

Classic Poetry Series

Henry Treece
- poems -

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Henry Treece(22 December 1911 – 10 June 1966)

Henry Treece was a British poet and writer, who worked also as a teacher and editor. He wrote a range of works, but became mainly remembered as a writer of juvenile historical novels.

Life and work

Treece was born in Wednesbury, Staffordshire, and graduated from the University of Birmingham in 1933. He went into teaching, first at Tynemouth School. In 1939 he married Mary Woodman and settled in Lincolnshire as a teacher at Barton-upon-Humber Grammar School. Their son, Richard Treece, became a musician with Help Yourself and other rock bands.

His five volumes of poetry were: 38 Poems (London: Fortune Press, [1940]), then by Faber & Faber; Invitation and Warning 1942; The Black Seasons 1945; The Haunted Garden 1947; and The Exiles 1952. He appeared in the 1949 The New British Poets: an anthology edited by Kenneth Rexroth; but from 1952 with The Dark Island he devoted himself to fiction. His best known are his juvenile historical novels, particularly those set in the Viking period, although he also wrote some adult historical novels. Many of his novels are set in transitional periods in history, where more primitive societies are forced to face modernisation, e.g. the end of the Viking period, or the Roman conquest of Britain. His play Carnival King (Faber & Faber) was produced at Nottingham Playhouse in 1953. He also worked as a radio broadcaster.

In World War II he served as an intelligence officer in the RAF and helped John Pudney edit Air Force Poetry.

Other poetry anthologies he was involved with include The New Apocalypse (1939) with J. F. Hendry giving its name to a movement; two further anthologies with Hendry followed. He wrote a critical study of Dylan Thomas, called Dylan Thomas - Dog among the fairies published by Lindsay Drummond, London in 1949. He and Thomas became estranged over Thomas's refusal to sign up as a New Apocalyptic.

He also wrote Conquerors in 1932, as a way to reflect on the horrors of war.

He edited issues of Transformation, and A New Romantic Anthology (1949) with Stefan Schimanski, issues of Kingdom Come: The Magazine of War-Time Oxford with Schimanski and Alan Rook, as well as War-Time Harvest. How I See

Apocalypse (London, Lindsay Drummond, 1946) was a retrospective statement.

Ages

In that stone head, obscenity
Has been preserved a thousand years;
A bible-leaf of families
Have shuddered at the pointed ears.

The sword that hangs upon the wall
Is notched the length of its long blade,
And children at the village school
Dream of the trusses it has mowed.

Close against the lichened tower
Still lives a witch. Around her head
She wears a shawl, and white as flour
Her lips count every step she treads.

But when the dusk-born lovers stand
The figure sobs, 'Oh where's my soul?'
The sword sighs for the long-dead hand,
The old hag huddles from the owl.

Henry Treece

Dumb Love

How do I love you then?
Till stone unfold his nature, and
Funereal rook his language,
Tongue dumb as bell unclattered
Lies in silent head.

How tell you hurt, my own?
Only as trees wind-anguished bend
And sigh their mournful message,
Or woman freshly widowed
Whispers to her dead.

How can it end, sweet Queen?
Only as leaf ends in the wind,
Blown to a new world's edge
For future's growth the food,
Rich as a dying word.

Henry Treece

Lincolnshire Bomber Station

Across the road the homesick Romans made
The ground-mist thickens to a milky shroud;
Through flat, damp fields call sheep, mourning their dead
In cracked and timeless voices, unutterably sad,
Suffering for all the world, in Lincolnshire.

And I wonder how the Romans liked it here;
Flat fields, no sun, the muddy misty dawn,
And always, above all, the mad rain dripping down,
Rusting sword and helmet, wetting the feet
And soaking to the bone, down to the very heart . . .

Henry Treece

Love Poem

Let us go out in the rain, love,
And keep these memories clean;
Then stand beneath the sheltering eave
To fall in love with the moon.

