

Shirley Barker

A Land and a People

A book of poems

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Books by Shirley Barker

POETRY

The Dark Hills Under

A Land and a People

NOVELS

Peace, My Daughters

Rivers Parting

SHIRLEY BARKER

A Land and a People

A book of poems

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Dedication

For whom I am like money in the bank.
You can forget it, take no care for it.
But if you ever need it, it is there.

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I

A LAND AND A PEOPLE

New Hampshire Prelude

Will Scarlet walked in the gray-green wood,
Where the bearded oaks and hazels stood,
Up through the covert to Robin Hood,

In the time of man, in the time of man.

He let the ghost of an arrow fly
As the ghost of a deer went loping by
In the primrose light of the evening sky,

In the time of man.

The trees had stood there since the time of God.

They nodded to Will with a kinsman's nod,
And he to them.

“My bones are laid

Over in Blidworth; the merry blade
Has a slack bow hung on a chapel wall
For epitaph. But a boy grows tall
In Gamwell Chase, with a shooting eye
And the name of Scarlet, the same as I.
We Scarlets been here since God made tree,
And none be English so much as we.
Where we've always been we will always be,
So what do I need of an epitaph?”
As he went to Robin he tried to laugh.

Robin tapered a shaft of yew.

“Ho, Will!

What powder and shot can do
I hear when I walk in Nottingham.
It must cleave a wand of willow true
Before I yield it a tinker's dam.
But the night owl falls from his daytime perch
At seeing you stride from Blidworth Church

In the wan half-light ere the night comes on.
You've not been so spry since the reign of John.

Tuck and Johnny are hunting grouse,
And Allan's gone robbing a public house
To raise the ghost of a butt of beer,
But empty-handed you've traveled here,
You, my yeoman who bagged the deer
Always.

Have you been carrying on
With that royal wench from Aragon
Who liked you best of the merry men?
Don't tell me she's astir again,
When we stole a priest to bless her sod,
And left her back in the time of God,

While we stayed on, for the time of man."

Will stood up in his gray-green ghost,
Like a shaft of smoke from a farmyard oast,
Tapped foot to earth with a woodcock-drumming.
'Robin, I've word to fear what's coming!
Once I ha' died—"

"Aye, Will, that's true,
So what have you got to worry you?"

"I can die again—

for what's to die
But to go from England—?"

"Aw Will, give over!

You be going nowhere.

Go back and lie
Down at Blidworth and dream for aye
O' being the Spanish woman's lover.

I wish that Allan would come in sight!
There's little here for the soul's sustaining,
Since that prowling priory Hallows Night

Gave our last barrel of sack a draining.”

“Rob,” said Will, to his sorrow cleaving,
“The blood is up and the lad is leaving,

For all time ever of God or man.

And wherever he goes, goes part of me.
We Scarlets been here since God made tree,
And none be English so much as we.

But he’s going forever from Gamwell Chase,
And not for sack or a pretty face,
With adventurers for Piscataqua—
And what’ll they have when they get him there?
Six feet still of muscle and bone
May turn to nothing we’re proud to own,
Once he’s away from us; less tall,
In the land where black-green rivers crawl,
And gold guineas catch in the salmon weir.”

“What’d you have if you kept him here
When he wants to go?” asked Robin, fetching
A sheaf of arrows that needed fletching.

“Can’t you see, Will, a boy can tire
Of heaping turf on a kitchen fire
That hasn’t gone out in a hundred years?
Guineas leaping in salmon weirs
Would tempt me too, and there’s endless firwood
There, I hear.”

“But it isn’t Sherwood.

He may thatch four walls there, and strew seed corn,
But it’s not Old Thorny where he was born.
None of its towns will be Nottingham,
Nor its rivers Trent, where his father swam;
And he’ll grow a difference.

New England will swallow him.
He’s going where England’ll never follow him.

And he can't tell why, and neither can we."

"Why then," said Robin, "God made tree,
But Devil had share in you and me.

Mayhap between them they think to take
An English yeoman, and of him make
Something better, for Christ His Sake."

Fire spat forth from the gray-green head.

"What *could* be better?" Will Scarlet said.

Robin sighted along his bow.

"Whatever it is, we'll never know—"

Choosing a shaft with a goose-gray quill—

"We won't—but maybe New Hampshire will—

And the time of God be the time of man."

Over the shires a gray wind came,
That iron autumn, where men were sowing
Their winter wheat. No town could tame
Its force. John Winthrop felt it blowing

By Fleet Ditch midden. The reedy water
Of Lincoln scudded against the weirs,
As it passed on its way to Dudley's daughter,
With rhymes to last her for forty years.

The gray wind blew on a generation,
And those who felt it were marked for going
To be seed corn for the strangest nation
That ever came of a gray wind's blowing.

Stand in the furrow, lad, and feel it!
The wind blows ever on town and tree.
What choice it makes, you cannot appeal it
In County Assize or Chancery.

You cannot flee from its commendation,
You cannot struggle athwart its plan.
You must stand up with your generation
And play your part in the time of man.

A Land and a People

Seers of my day, loose-lipped and self-assured,
Call me the dying bough on the dead tree;
Tell me my race is evermore immured
In sunken graveyards. Blood from oversea—
Which you call new—will wake new miracle
Out of the empty soil that starved my sires
Until they died within themselves, and walked,
And worked, and bred dead sons too long a time.
Tell me a peasant woman is a shell
Bearing the pearl of vitalness within;
That in my fields, run-out and rusty-stalked,
Sweet corn shall grow for her and fadeless thyme.

Tell me these things: here there were Puritans,
Stiff-necked and gray, blind as the steeple bat
To virtues alien in their stubborn clans;
Their laws forbade the tassel on a hat,
The buckle on a shoe, the gilded sleeve.
These bigots prayed, and bred sons who were weaker
With every breeding. These shall not retrieve
Ascendancy, for a new race is forming—
At carven doors hear the coarse knuckles storming!
A people dies! The People rise!

Bespeak her,

This woman who is earth, and man, and pain,
Harvest and dearth, the spirit of your People.
She toils to whitewash stones along the lane,
Missing the vision behind the whitewashed steeple.
Her hands are raw with labor in the mills,
She has delights, nor knows the greater one—
Between the moment when her body fills
With the sharp clamor of the living son,
And a new ribbon for her unwashed hair.
Pitiful is she as a new-plowed field,
As patient, and as sure to bear, and bear,

Heavy with strength she cannot always wield,
Half troubled by old laughters on the air.

