

CBC TUESDAY NIGHT  
“THE SECRET PRINCES”  
CBL/CBC: AM

SCRIPT: George Whalley  
[Radio 11 November 1975]  
PRODUCTION: John Reeves

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ANNOUNCER: OPENING ANNOUNCEMENT

(SHORT PAUSE)

JONES: This Writing is for my Friends, / in mind of all common & hidden men / and of the Secret Princes, / and to the Memory of those with me / in the covert and in the open ... / and to the Enemy Front-fighters / who shared our pains, / against whom we found ourselves / by misadventure.

ANNOUNCER: *The Secret Princes* – a meditation for Remembrance Day 1975, based on David Jones’s poem of the First War entitled *In Parenthesis*.

JONES: This writing has to do with some things I saw, felt, & was part of. I did not intend this as a “War Book” – it happens to be concerned with war.

NARRATOR: David Jones had been studying painting and drawing in the Camberwell School of Art for four years when, in January 1915, at the age of nineteen, he joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers. From December of that year until March 1918 – that is, from the age of 20 to less than 23 – he served as a private of infantry on the Western Front, in the same sector that is known to us in harrowing and poignant detail from the writings of Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Owen, Herbert Read. He began to compose the poem in 1927; it took almost ten years to write, and was published in 1937 twenty years after the events that brought it into existence.

COMMENTATOR: *In Parenthesis* was the last, and also the most vivid of the books to celebrate the First World War; and of all those books it is – through its peculiar precision and distancing – the least personal, the least confessional, the least bitter.

JONES: I have only tried to make a shape in words, using as data the complex of sights, sounds, fears, hopes, apprehensions, smells, things exterior and interior, the landscape and paraphernalia of that singular time and of those particular men. I have tried to appreciate some things, which, at the time of suffering, the flesh was too weak to appraise.

COMMENTATOR: The action of the poem is limited to the field of vision of a very small group of persons, and their interior life. Yet *In Parenthesis* is probably the most complex evocation of the *feel* of war that has ever been written in English – or perhaps in any language.

MUSIC #1: HARMONICA: “THE ASH GROVE.”

COMMENTATOR: We choose *In Parenthesis* as central image for the experience of war, not (in some sense) to elevate the First War above the Second, but to choose the most penetrating image we can find. The reality of war is – like all reality – human, personal, and interior: what it *feels* like, being me, being here, suffering this, watching myself suffering this, knowing the danger to be absolute, the odds hopeless, the situation idiotic.

No great event necessarily produces a great and abiding record. That depends upon the rare accident of there being present, and deeply implicated, a person capable of grasping the reality of the event, and eventually shaping that reality into words. For the reality of the event dwells in the perceiving of it. Only the eye and craftsmanship of (what we call) a poet can elevate an event above the level of fact – simply, that it

happened – to the level of reality – of what, in some inscrutable and fruitful sense, it *means*. The reality depends upon a narrow and sharply focused field of vision fertilised by a rich and active memory.

JONES: I think the day by day in the Waste Land, the sudden violences and the long stillnesses, the sharp contours and unformed voids of that mysterious existence, profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment ... and that landscape spoke “with a grimly voice.”

(SLIGHT PAUSE)

The works of man, unless they are of “now” and of “this place,” can have no “for ever.” The function of the artist is to make things *sub specie aeternitatis* – (under the eye of eternity). There is no help – he must work within the limits of his love ... for only what is actually loved and known can be seen under the eye of eternity.

READER 3: The immediate, the nowness, the pressure of sudden, modifying circumstance – and retribution following swift on disregard; some certain, malignant opposing, brought intelligibility and effectiveness to the used formulae of command; the liturgy of their going-up assumed a primitive creativeness, an apostolic actuality, a correspondence with the object, a flexibility.