And let us walk in the wood, dear,
Walk in the stillness of pines,
And sigh for the wild birds who cry there
All night in their shuddering dreams.

Then back to our waiting house, sweet,
Four walls and a sturdy roof,
Where nothing can ever harm us -
No, not even grinning Death.

Henry Treece

Love Song

Distance nor death shall part us, dear,
Nor yet the traitor word;
And love shall live within our home
As blithe as any bird.

The sight of you is in my eyes,
Your touch is in my hand;
They cannot part us now, my love,
With miles of weary land.

Man with his sword and Death his scythe,
Are but the tricks of time,
To tease me with the empty years
Before we shared one name.

Henry Treece

Martyr

He lay, wrapped in a world of mutilated hands,
Of trees that walked by night and grinning clouds;
To bellowing of bulls, his dream's black cloth
Ripped and let drop a heart stuck full of swords.

He walked, and by his side there strode a shade
Whose tattered hood half-hid a ram's dry skull:
'There is a place set for me at God's side.'
Said Ram, 'A door swings open outside Hell!'

He rose, upon hysteric wreaths of love,
Soared, nailed to an unrelenting beam;
Through airs that tingled with a child's low cries
He glided, gentle as a girl's soft dream

Of hyacinth and marjoram, in bowers
Of vernal holiness, where at a sigh
The leaves bend back like gracious hostesses
To introduce a lover, golden in glee.

He smashed the bowl of bitterness, let spill
His freighted nightmares on the weeping world.
His soul, ecstatic as the chains fell free,
Sped in the likeness of a tiny bird.

Henry Treece

Poem - I

In the dark caverns of the night,
Loveless and alone,
Friendless as wind that wails across the plains,
I sit, the last man left on earth,
Putting my fear on paper,
Praying that love will flow from my dry pen
And watching the tears make havoc on my page.

And I remember then,
Under the night's still mask,
The gallant geese
Making their way through storms,
The fieldmouse scattering to my door
Away from the black cloud,
And the gay snail
Garnishing the twig before leaves came.

The old ones told me,
'When you grow grey you think on little things ;'
Now these dreams kiss the bruises from my mind
Under the night's still mask,
As loveless and alone
I sit, till dawn the last man left
Who knows the sound of rain on summer leaves,
The graceful swan breasting the blood-red stream,
And heart's incompetence.

Henry Treece

Poem - Ii

Death walks through the mind's dark woods,
Beautiful as aconite,
A lily-flower in his pale hand
And eyes like moonstones burning bright.

Love walks down heart's corridors
Singing for a crust of bread
All the tales of laughing youth
Who tomorrow will lie dead.

Here two summer metaphors;
For even on a sun-mad day
Laughter breaks into salt tears,
And grave is never far away.

Henry Treece

Poem - Iii

Through the dark aisles of the wood
Where the pine-needles deaden all sound
And the dove flutters in the black boughs

Through twilit vaults of the forest
Where fungus stifles the roots
And the squirrel escapes with a cone

Through the dim alleys of pine
Where the bent stick moves like a snake
And the badger sniffs at the moon

Through the green graveyard of leaves
Where the stoat rehearses his kill
And the white skull grins in the fern.

Henry Treece

Relics

In that stone head, obscenity
Has been preserved a thousand years;
A bible-leaf of families
Have shuddered at the pointed ears.

The sword that hangs upon the wall
Is notched the length of its long blade,
And children at the village school
Dream of the trusses it has mowed.

Close against the lichened tower
Still lives a witch. Around her head
She wears a shawl, and white as flour
Her lips count every step she treads.

But when the dusk-born lovers stand
The figure sobs, 'Oh where's my soul?'
The sword sighs for the long-dead hand,
The old hag huddles from the owl.