You give this land to her, seers of my day.
Give her the king-writ grants she cannot read,
And let us watch her. I shall stand aside,
And hear the wooden pattens pounding up
The stairs of generations. I shall laugh
At certain changing airs of this, your People.

The posturer who clips the unwieldy name,
And calls himself "Rob Jones" or "Edward Smith";
He has despised us when he took our land,
But now he wants the name that goes therewith,
Now he has coins to jangle in his pocket.
The dame who shapes her grandsires' tardy fame,
And shows the jewel from a pawnshop locket,
Saying her forebears brought it out of Kent,
Lincoln, or Surrey—she has studied maps—
In Cromwell's time—she has studied history
With sloe-black southern eyes, dull, but intent.
You say the Puritans are dead? Perhaps.

This country will not let this people die.
Their dust strikes deeper than the mountain root,
Their inarticulate grief swells in its rivers,
Their tartness sets the flavors of its fruit.
While there are stars—by this I mean forever—
Who takes this land may climb
With wooden shoes or silver up the stairs
Of generations, but his look will grow
In climbing, like the look of Alden's heirs;
Myles Standish will be in him ere he know;
When all the loose-lipped seers have talked with time,
And turned away, admitting it is so.

Good as a woolen coat, as ledges bare—
But living—living!”

I may not go beside them,
But I shall watch for these steeds and the men who ride them,
For one I would meet again at Sandwich Fair.

From Father to Son

Young men who walk the windless halls of time,
Young marchers in the progress that is man,
Young countrymen of ours, tough with the lime
And sand of our own acres, we are plan
And power that spread your fields unhedged and broad,
That raised your towns against the afternoon.
We are the elders building spires to God;
The rakes who battled to a drinking tune.

We are your fathers, living as the brook
Under the ice of winter, and we smile
With dim old faces in a dusty book.
You think you are the first to play with guile,
The first with driving courage in his marrow,
The first to stand upon a peak and sing.
You think us lodgers in a sunken barrow,
Forever doomed to feed the roots of spring.

And this we are. But deeper than the blind,
Proud fallacy that death is dust and rue
In the grave's unchanging weather,
The dead man walks within the living mind
And counsels you,
"You are our sons, and we shall march together.

When you have given your body to this land
And the sharp roots about your temples bite,
The fires you lit being no longer-spanned
Than any young man's ardor in the night;
The plans you made for mankind gone awry,
Your high crusade become a schoolboy's jest,
Then you shall share our earlier dream of sky,
The ripe field, and the roof against the weather;
The woman's mouth, the child upon her breast,
And youth, a roaring colt too brave to tether—
These, and the wide land, and the stars at night,

And the dim roads the dead men march together.

When you have poured your blood upon this land,
Buried your loves in it, and watched them grow
Into a summer's greenness, you will know
A courage past the lift of waving flags,
A faith that needs
No stormy eagle crying on the crags,
No guarded roads for lesser men to grope;
Only the surety of scattered seeds,
Only the knuckles curved for clasp or fight,
Only the wide land, and the stars at night,
The sires for memory and the sons for hope.

When you, with us, are shades through shadow drifting,
You shall have peace no vision can foretell,
And sharp delight to feel your spirit lifting
Young clay again; to know yourself the bell
Whose voice strikes upward from the sea-drowned steeple;
To know in starlit land and a quick people
Something of yours remains, and it is well."

The Spirit Walks

England has come this way:
England has come and left
This patterned country, shaped with hedge and wall;
England has bred these canny folk who say
Few words in youth, in old age none at all.
Where a gaunt wind grows loud, of space bereft,
Rocking the steeple, shaking the white plum
To the bough's hard tip; England has come and left
Her likeness here, and gone.

And there have come

Out of the niggard valleys, strong men singing;
Out of the praying sires, the fighting men.
Swift as the taunt astride the bullet's stinging,
The spirit walks, and speaks of change again.

Away and off, beyond what sweet horizon,
The sky has roots, the rainbow turns to gold?
The hand that staked the claim and shot the bison
Shall not return to Massachusetts mould,
More than the flesh that conquered Massachusetts
Shall feed the Cotswold violets.

Not alone

The spirit walks. It leads where graves shall mellow
For us, in some hushed land beyond the yellow
And amber stores of immemorial harvest,
Wrested from sharper earth than plows have known.

The Fathers of My Heart

The fathers of my heart were gnarled men,
Riding the borders of a mountain county
To view their fences. Men who knew the Lord
Loves a tight fence, they only used a pen
To keep accounts, nor did they have the swagger
It takes to wave a sword.

Children begotten in their narrow bounty
Of passion, might grow up to whet a dagger,
Or love a harlot, or drink wine and stagger,
Or worse—to spend what they could not afford.

Self-ruined heirs might waste their careful hoarding,
For no dead hand had laid restraint thereon.
“After we die, we shall not talk back from heaven.
Go wallow in every sin from one to seven;
We shall not weep for it where we have gone.
We framed your minds to sense; deny the pattern.
We sweat to earn you gold; trade it for clay.
Go crying ‘Sister’ to each passing slattern,
If you want to make yourself a fool that way.

You are our flesh. We love you, but we show it
Not in the quick kiss, not in the weak tear drawn
By your mistakes. This is the way you know it:
That we went gnarled and niggard to project you
Toward plenty, that we taught what should protect you
And keep you free men, after we were gone.”

The fathers of my heart were ruthless men
Unto themselves, unto their neighbors, shearing
The sheep too close, going in threadbare coats,
And praising their sons deep in their gruff throats,
When the sons were out of hearing.
Berating with a caustic word those children,
Loving them so the hand shook at the name
Of son or daughter; all their tortuous living

Quickened for those whose flesh was of their giving
Such were the fathers and the ways I knew them.
The children of my heart shall say the same.

Descend to Man

Spirit that lifts a golden maple high,
And sways the willow catkins in the spring;
Spirit that speaks out of a gusty sky
The muted poetry of a blackbird's wing,
The wordless poetry of a mountain climbing
Among thin, frosty airs forever chiming—
Spirit, descend to man that he may sing.

