

Welshampton, Colemere, Lyneal: Giving a Voice to the Dead of World War One

One hundred Autumns and one hundred Springs
have passed since the end of our fighting and dying:
will those who've come after remember the things
we held fast in our hearts with our last breaths sighing?

The visions we saw as we gazed to the sky
were the lanes to our homes by field and by moss
where coppices thrive and still waters lie,
the pools and the meres, the core of our loss.

In Belgium we died, in Turkey, Egypt, France –
all of us too young, though War made us old,
cruel death took us all, we hadn't a chance
and these memorial stones are heavy and cold.

We'd trod mud in Hampton, heard Saint John's bells,
roamed Dunbuck and Clarepool, wandered Stocks Lane,
a calm world away from the shock of the shells
and the shriek of the bullets that addles the brain.

In places undreamt of our futures were frozen
never to be thawed, unlike ice on White Mere,
or Colemere, or Kettle, whichever we'd chosen,
perhaps Crose or Blake, to skim on or play near.

We could have come from Welshampton, or the Hole in the Wall,
from Bradenheath or Balmer, like our sisters and brothers,
some of us were Bantams, some of us were tall,
some left broken sweethearts, all left grieving mothers.

One of us gave out his pigeons, his most treasured prize,
another washed at the pump before rejoining the fray,
whilst one saw his baby and heard her strong cries
as under Rowe Lane Bridge the train carried him away.

Some say before death your life flits through your mind,
and we all saw our loved ones, in memory sealed,
but there was something else we had each left behind,
a spirit of place, an essence of lane, heath, wood and field.

Claypit Leasow, Cae Wilkin, High Field and the Rough,
the names we all talked of from when we were born,
little knowing our days were numbered and never enough
to savour the joys from which we were torn.

One of us wrote poems to light our dark times,
to tell the world of the shadows that man often casts:
destruction of hope and youth, these are the crimes
we must learn to defeat with victory that lasts.

So, one hundred Winters and one hundred Summers
teach us this lesson, as our fair villages gather again:
question war-mongers, heed not war-drummers,
surely our life-loving souls were not sacrificed in vain?

Ted Eames, 2018