, strung from his neck, no amulet
 Against the ache of loss, were worn in darkness
 Under grave blankets in the narrow cot
 After the bugle's skirmish with night's silence.
 In trembling cities civil sleep was probed
 By the wild sirens' blind and wounded howling;
 White searchlights hosed the sky; black planets throbbed;
 All night all buildings put on total mourning.
 And when dawn yawned, the washed skies were afloat
 With silver saveloys whose idle motion
 And conference with puffed clouds appeared to mock
 Bereaving night and morning's lamentation.
 And then, down country lanes, the crop-haired sons
 And nephews of the skeletons of Flanders
 Made séance of their march, as, on their tongues,
 The old ghosts sang again of Tipperary,
 Packing kit-bags, getting back to Blighty,
 But soon, bewildered, sank back to their graves
 When other songs were bawled – a jaunty music
 With false, bragging words: The Siegfried Line
 Transformed with comic washing hanging from it,

Henry Reed

The Place and the Person

The place not worth describing, but like every empty place.
 So much like other empty places, you yourself
 Must paint its picture, who have your own such places,
 Which lie, their whitening eyes turned upwards to the sky,
 On the remoter side of a continent.

Under a burning sun. Their streets and hovels
 Have lost all memory, and their harbours rot.
 Paint it, and vary it as you like, but only
 Always paint this: the solitary figure,
 Who lies or squats or sits, facing the sun,
 Now in bewilderment or a vacant calm,
 In filthy rags, the ancient garb of exiles,
 The casual mixture of others' memories,
 Legacy or theft; and the mind perplexed and eroded.

In such a one, at the edge of his world, desire
 Is buried or burned in lust, and love is banished
 Beyond the creeping jungle; in the noontime heat,
 Since even these can be lost, they are far away.

You will know all this, and can paint it as suits you best,
 But paint alone the central figure faithfully;
 His surroundings do not matter: they are yours or mine,
 The walls perhaps with greying notices

Of the bygone sales of heifers, or the concourse
 Of a troupe of vanished singers, singing there,
 The carrion birds shuffling upon the roof,
 The empty expanse of ocean confronting him,
 The harbour steps, the empty sands below,
 And the movement of water on the harbour bar.

And from the emptiness, still mute but moving,
 Emerge the dancers who will not be still.

Nearest at hand two scuffling figures, who
 Saunter a little and scuffle again and dance,
 Or lie on the paving-stones and yawn at each other,
 A daily ritual; if not with them, with others.

This is a dance, with ritual and celebration.

Others join in its windings as the day
 Passes through noon and afternoon and evening
 And wave on wave of heat and sunlight fall,
 Illuminating and transfixing, and at last
 The dreadful pattern of their lives disclosing.
 From out of rocks and paths they come, the dancers:
 One who walks solitary and shuns the gaze
 Of the scuffling pair, now languid in the heat,
 Until, withdrawn, he looks about and secretly
 Seizing a dead shark's jawbone out of air,
 Makes it a trap with stones and vegetation
 For yet another who walks on the level beaches.
 They congregate, beseeching or resentful,
 Till the empty place is crowded with silent ghosts,
 They are intangible, but he is one with them,
 As with their proud, vindictive admonitions,
 And sensual taunts, and gestures of possession,
 They separate, part, return, link arms again,
 Familiarly, yet not with reconciliation.
 And, one with them, he cannot turn away,
 Or forget in the motions of song and prayer and dance
 The great dried fountains of their sombre eyes.

Fed on such visions, how shall a man recover
 Between the dancing dream and the dream of departure?
 For the dancers go, and their silent song and prayer
 Go with them; and the ship goes from the harbour,
 Vanishes in sea, or drowns in air, but goes.
 The waves of noon can barely reach the shore,
 And the jungle approaches always a little nearer.
 This is the captive. And paint him as you will.
 These are my images. The place not worth describing.

John PUDNEY: Born 1909. Gresham School, Holt, Norfolk. *News Chronicle* 1937-40. RAF Squadron Leader, 1940-5. Book Critic, *Daily Express*, 1947-9; Wrote 'For Johnny' on back of envelope during London air raid 1941. Official Historian on Battle of Malta. Died 1977.

M. RAWLINSON: with Royal Tank Reg., Western Desert, 8th Army.

Henry REED: Born 1914, Birmingham University. Journalist and writer before the war. Called up in the Army, 1941, Royal Army Ordnance Corps, but released to work at the Foreign Office. Radio writer after the war.

Anthony RICHARDSON: Flight Lieutenant, RAFVR.

Michael RIVIERE: Commissioned in the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry. Taken prisoner in Crete 1 June 1941; after escaping in 1943 with sixty other British Officers from Eichstatt in Bavaria, sent to Colditz (Oflag IV C). Mentioned in despatches.

R.M. ROBERTS: Born 1909. Royal Signals in Western Desert and Italy. Post-war built up furniture and clothing store in Burnley, Lancs.

Newman ROBINSON: Served with South African Medical Corps (L/Cpl), taken POW, Western Desert. Wrote reminiscences *In the Bag* (Macmillan SA 1975).

Alan ROOK: Born 1909. Uppingham and Oxford. Royal Artillery, Dunkirk, Major, with 6th AA Division. Later invalided out. Editor of the Oxford Magazine *Kingdom Come* with Henry Treece.

John ROPES, OBE: Served in Western Desert. Brigadier at GHQ Cairo; put on entertainments for the troops.

Alan ROSS: Born 1922. Haileybury and St John's College, Oxford. Royal Navy, the Arctic and North Seas. Intelligence Officer with destroyer flotillas. Naval Staff, Western Germany, 1945-6. Post-war, British Council and then journalism. Editor, *London Magazine*.

Roger ROTHWELL: Lieutenant 1st Battalion Middlesex Regiment. POW of the Japanese in Hong Kong from Christmas Day 1941 until August 1945. Poem written in prison camp hospital, where admitted with malaria and dysentery January 1944.

Larry ROWDON: Born Canada. Served with Royal Regiment of Canada, 2nd Division Canadian Army. Landed at Normandy beach and wounded near Caen.

Alf SAMSON: Served Middle East, artist and writer. Post-war, advertising.

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