Come swinging through the beechwood in the dusk,
Bearing the scent of leaves forever green;
Through towns more fair than Camelot on Usk,
Blow the long smoke the shining roofs between.
Spirit that moves a field to kiss the plow
With warm, brown lips, and breathe the ruddy word
Of harvest: Spirit shaking the ripe bough,
Where blind men only see the thieving bird:

We shall inherit what our fathers had:
The mellow field, the road that gropes to town;
Each his own choice of music—each may hear
A hundred steeples beat upon the ear,
Or one lost sheep bell from a misty down.
We shall inherit spires that twist and climb,
Tall tree trunks blackened with the wind and rain—
All that our sires relinquished unto time
We shall have back, as youth has always had;
But not their lost security again.

Not the proud force that held the seas at bay,
And cut the curving lands to their deep core;
Not the sure knowledge that the new-cut hay
Would rise as sweet a thousand seasons more;
Not the indifference to death and pain
That keyed the senses to a marching tune,
That drove the ramrod home at Yorktown plain
And broke the dark and bloody ground with Boone.

We shall inherit what a people leaves,
But we are not that people, fleshed with earth,
Who dwelt serenely under ancient eaves
And took their substance from one meadow's girth.
We are not that folk who watched the breakers flood
Over their little ship steered for a dream.
No storm of arrows stings along our blood
To drive us where the last dim ranges gleam.

Spirit that lifts a golden maple high,
Dark, thorny boughs are crashing on the air.
Come softly where our ruined towers lie,
Sow in our furrowed minds the seeds of prayer.
Song shall arise there like a sweet wind blowing
To green old fields against a second mowing—
Song, and the singing courage that shall dare
On mortal lips to front the immortal sky.

The Eldest Son

These are the children of a continent:
This dark-eyed, ruddy girl, the painted plain,
With desert turquoise woven in her hair;
This cornland woman overborne with grain,
Generous alike to seed and sickle blade,
Burnt gold and brown beneath the parching air.

These are the children of a continent;
Mulatto wench, slow-veined with tepid streams,
Most ancient lady, whose severe brocade
Is frayed along the seams,
Who sits within a ruined garden close
And weeps because a vandal crushed the rose,
But plants new roses only in her dreams.

These are the children of a swelling land,
A full-blown country, and a vision's power;
A country that can partly understand
Love is least mortal at its April hour;
A country that forsook its eldest son
On a sharp headland by the gray sea's rim,
But made a hundred peoples into one,
Strong with the sinewed strength they drew from him.

He is a man, *this* country, and his frame
Is a gaunt hillside, and his laugh the wind
That shakes the hill—a laugh not often heard,
Save at the cry of the black, returning bird
Where wings have ceased to beat since winter came.
Dark roots have long drawn lifeblood from his heart,
His youth gone seaward from a rotting pier,
But still his savor keeps the apples tart,
His passion speaks in men for men to hear.
Autumn pervades him, but his every part
Holds May more dear.

He is a man gray-coated in the snow,

Hiding arbutus underneath his coat;
Wearing a silence always on his mouth,
Though the whole sea is singing in his throat.
That mouth is an ascetic's, thin and tight;
Its kiss is like a comet in the night.

I took this man for lover in my youth;
I took this man, desiring his caress.
His love was sunlight on the winter roof—
Too white and sharp to give me tenderness.
His handclasp was more cruel than a blow,
His fingers grasp my spirit's self in me;
But I shall love him till he bids me go
To feed the sumac and the shagbark tree.
His heirs amend him. You can see them pass.
They beat against you in a crowded street,
Their footprints lie on every blade of grass,
Their chimney smoke goes up the sky at dusk—
I have not drawn them from a winding sheet
Scented with rue and musk.

My lover's house is not a cenotaph:
Its granite chambers open to the sky
Are full of living men who breathe, and laugh,
And walk the russet orchards in the fall;
Who walk the road of death but do not die,
Because their sons go out to mend the wall
They left unmended, and their daughters take
The needle up to run the unfinished seam.
Their blood has the bright leap of brooks that wake
In spring, their flesh is turf that takes this stream
And holds it up to feel the vibrant air.
I would be theirs, and I would have them mine,
Because I know they live to breed and bear
A destiny beyond their own design.

For men will come on feet that shake the ground,
Deep-rooted men, as earthly as the corn,

Whose laughter has a wind-in-treetops sound,
Who scatter seeds out of a powder horn
And put their faith upon the blowing stem.
Such men will come. I want a part in them.

Challenge and Answer

The young man wearies of his father's house:
Too sturdy timbers keep the stars from sharing
His wakefulness. Outside, the careless boughs
Shake with fresh wind across a new world faring;
Within, the cobwebs gather, gather and thicken,
As old beliefs thicken in old men's minds.
Hew off the roof! Pull down the walls! Let quicken
Each gust of change.

Rattling these window blinds

Is no fit, noble sport for such clean blowing.
We are young men. We shall build new, if at all.
Youth needs no shelter when the rains are flowing.
Strength will not burrow when the whirlwinds fall.

Young challengers, this is the doom of you:
To grope, tear-blinded, through a shattered wood
Of trees that you considered stout and new.
When you have learned your fathers' ways were good;
That stars and wind are but poor friends to mortals;
That roofs have reason in them, you shall dwell
Under the weathered beams, behind old portals,
Rejoicing that your fathers built so well.
You shall renew the battered paint and shingle,
And watch your gray hairs coming through the brown,
While all your generation toil and mingle,
And rear up sons to tear *their* houses down.

In autumn

Brown shagbarks, hold from me the gnarléd kernel
With the prised shell. Yellowing elm trees,
Pour down your gold on the hair of other women
Walking in virtue.

Barberry bush, tender your sour orange.
Briar and burdock, tatter my flesh. The bramble
Plucked with the rose strikes inward rankling coldly
When I embrace it.

Fetch me the sackcloth skirt and coif of ashes—
Likewise, a branch outrageous of the maple!
Thus I be fitly clad for sin or Sabbath,
As the mood takes me.

Alas and Lack-a-Day!

