

AN AFTERNOON IN PICARDY

One summer afternoon in Picardy, We strolled a country lane,
Hand-in-hand as lovers do, Past fields of ripening grain.

A kindly sun with placid ease, A warming blanket spread
A gentling for distant sounds, The far horizons blue-tinted.

A drowsy murmur all around, A peaceful land at peace
A landscape of a thousand years, By nature and man, a masterpiece.

But – this place was never quite so calm, For all its merits and its worth
Just over four score years had passed, Since this was hell on earth.

For this was the province of the Somme, A name forever written
Along with mud, wire, shell and death, In the annals of the Briton.

Within these fields men lived and died, In thousands, but no – in millions
Butchers and bakers and candlestick makers, Not soldiers but uniformed civilians.

We had come to look for one of these men, Who'd died from a sniper's shot,
The line was calm said all the reports, But not for John Whitfield Stott.

My grandfather's brother, just twenty one, The third of a family of eight,
He paid the high price that the seven might live, A martyr and an advocate.

January '16 was when he was killed, By an unseen, unknown foe,
One more name on that terrible list, One more coffin to follow.

The cemetery stood to the left of the path, Concealed by a fold in the ground
Neatly enclosed in stone-blocked walls, With trees and bushes around.

We found his grave almost straight away, It was placed just next to the gate,
A memorial stone like all of the rest, His name, his rank and the date.

I stood alone, an Englishman, But not alone, for in grassy thrones
A hundred others were there with me, Beneath their ashen stones.

My Frenchwoman was lost in thought, Of strangers dead in her land,
They'd cursed and moaned then perished, No chance that they might understand.

For France had endured the slaughter as well, Defending their land from the Hun,
Their battles re-echo down to this day, Argonne, the Marne and Verdun.

We stood and we looked, my lady and I, At this fearful burial ground,
Despite the passing of eighty odd years, It still had the power to astound.