Henry Treece

Revenente

The bells of memory sound this summer day
Down the long alleys of the blue-skied years;
Shy cowslip, thyme, the haunting scent of hay,
Pleached gardens nourished by a lover's tears,
And honeysuckle, shy maid in the hedge,
Are all Her handmaids; blessed is the sight
The mirror-pool caught of Her. So the stage
Is set for entrance, and a girl in white
Walks in my heart again, out of pale death,
Kingdom of shrivelled mouth and powdering bone,
Touching my cheek with flower-laden breath,
And whispering, 'Poor love, and still alone?'
Was any man so lucky, dear God?
It will be dawn before She takes the road.

Henry Treece

Sympathy With Stone

Blood-red the lily, and the questing horn
Shrivelling in silence;
Crumbling the archway, tumbled stone
Trembling at violence
Of rain and frosty ruin and the crushing heel;
No tenderness,
No knowledge of that soul
Which cries in every stone, how hewn, how shaped.

We quarried you and gave you for a name
His title whom you shielded from the wolf,
Who left you standing naked, when his shame
Gave him grave's armour, left him safe
With you to take the punishment, sad stone.
How living among men, how dead alone.
You suffer, I could find my part to weep . . .
But hush, I think this dying stone's asleep.

Henry Treece

Tears Are Two Small

Tears are too small a sign of grief,
My love, oh my sweet love!
A child will cry himself to sleep
As though his golden heart would break,
And yet will laugh himself awake
To see the morning cony leap.

Grief is too great to break a heart,
My sweet, though pain is there;
Too great for anything but death,
Blank madness underneath great seas,
Christ screaming from a million trees,
You, stark beneath a burial-cloth.

Henry Treece

The Barriers

Between the muscle and the hammer-head,
The liquor and the veinous leaf it feeds;
Between the vision and the throne of God,
The promise and the stillborn shrouded words;

Between the hope that flies, the fear that dives,
The beak of hawk, the pretty breast of wren;
Between the husk that dries, the seed that thrives,
The line that flames, and that which leaves the pen,

Stand blood, its channel and the broken cross,
The bed unslept-in and the worn-down shoe,
The fruit of pity and the breast of Christ,
And all the bones kissed clean beneath the sea.

And would you say it even if you could,
Smash cage and let the weary words fly free?
Might that not let the tiger from the wood,
And madness ride across the morning sky?

Henry Treece

The Haunted Garden

In this sad place
Memory hangs on the air
Fragile as Spring snail's tiny shell,
Coming to the sympathetic ear
Gentle as bud's green pulsing in the sun,
Suave as sin in a black velvet glove;

The old faces gaze
Wistfully as birds, among the nodding leaves,
They watch the pleasures they may never share;
And through the twilight hours
Old voices call along the river banks,
And out of the high-walled garden.

Why do they sigh,
The gentle ones in the flowering musk;
And what are the words of the song
The pale stranger sings as he walks
The garden's still, deserted paths,
Like a boy searching for his dog?

Henry Treece

The Old Ones

The old ones knew that black was hate,
White garment purity and red one sin;
They spoke the language of the trees
And opened veins to let love in.

These old ones, feeling life was brief
And brittle as the fire-baked shard,
Could find no seat for sentiment,
So mended weakness with a sword.

In them the heart was made of gold,
But mind was forged of steel so sharp
That hand which plucked the harp could shape
From father's skull a drinking cup.

The old ones' fashion we have lost,
Whose red is passion, white deceit;
In casting devil from the flesh,
Who perish with the bread we eat.

Henry Treece

The Waiting Watchers

They shall come in the black weathers
From the heart of the dead embers,
Walking one and two over the hill.
And they shall be with you, never farther
Than your bedside.
At their will
The smell of putrefaction lingers
And floor is carpetted with rotting hair;
Or sheets are torn to shreds
By the beaks of dead dry birds
And the red blood clots in your cup.
Put up your swords!
What steel can cut the throat of next year's dream,
What tongue is tunes to speak last night's quick scream?
Go alone by darkness;
Burn the clippings of your nail;
Donate a thousand candles.
But do as you will,
When sun is blind and lamps are lit once more,
Two and one, they shall be standing
At your door

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