Who marries you will marry Massachusetts,
The steepled village and the fieldstone wall,
And lie in bed at night with ghosts of greatness
That cannot make the living man more tall.

Who marries you will marry Harvard College
And rear her sons to wear the scholar's gown
And entertain on Sundays, Cotton Mather,
Alive as when he preached the witches down.

Of parsons robed severely for the Sabbath,
Of magistrates garbed each in his degree—
Of all who render honest lovers honest—
Who marries you will never marry me.

Incredible End

These are the girls who read the *Gallic Wars*
When I was reading them, who ran with me
Across the hockey field. They sit indoors
Tonight, and read a cooking recipe
Or mend a sock. The hips and bosoms flare,
That I recall as angular and slim.
Wide eyes grow veiled beneath the accusing stare
Of wider eyes across a cradle's rim.

These are the men who had the mouths of boys
When I was learning how a boy's mouth felt
Upon my own. Now apathy employs
Their nights as trade their days. No friend can melt
The glaze of their indifference by asking
News of themselves. They only warm to me
After a glass has cheered them into basking
In piteous boasts of what their sons will be.

It does not grieve me that my father's friends
Are old men now with sinews lax and sprung,
But that my own companions fall on ends
Incredible last night when we were young.
This is the end of agony and wonder
Save through vicariousness; this is the pain
Of my green generation's plowing under
To feed the roots of man's eternal grain.

March Weather

Landscapes dissolve in rain,
Now winter splits apart;
Willows bud in the fen;
The weather in the heart
Stirs like the greening wave,
Quickens in kindled fire:
Now every girl believes
In every man's desire.

The leafless lilac hedge
Too bare to shelter love,
The sea-blown winds that rage
Inland cannot reprove
This shaft of mellowing light
Over inward acres blown.
In this weather of the heart
No lover goes alone.

Poem Written in the Belief That It Is
Possible to Pass Through Wisdom
and Come Out the Other Side

When I was nineteen the land ran green and brown
To the mountain's blue,
And any fool could tell the field from the town,
The false from the true.
Wiser than all the books I had never read,
Older than all the years I had never seen,
Inexorable as parting of quick and dead,
I knew you would never be mine when I was nineteen.

In a riper year the land dissolves in sky
Like smoke in mist.
Bared to their colorless depths all colors lie;
No towns exist
For wise men's telling. Under the autumn rain,
True touches false with little choice between,
And the tempered wit denies the untempered vein
The wisdom of nineteen.

Rhyme for Red

Red are the apples on the bough,
Red are the bramble hips,
Red is the soil beneath the plow,
Red are a woman's lips.

Though man may reap his fruit amiss
And seed his turf awry,
Until he scorn a woman's kiss
His kind will never die.

Men's Generations

Men's generations lift a feeble stem
Immortally, much to the planet's wonder,
The stars' indifference. There is in them,
Fibre of oaks hewn down and trodden under;
Tenacity of fog on a dark shingle;
The inarticulateness of wind and rain;
Patience of fields wherein they look to mingle,
Intimate dust with dust that grows again
Up a green stalk.

Men's generations quiver
Before what storm of stars? Go down before
What planet's thrust? Streams from a deathless river
Into their hushed roots pour.
Soil from unmeasured mountains feeds their growing
Perennially. Under the blade of time
Fall the bright flowers of all purer sowing,
But not the generations as they climb.
Mist out of chaos blurs the leaf's appearance,
Seldom the sun of vision warms the tree
That has no power beyond the perseverance
To lift a feeble stem immortally.

If any child, born of this beauty's breath,
Shall look at me with eyes like mine and say
That love has less reality than death,
That men are forged of finer stuff than clay,
I shall forgive him.

Young eyes watch a star
Too ardently to see the fields as well.
Small good to tell him April lilacs are
More sweet than amaranth and asphodel.

If he swear loyalty to deathless things,
As I am sworn to love the things that die,
If any child of mine shall long for wings,
Let him, too, learn the emptiness of sky.
He will come back to crush the friendly turf,
To barter jests and apples in the town,
To pull an oar against the pulsing surf,
And love a girl with eyes of autumn brown.

If any child shall have his flesh of me,
Betrayed by this bright moment out of dust
Into a shape that fathoms ecstasy
And begs in scarlet for a bitter crust,
Let him love oak leaves rustling to the moon,
And all earth's colored pageant moving by.
He will be part of timelessness too soon,
Lost as a wind that walks along the sky.

In shadow and quick light,
Where grass flows to the sea,
Blue, to green, to white,
Time moves visibly.

Gold, to amber, to black,
Returning tides will come;
The russet leaf hangs slack
To banner no man home.

The chestnut's ivory leaf,
The lilac's mauve,
Wither for no man's grief,
Nor burgeon for his love.

Time bids colors burn
Or cease, to suit a plan
That holds of no concern
The troubled flesh of man.

Child That I Never Had

Child that I never had, you owe me more
Than any man of flesh can owe his mother:
Armor no crowds can spit upon or bore
With lead; the knowledge no man is your brother,
And hence deserving of you. Nothingness?
There are worse legacies of stain and blight;
You might have paid with fifty years' duress
For sport I took at kissing in the night.

Girl that I never had, you will not know
All earth's horizon in one lost young man
As I have done; but you are better so
Than bound in service to the futile plan
Of generation.

Oh unawaking son,
Infallible, and unbetrayed to clay,
Not by the crumbling forts my fathers won
Shall I appoint you heir to their decay.

Women who cannot see beyond delight,
Or women who believe, or those who hope,
Cling to the strong arm, claim their ancient right,
And curse with breath the children who must grope
Into an ever darker chaos. Shrinking
Back from the baffled girl, the bleeding lad,
I shall go down my last road proudly linking
My arms with arms of heirs I never had.

To a Maker of Land

When the last briar, the last red sumac spray
Is hacked away, and sleekly curves the ground
Under your apple trees, stand tall some night
Under the light of a bright moon; look round
About you at the land you wrought, and hear
The early apples clear the twigs and fall,
At the sad end of summer—and remember
I would not have approved your feat at all!

I would have kept the bramble, the wild stem
That leafs in flame, nor blessed with my consent
This tidiness created at your touch.
There is so much I would have different—
As you know well. Under the lowering air,
Turn homeward, where my feet will never go,
On your last night of summer—and remember
This is your orchard; you would have it so.

