

J. R. ACKERLEY
MICHELDEVER

(To Henry Cook, 1812-1831)

‘The fate of Henry Cook excites no commiseration . . .’
The Times: January 3, 1831

I

At first I could not find you. Up and down
I searched in vain. This was the place, I knew,
The village church, and there beyond the turn
Your way from Winchester: but where were you?

Had Nature with your enemies combined
To hush you up? This dumb, frustrated stone—
Was it *your* name the fidget-fingered wind
Had smudged away, the rinsing rain undone?

Or this that when Earth shivered in the dews
Sank forward on its face—who lay below?
‘Is this his place? Is this?’ I asked. ‘Whose? Whose?’
‘The boy who died a hundred years ago.’

Here by the fields you tilled, beneath these limes
That sprouted with your life, no stone records
Your death although it figured in *The Times*;
You were buried that bleak evening without words.

No solemn prayer entreated that dark pit,
No epitaph your mortal memory furthered,
Though there was thought enough and words to fit:
They said in Micheldever you were murdered.

2

I know the pattern, here the pieces lie;
I fit them in, yet still the picture wants—
Some light, now shuttered, in the country eye,
A confident, proud manliness of glance,

For you'd been free beyond our now conceiving,
Who signed upon this soil your common will;
The web of law that nets us now was weaving;
You struggled in its meshes; we lie still.

And then it wasn't much, the thing you fought for,
You and your fellows all the country over;
You didn't rise as rose the men of Otmoor
Your ancient rights and heritage to recover—

The land, the people's land, by Domesday given,
By lord and lawyer lately filched away,
And with it all your uses from you riven;
You only claimed sufficiency of pay

To keep your souls and bodies still consorted
While lord and lawyer in your pastures thrived
And had you hanged, imprisoned or transported
For taking hare or bird to save your lives.

Who sauntered then at evening in this lane
With ease and independence in his soul?
By each new law degraded, nipped, restrained;
Reduced at last to charity's grudging dole,

Who danced upon the green? That year at Fawley
They yoked an idiot to the parish cart
For begging for relief. It was a story
You must have heard. And was it in this part

That harvest time, beneath a hedge, were found
Four labourers starved to death? None would have
known
They'd laid their cheeks but lately to the ground,
So shrunk the flesh on their poor thrusting bones.

And all the while before your famished view
The sacred pheasant flashed his jewelled ruff,
The rich the richer and the grander grew,
And parson toadied after them. Enough!

3

The wandering, armed and uninvited bee
Scarce begs or steals the sweetness that he licks,
But levies tribute on prosperity;
And thus the labourers called upon the rich.

Hedgerow and field their arsenal supplied;
Old scores were paid; rejected in his cart
Each parish launched its tyrant; far and wide
The burning ricks like rosebuds burst apart,

And Headley workhouse fell; the falling stones
Their martial music made: across the slain,
Usurping threshers' bright, newfangled bones
They came into their kingdom once again.

But what most moves me, like that Indian tree
Upon whose leafless, stricken-seeming boughs
Bloom sudden flowers, despite their miseries
They showed such moderation; then as now

They taught the wealthy manners; overhead
The gathering clouds as little mischief meant;
With dignity and wit and no blood shed
The paupers did the work of Parliament—

And almost won: adornment of the hour,
I gather from the shabby page this love,
This brittle, pressed, incalculable flower,
That local help against them would not move.

But that was only how the business started,
And you were dead before its course was run;
Six hundred of your fellows were transported,
And nine were hanged—from Micheldever one.

4

They say you shed some tears to hear your doom,
But put up no defence: at plough-tail bred
You could not read nor write, but in that room
The predetermined verdict plainly read.

No legal aid for you, nor might you plead
Your poverty for pity; come to that,
What judge would pause to pity one whose deed
Was knocking off the local J.P.'s hat?

They had you cold; you could not even bring
Your comrades to bear witness, for at once
Acknowledged sharers in your rioting
They shared your lot. Let's honour Harry Bunce!

The lovely fellow for his friend attested
Though cautioned of the fate that would betide him,
And when the judges ordered him arrested
Sprang up into the dock and stood beside him.

They exiled him for ever. But a few
More rigorous examples would be wise.
Stolid and oxlike, unattractive, you
Were naturally cast for sacrifice.

Some handicaps the press you could not read
Obligingly adjusted to your fate.
To hang a man's a more inspiring deed
Than hang a hungry boy. At any rate

It seemed as though they wanted to deprive
You now of next to nothing; work and pay
They lavished both and added to your life
Ten years before they took it all away.