Cup to the Dead

Come, brother, Agamemnon's down,
But we shall share his hill;
Fill we our cup with drink as brown
As the turf we must fill.
What if our grief grow clamorous
And scandalize the town?
Death has no power to trouble us,
Now Agamemnon's down.

The beams to shore the falling roof
Have felt our strength today.
He built his house disaster-proof,
He shaped his heirs that way.
Come, brother, hold your corner hard.
Let nothing shift his wall,
Who told us, "This is yours to guard—
If Agamemnon fall."

Brother, our legend ends in peace,
So men have said who know;
They wrote it down that way in Greece
Two thousand years ago.
Till then, serve we each other well,
Past any loves that be,
Because when Agamemnon fell
No other watched with me.

In Time of a Friend's Illness

I. *St. Patrick's: a rainy night in May*

I was brought up to think the gods were dead
With ghost and goblin. I was a wise child:
Too wise to bend the knee or bow the head,
And that did well enough while fortune smiled.
But now, afraid, in trouble, and distraught,
'Tis marvel how unerringly I turn
From consolations thinking men have wrought,
To these old altars where the candles burn.

I kneel here in the dark, an unbeliever,
With lovely Latin chanted soft above,
Humbly beseeching those *dead* gods deliver
Their safest passage to a friend I love.
And as they answer Heaven stands or falls.

Oh gods, I charge you, mind those jasper walls!

II. *The Knight's Tale*

Let's play that you're a princess in a tower,
And I'm the knight pacing below the wall,
And illness is the cruel stepmother,
And pain the dragon at her beck and call.
She is not flesh the broadsword can dispatch,
No sorcerer can chant her hold away,
But all we have to do is wait and watch;
She is at best the creature of a day.
'Tis a hard doom thus to subsist on patience
That bears but poor repute as knightly fare.
The walls look down upon me in complacence.
I face them back and tell them they are air.
I can await the ultimate renaissance,
When you let down one single golden hair.

III. *On receiving an invitation to a strawberry*

*festival that would have admitted two,
but that only one can use.*

These strawberries will not be common fruit
Gathered from any field of earth. They'll be
Grown of Elysium's immortal root,
Too good for me.

Whatever's said or sung will be the same,
Sweet past the telling, be it false or true;
Since it is something hallowed with your name,
Coming from you.

I'll be there proud and wear my gayest dress,
And walk secure, and steadfast, all my own;
And nobody who looks at me will guess
I'm not alone.

Poem for My Daughters

These are my daughters and these will I own:
Deborah, Barbara, Janet, and Joan.

Barbara—stranger—is I to the life,
Always a daughter and never a wife.

Janet and Joan are the twins I would bear
Him who demanded a masculine heir.

Deborah, brown-eyed, in a gray dress
With a white kerchief—one sober caress

Always I wanted and never could win—
She is the child of that mystical sin.

All will I give you, save flesh, blood, and bone,
Deborah, Barbara, Janet, and Joan.

Poem for Your Home Town

The land I grew in gave me gifts
Beyond my flesh: the free
Indifference to assault that lifts
A mountain rowan tree.

Its sea put singing in my blood;
Its autumn air put edge
Along my wit. To nerve and mood,
Each crooked granite ledge
Brought perseverance after vows,
The strength to look at truth.
My father and my father's house,
My apple blossom youth
New Hampshire gave.

It did deny

Of all sweet gifts the crown.
That was bestowed upon me by
A green Ohio town.

II

BALLADS AND CHARACTERS

Sing Oh the Holly

I met my love in winter's sorry season:

Sing oh the prickled holly and the fir!

A maid is first betrayed by her own treason,

It little needs a man should cozen her.

I kissed my love when Candlemas brought thawing:

Sing oh the chastened holly in a wreath!

Wroth at our plighted troth the rooks went cawing

Up from the boughs we lovers lay beneath.

We waved goodbye across the springing furrows:

Sing oh the withered holly flung away!

No man who takes the span of golden boroughs

Will hie him back to cut the golden hay.

By Hallows Eve, 'tis like, I'll bear his daughter—

No boy be cradled for a lot so mean.

One woe she'll know, whatever else is taught her:

In twenty years the holly will be green.

Fable for Genealogists

They drew her in a satin dress
Of whalebone and brocade,
Befitting for an ancestress,
But irksome to a maid.

They painted her with powdered hair
And jewels at her throat,
Who once had let her feet go bare
And torn her petticoat

Picking a way up Bramble Hill,
To tryst beneath the thorn
With Tam O'Day who kept the mill
That ground her husband's corn.

That she was fair the men would say,
The women call her sly:
Her son was gotten on the day
She laid her satins by.

They painted her with powdered hair
Beside her graybeard squire
Who reared him up the thin-lipped heir
Named for a thin-lipped sire.

They drew her in a satin dress
Ten generations gone.
Never did those bright lips confess
What lips they rested on:

But now and then the blood distills
A child too mad and gay,
The eyes as blue as Wicklow hills,
The laugh of Tam O'Day.

The Sewing Circle Remembers Kit Rowan

Kit Rowan's mother came from County Down
In famine year, wrapped in a ragged quilt.
Kit's eyes were blue, her hair was peat-moss brown,
She prayed to Mary, and she danced the lilt
With Dan the peddler on the muster green.
('Twas Dan the peddler bought her scarlet shoes—
He said he liked her laughter.) That could mean
The elders had no second way to choose.
Beyond the edge of town they harried Kit.

"It's sad I am," she wept, "for any people
So hard and foolish and so proud of it
They put a golden cock upon a steeple."
The girl was dragged, poor, and infamous;
I cannot see why she should pity us.

Ballad of Wind and Rain

Two men were knocking at my door as I ran down from the gables;
Rain blew up from the river, and fog drew in from the sea.
One man wanted a prophet, and one a spinner of fables,
And neither wanted me.

“Come in,” I said, “from the dripping sky. A loaf and a lighted candle
Are yours and welcome, though I can tell no saw nor curious tale.”
*“Better the storm than a stupid wench made fast to a teapot’s handle.
Her speech pallid and stale.”*

I loosened my hair in the sullen light and the color of bronze was in it.
I held my hands to their scornful hands, and beckoned them indoors.
*“We have been blinded with brighter locks and lain out love’s sharp
minute
In whiter arms than yours.*

*We come here seeking a man tonight; a brother to stand beside us
And try his wit upon our wits, and gladden our feast with the pearl
Of a brave jest crushed in the wine. We have not hied us
Hither to prate with a girl.”*

They rode away in the yellow mist. I walked my house more drearily
Than raindrops lost in the river or fog drawn back to the sea.
Every night comes the rap on my door, and my own name spoken clearly,
And nobody wanting me.

Oh come, fellow, come, here's India rum
In a keg that will never go dry,
And here's Hetty come up from the towns in the south,
With the come-hither look in her eye.
She's been with a colonel who carried a sword,
She's been with a sea-going tar,
She's been with a parson who prayed to the Lord,
And she's waiting to try what you are.

Once Hetty was white as a pear tree in May,
But now she is raddled and red.
Too often she watched out the dawning of day,
While her sisters lay sleeping in bed;
Too often she walked with a man in the dusk;
Too often she lay in the straw.
She's been with a painter, and been with a priest,
And been with a man of the law.

For we cried, when her baby lay breathless and dead,
That its throat bore a bruise and a mark,
But the judge on the bench caught a glance from the wench,
And loved her that night in the dark.
So Hetty will laugh with her wide, painted lips,
And shake the rough mat of her hair.
"When I was a girl, you were good, you were bad,
Just the way you were ugly—or fair."

Oh come, fellow, come, to the comfort of rum,
Nor drink to the loves you have lost.
Here's Hetty as bright as the coins in her purse,
And sharp as the edge of the frost.
She's been with a poet, and a digger of graves,
She's been with the host at the bar;
She's tried all your brothers and found they were knaves,
And she's waiting to try what you are.

Of Female Scholars

*(For Edith Stedman, Director of the Bureau of
Appointments, Radcliffe College)*

My wares are female scholars, sir. Discern
Their virtues well, and make a studied choice.
Here's Ann: it took her seven years to learn
To babble Sanskrit in a raucous voice.

Here's Jane: her stockings wrinkle at the ankle,
Her brow is smudged with lipstick like the curse
Of Cain. Don't let such trivial matters rankle!
She writes iambics, eloquent and terse.

Laurette—poor creature—this is just between us,
Is a rare jewel, though she stoops and squints.
She wrote her thesis on "The Busts of Venus."
(The subject didn't give her any hints.)

These are my wares, these shy, imperious women
Pursuing visions perilous and sweet.
They put no thought upon a bonnet's trimming
And make no terms with dust blown through the street.

I hawk them for the price of bread and covers
Paid to the purchased wench. Their heads are high;
Plato and Aristotle are their lovers.
My wares are female scholars. Who will buy?

A Cradle Song for Old John Doane

*—A deacon of Plymouth church who lived
to the age of one hundred and ten, and
during his last days was rocked in a cradle—*

Oh let Sue scour the pewter, both trencher and ladle,
And Ann go out leafing the green woods along,
And Martha's to rock the old lad in his cradle,
With the long swing, the strong swing, the soft swinging song.

Here and yon,
Come and gone.
First of all
Men recall
Swaying bed,
Bending head
Over them,
Rustling hem,
Gentle kiss.
More than this
Never any woman is.

Who was small
Groweth tall;
Draining sedge,
Setting hedge,
Guiding plows.
Hawthorne boughs
Hide the place
For embrace,
Plighting kiss.
More than this
Never any woman is.

Oh the light's down the wall, and the wick as ye trimmeth,
Lean over him gently—he sleeps now and then;
Our grandfather's grandsire, a deacon of Plymouth,
All shriveled and wee, and a hundred and ten.

Crossing seas,
Felling trees,
Shooting braves,
Digging graves,
Praising God
For his rod,
Watching her
Soothe your heir
With her kiss.
More than this
Never any woman is.

Run, Nan, pin the shutter across the east gable;
The wind's rising fast. Jane, go season the pot.
The wisest lad ever was rocked in a cradle
Will call for his supper and call for it hot.

Here and yon,
Come and gone,
Summers pass;
Flesh is grass
Under stone.
Man alone
Thinks of these:
Gathered sheaves,
Fallen leaves,
Memories—
More than these
Never any woman is.

Soft and slow,
To and fro.
What was tall
Lieth small.
Start and end
Meet and blend.
Swaying bed,
Comely head

Bending down,
Rustling gown,
Gentle kiss;
Who has this
Has all woman ever is.

Hester Prynne's Daughter

I have remembered walking in this way,
Through slanting tombstones on the yellow grass;
Feeling harsh boughs beset me as I pass,
Hearing a wind beside my shoulder say,
“Put a dull cloak upon your rose-red dress.
You walk where dead men walked in righteousness;
Kneel down in prayer where they have knelt to pray.”

The air was thick with syllables of dust;
The silt of ages lay upon my hair—
And then the bright wave caught me unaware!
Thrust from the sod as daffodils are thrust,
I knew the kisses of the living air,
I knew the kisses of a loving mouth.

I have come back to walk across the drouth.
That love is gone. The daffodils are dead.
I walk among the tombs, I hear the sound
Of a ghost's gray skirts as it trails them over the ground.
The gray wind says what all gray winds have said.

But I am proud to walk across this grass
And flaunt my rose-red gown to the prayerful men.
No grand-dame crying caution in my blood,
No vision gleaming darkly through a glass,
Shall keep my soul from drowning in that flood,
When the bright wave breaks over me again.

Clipper Captain

The Captain went to sea at seventeen,
Before the time of clipper ships was done.
They say his first wife was an island queen
Who moved like palm leaves stirring in the sun.
His second wife was Mattie Jones from Hull;
She bore him sons and kept him from the tide.
Her voice was shriller than a wailing gull;
She swept the house up clean the day she died.

The Captain does not think of women now.
His chair is placed where he can watch the sea;
His blue eye quickens at a cleaving prow,
He whispers quaveringly,
“This land breeds men. I sailed around the Horn
Seventy years ago. One hour past
A boy took ship, and there are boys unborn,
Like those who sailed with me before the mast.