And as a final warning not to knock
The gentry's hats or take from him that hath,
The learned law decided that your smocked,
Convicted mates should see you done to death.

This was life's end, this was life's summary,
Those anguished cries, and in the yard below,
Like withered leaves cast by the gallows tree,
The pale uplifted faces, swept with woe,

Who did not know what penalties they earned,
Nor anything save that they'd lacked their due:

Once they had had a cow and strip of land,
And then had nothing, nothing else they knew—

But held a strange, immovable conviction
That God had made the earth for all to share,
And equally for all without distinction
Had larded there the pheasant and the hare.

They were the best of course, the chaps of mettle,
But spirit can be broke as well as necks,
If skill enough be used, though not so brittle;
Some pined away between the transport's decks;

The rest? Who knows? Who cares? That distant spot
To whose deterrent worth your rulers gave
Such anxious, flogging thought is best forgot:
I fear they called you lucky in your grave.

Years later they were pardoned; few came back;
Exile was sweeter than the image in their eye
Of England's vaunted freedom and your black
And strangled body strung against the sky.

But when, the suffering over and the shame,
You journeyed home at last to Micheldever,
The parish all came out, as one they came,
They came as one to meet you like a lover,

And buried you in silence. No stone stands
Above your grave; the pious place admits
No knowledge of your keeping; loving hands
That dug there dared no more; your name is writ

In dandelions and nettles. But the lie
However deep we dig it perishes not,
Nor fails the cry of hope: a stranger I
Bring you this message: you are not forgot.

Out of the dark you sprang with hammer raised—
Then vanished; your defiance came to nought;
Your desperate blow the moment scarcely grazed;
No Hampshire guidebook names you; you're not taught

In school, where inconvenient disclosures
Might be unwise, and where your tale's a small,
Dry, unobtrusive chapter called 'Enclosures',
Not flesh and blood, not tears and pain at all.

Nor murder, no; not how the English gentry
Capitalized the land by fraud and force,
And when the dispossessed cried out for mercy
Choked them to death—judicially, of course.

But there's a legend lingers to this day
That when the sealing snow has shrouded over
The Hampshire hills and whited all away,
It stays not on your grave in Micheldever.

5

When these bright fields are dimmed, the lanes dusk-laden,
And to the last bird's warning, sharp refrain
The fading landscape falters in its fading,
Does that forgotten army march again?

It marches, yes, but stones are turned to shot;
Now uniformed, more formidable, faster,
Your army has not ceased to march, but not,
Not now, not yet again, against its masters.

For still the fight continues. That astounds
You, doesn't it? Illiterate country chaps,
No doubt you thought an extra half-a-crown
Was all the stake at issue. But the traps

Were set for more than yokels. Ruthless eyes
Looked further than your petty fields for power.
Big business had begun, and other skies
Drew blood up with the dew. The greed and fear,

The struggle still goes on. We give it names
You'd never comprehend and we defend
What you contested, but the fight's the same;
You fought at the beginning, we at the end.

And all are in it now; across the world
The dikes are down; in intricate dismay
Gainer and loser both in the flood are hurled:
Those tears you shed, we drown in them to-day.

[The history upon which this poem is based is to be found in *The Village Labourer*, 1760-1832, by J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond. Longmans. 6/-.]

C. DAY LEWIS WAR POEM

They lie in the sunday street
Like effigies thrown down after a fête
Among the bare-faced houses frankly yawning revulsion,
Fag ends of fires, litter of rubble, stale
Confetti sprinkle of blood. Was it defeat
With them, or triumph? Purification
Or All Fools' Day? On this they remain silent.
Their eyes are closed to honour and hate.

We cannot blame the great
Alone—the mad, the calculating or effete
Rulers. Whatever grotesque scuffle and piercing
Indignant orgasm of pain took them,
All that enforced activity of death
Did answer and compensate
Some voluntary inaction, soft option, dream retreat.
Each man died for the sins of a whole world:
For the ant's self-abdication, the fat-stock's patience
Are sweet good-bye to human nations.

Still, they have made us eat
Our knowing words, who rose and paid
The bill for the whole party with their uncounted courage.
And if they chose the dearer consolations
Of living—the bar, the dog race, the discreet
Establishment—and let Karl Marx and Freud go hang,
Now they are dead, who can dispute their choice?
Not I, nor even Fate.