This land breeds men. They may not swear by sails,
But they are tempered with the same unrest
A headland gives. They have a love for gales
And roads run west.
It is not death to feel the body go
Into a land that keeps on breeding men.
It is the one way I shall ever go
To sea again.”

John Alden Speaks for Himself

May Hell and Death blow fury on that day!

I walked so gay in the woods, and I found a plot
Of silly pink buds and took them to her in a spray.

The Captain said she was his. (May the Captain rot!)
He said he knew she loved him, but he was too proud
To go chasing a maid for himself.

He never said
That once I'd made *his* offer, and stood there, polite, and bowed,
The wench would fling herself at my hapless head.

There were others in town could bake a tastier loaf,
Others could kiss in the starlight quicker than she;
But had I refused her, all Plymouth would call me an oaf.
I might have found myself in the pillory
Or worse.

You know the end—the end that is never over—
Three hundred springs have dwindled away in fall,
But still men sneer at me for a laggard lover,
Who was never a lover at all.

III

MY WORLD AS IN MY TIME

Hunter's Moon

—*In the time of the Finnish War*—

Great Bay is frozen over now,
From the pale sedges wheel
No blue-gray wings of mallard,
No blue-green wings of teal.
The men crack walnuts by the fire,
The boys court or brawl,
Oblivious of their empty guns
On the kitchen wall.

By other frozen bays the guns,
Checked by no game law's ban,
Bring down upon the darkening fields
The richness that is man.
Under the trampled sedges lie,
Stiff in the steel rain,
Boys who will never shoot a duck
Or kiss a girl again.

The stars look out on Stratham Hill,
Lights in the windows spring;
And I reach out my hand for yours,
Knowing no better thing
Than this dumb comfort for dumb fear
Of landscapes torn with steel
If the Great Bay men wrench down their guns,
Ignoring teal.

Armada Weather

“Grant us, oh God, the old Armada weather—”

Country too raw to nurse the fine-bred heather,
Unfertilized by castles in decay,
Now England darkens for Armada weather;
What shall we say
When she comes seeking men-at-arms of us?
Is it the old reply?
“While our unthreatened towns are populous,
Our harvest safe, we have no call to die.”

Look out with lights across the shrunken water:
Are we unmenaced if the armies sweep
Over the sad frontiers betrayed to slaughter
By old men counting danegeld in their sleep?
Country too young to know Armada weather,
Ask your unshattered stone,
What free man turns from free men drawn together?
What nation liveth to itself alone?

New Hampshire Christmas

Our harvest moon is gone, and our hunting season;
Black rains turn white in the air, gray acres white.
Now firwood feels the axe for the old reason,
And children dream of reindeer in the night.

Now in the reindeer countries no such folly
Survives. Kris Kringle dies without reprieve.
Brave shires that sang the ivy and the holly
Dare risk no peal of bells this Christmas Eve.

Christ, if he came, would find no friendly manger
In David's land, no offering of myrrh.
Peace walks the earth an outcast and a stranger,
But in New Hampshire we may harbor her

A little longer at least; tell the old story
Of man's rejoicing, and keep the old good cheer;
Thank, for what peace we have, the Power, the Glory—
And pray to do the same another year.

American Autumn

Believing men have plowed their fields this year;
Traced the brown runnel round the fallow hill
As in remembered autumns.

So mynheer
Planted his tulips by a brown canal
One fallow spring, but never saw them bloom.
Last year the muzhik set his fields with grain,
Then set the torch against the yellow stem.
Plowers, how many of you will plow again?
Will see, beyond the fields of brown and amber,
The beechwood whiten as the dark comes on;
Will use your guns for hunting in the timber,
Or know rejoicing in the new-born son
And the casual march of autumn back to autumn
Till age remembers only mellow sky?
Death was about, young men, when you were gotten,
And your young fathers marched away to die.

With a Book of Bohemian Folk Tales
Done in Red and Black

Black grief is yours, black terror on the rack;
The red of sweet, spilled flesh is yours as well,
Bohemian peasants drawn in red and black,
Who sent the devil limping home to hell.

A greater devil strides your mountains now,
Your cities crumble and your harvests burn;
You cannot smite the symbols from his brow,
By simple tricks with apple tree and churn.

But these sharp stories from your days of mirth
Should caution any Satan to have done
His futile war on the black strength of earth,
The red of apple harvest, and God's son.

By High St. George

The apple trees by high St. George
Bend in the shifting snow
Seaward, toward the harbor gorge
Wherein the troopships go.

For there are men loved apple trees
Who walk the decks thereon,
Leaving their hearts' Hesperides
In Maine and Oregon.

They shall pick apples, God allow,
At home, before they die,
Who turn from home's last apple bough
East to the alien sky.

We set our faith in no mirage
Who call their courage kin,
And tend the roots by high St. George
Till all the ships are in.

Contradiction

(On reading of the death of Stephen Vincent Benét)

So long as men shall cross America
West from the seaboard cities with the light,
Yet conscious underneath their consciousness
Of Plymouth landfall, or the dogwood bough
Whitening beside the James:

so long as men

Pass the horizons of the buffalo—
Today, tomorrow, and no buffalo there—
Beyond the gray-green streams that flowered blue
At one man's word—

this man shall live that long!

First Poem for Valerie

(Born on the morning of the invasion of Sicily)

Green nuts hide in the green leaves along the chestnut bough,
Blue summer lights the bay.
In May the chestnut blossoms—you must learn how whitely—
For you were not born last May.

These green nuts in autumn will be smooth and amber
You must touch them then.
Nothing will ever be sleeker to your fingers
Though you stroke richer silk than most daughters of men.

A black mist came blowing early through the chestnuts,
The green fields of cattle and corn;
And on one chestnut island, good men died in battle,
The morning you were born.

A sad wind, a sea wind blew your eyelids open,
The world revealed its woe.
By children slain, by cradles split and broken,
You could have told it no.

But you chose to breathe its grim air—so the world is yours
To take with little aid,
Save the trees in the green wind that never heard of wars,
And lift their boughs for any child who makes the choice you made.

Great ships move down the bay,
Bearing our loves to death.
Ile de France makes way
For *Queen Elizabeth*,

Moving like queens to court,
Sinister, sleek.
Wherever they make port
The wrath will break.

It has been ours to prove
In our life's span,
The death of God and love,
The rise of outraged man.

These ships have in their holds
Burnt town and riven sky,
Young flesh already old,
Bright flesh that must die

Before its brightness dulls,
Before wars stop.
Over them hang the gulls,
And the world's hope.

Map of England

Here's England forty miles the inch! Here's time,
And love, and man, and all that makes us we!
Top of the Dunkery Beacon I shall climb
To watch the Doones and Lorna—it's 5-C.
And you'll be up in Haworth near 4-D
With those Bronte girls—Charlotte's a minx, but clever
Enough to seem demure; wears jet, no doubt.
And if she misses, Emily you can't flout.
They will go on enduring and forever
On their doomed earth that shall outwit all doom.

To this our blood goes back: to Suffolk where
Jim Barker left his goose and tailor's shears
And went from Risbridge Hundred west—the years
That bring men home have not returned him there;
To Cheshire, where "a Done doth kill a Done,"
Beside the Irish Sea, so Drayton wrote
About your sires.

In this lost century,
Where sterling pound grows lesser, groat by groat,
Here's Wessex whence the fighting kings have gone.
Here's England!

Cross your fingers and hold on.

This is the way the houses looked,
All dusty in the drouth;
Around this hill the coach road crooked
When hooves went beating south.
His love stood by in crinoline,
His house rose firm as prayer,
The day Bray Collin rode to war
Across the village square.

New Hampshire dust has piteous dreams
Asleep at Seven Pines:
Bray Collin's house is rotting beams
Below the blackberry vines;
His love has left her withered flesh
That wrapped a bitter core.
Her sons were not Bray Collin's sons,
They never went to war.

The years go over: autumn, May,
And love and death come back.
Men whose great grandsires rode with Bray
Move now to the attack.
May God upright their roofrees keep,
Let love's fulfillment be,
Nor lay New Hampshire dust asleep
Beside the Yellow Sea.

IV

END AND BEGINNING

Return again!

Wind rattling at the door
In the blue autumn morning, rains of spring
Driven across the warm night heretofore
Have kept you down, have ceiled you, wondering
Why death must be (as we shall wonder soon);
Not done with life, not reconciled to gain
The heaven promised you, seeking no boon
But breath eternal—

Gone, return again!

Not that this foolish bidding can evoke
What is, without it. There can never burn
In dead men's minds the words their children spoke,
"Christ, as you had a father, make return
Of mine!"

The graves that do not yawn or yield
Stay tamped; no glimmering whiteness moves from there
Transparently. But in the stubble field
Or the steel town; in every man, the heir
Of all men gone before him; in the thrust
Of blood and muscle; in the silence heard
After the prayer, the poem—

Wan in dust

The dead men—but they speak the living word.

They lived before us, winding in parade
A flight of stairs (the journey up or down?)
From lavish Eden in the apple shade,
To August morning in an eastern town
Now with them, out of mind.

(Did they enjoy

Its sharp arrival? Whisper pridefully,
"It took our arms ten years to level Troy.
The boys we got are better men than we.")

They built before us: here and there an ell,
And now and then a gable—never whole
Or to a grand design. If it were well,
They did not ask; if it were beautiful,
Not half so much as did it serve the need.
One marble moment of the Parthenon,
Ten thousand years of wattle laced with weed.
We cannot call them back who have not gone.

They thought before us: Beauty, Truth, and Good
They bounded, sifting shadow out of dream.
Sir Isaac lying in the apple wood,
The Scotch boy bending to the kettle steam,
The men who wrote, “We hold these truths to be
Self-evident—”

Like raindrops down a wall
They pass, and yet we have no surety,
But what our children shall out-think them all.
Their books, their walls, their unremembering flesh
We have of them; within us they remain.
I try their old integrity afresh,
Who cry above our graves, “Return again!”
With this my argument:

I bear no lyre,
No golden clime of song has sheltered me;
I had my being in a stony shire,
The only shire this side the western sea;
But there the mist was cleft before me once—
Which one of you can prove but what I am
A palace minstrel murdered in Provence,
Reborn in Strafford north of Rockingham?

But what am I and what are all the poets,
Talking too loud of what they do not know?
Effectual as blind men tossing quoits,
Till the mist cleave to let the vision show

A dome of many colored glass revealed
To one; the red rose beauty, to a score;
To me, a narrow stretch of stonewalled field
That has been England's but is hers no more.

Below this field, the men this field has fed—
And out beyond this field to Sutter's mill—
In Saffron Walden were the fathers bred,
Devon or London, but the moving will,
From Charles His Kingdom by the Grace of God,
Spilled them all seaward as the lemmings spill.

And the sons grew up in the swamps around Great Bay,
Taught they were subjects still of Charles His Crown,
But a different set of muscles comes in play
Trimming a hedge than rafting hemlock down.
A different look lies on the land you clear
Than on the land you had from Doomsday Book.
The first New Hampshire man was not a seer,
But he could read the difference in that look.

In Strafford County north by Rockingham,
Down in a cup-shaped town the dark comes early,
Where chestnuts reach across the beaver dam,
I heard him asking,

“Can't you hear me, Shirley?”

“Yes, I can hear. What is it?”

“If you can,

You are mine forever. I can half the score,
Possessing you, with any living man.”

And hearing him, I knew what I was for.
I was to listen always till I die,
For the voice half heard just as the dark comes down,
When mist goes walking somber on the sky,
When grass is gray and all the leaves are brown.
I was to speak whatever I should hear
Blown through the crooked crabtrees black with rain.
Thus, as a destined watcher by the weir

Between two worlds, I plead,

“Return again!”

Return again! Forever driving north
By east, the sea wind spirals into snow
Round towers that cannot hide me from the truth
Faced in a steeped village long ago.
I must lose myself to tell the thing I know.

There is no I. My hand's an empty glove;
Where I have stood, a lifeless cloak shall sway,
And other lips comfort my living love,
That dead men may go walking in the day.

Open the window to the northeast sky;
Out of New England floods the freezing rain,
The voices calling as the wind drives by,
The cleaving mist, the ages tipped awry,
And the undying dead return again.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this eBook.

[The end of *A Land and a People* by Shirley Barker]