COMMENTATOR: If for a moment we turn away from the grey deceptions of the cathode ray tube and the genial plausibilities of the hand-held camera, our imagination may take power from a dimension of distance – recalling the doll-like figures of the First War in ill-cut unglamorous uniforms –

NARRATOR: – (in the British Army, tin hats were not issued until early 1916) –

COMMENTATOR: in snapshots of the young startled faces, laughing, caught unawares – or of those sprawled at a ragbag whimsy in shallow ditches, at the rims of water-filled craters, or draped on the barbed wire, or face-down in a field of standing corn. We have perhaps seen such conniving winks of the camera’s eye – drawn from a kitbag in an attic, the moth having had all the rest, the owner not returned.

READER 3: Half-minds, far away, divergent, own-thought thinking, tucked away unknown thoughts ... each his own thought-maze threading; intricate, twist about, own thoughts, all thoughts unknown to the next so close following on.

READER 4: At dawn ... in the low place ... they waited helplessly, white-faced, and very conscious of their impotence. An eastward alignment of troubled, ashen faces; delicate mechanisms of nerve and sinew, grapple afresh, deal for another day; ill-matched contesting, handicapped out of reason, spirits at the ebb bare up; strung taut – by what volition keyed – as best they may ... fearful to know afresh their ill condition.

SOLDIER 3: You live by faith alright in these parts.

SOLDIER 1: You know little of the unity for which your hours are docketed – little more than bleating sheep the market of her fleece.

SOLDIER 2: You are moved like beasts are moved from upper field to pound, one hour carrying heaped-on weights, the next you delve in earth, or stand long time in the weather, patiently, a hitch in the arrangements; and now singly, through unfamiliar narrow ways. You don’t know which high walls enclose your lethal yard, or what this tight entry opens on.

READER 1: (QUIETLY) “The goat on which the lot fell, let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness.”

READER 4: Appear more Lazarus figures, where water gleamed between dilapidated breastworks, blue slime coated, ladling with wooden ladles; rising, bending, at their trench dredging. They speak low. Cold gurgling followed their labours. They lift things, and a bundle-thing out; its shapelessness sags. From this muck-raking are singular stanches, long decay leavened; compounding this clay, with that more precious patient of baptism; chemical-compounded once-bodies.

READER 3: They’ve served him barbarously – poor Johnny – you wouldn’t desire him, you wouldn’t know him for any other. Not you who knew him by fire-light nor any of you cold-earth watchers, nor searchers under the flares ...

READER 4: They bright-whiten all this sepulchre with powdered chloride of lime. It’s a perfectly sanitary war.

READER 1: “This is my beloved and this is my friend.”

FEMALE VOICE: “What is thy beloved more than another beloved?”

MUSIC #2: *CONCERTINA: “ES IST EIN’ ROSE ENSPRUNGEN.”*

JONES: But the works of man, unless they are of “now” and of “this place,” can have no “for ever” –

COMMENTATOR: And for *In Parenthesis* the “now” and “this place” are rendered through the poet himself and through the mentality of his companions. David Jones was –

JONES: – a Londoner, of Welsh and English parentage, of Protestant up bringing, of Catholic subscription.

And my companions in the war were mostly Londoners with an admixture of Welshmen, so the mind and folk-life of those two differing racial groups are an essential ingredient to my theme. Nothing could be more representative. Together they bore in their bodies the genuine tradition of the Island of Britain. These were the children of Doll Tearsheet; those are before Caractacus was. Both speak in parables, the wit of both is quick, both are natural poets; yet no two groups could well be more dissimilar. It was curious to know them harnessed together, and together caught in the toils of “good order and military discipline”; to see them re-act to the few things that united us – the same jargon, the same prejudice against “other arms” and against the Staff, the same discomforts, the same grievances, the same hurts, the same deep fears, the same pathetic jokes ...

COMMENTATOR: The poem is cast in a dramatic mode. Against a lightly sketched narrative, episodes and incidents emerge in which identifiable persons move and recognisable voices speak. The pivotal figure, establishing the identity of the little handful of Welshmen and Cockneys – of which he is a member but not its leader – is Private John Ball, 25201 Ball, ‘01 Ball, in certain respects David Jones himself –

JONES: – not only an amateur, but grotesquely incompetent, a knocker-over of piles, a parade’s despair.

COMMENTATOR: At the beginning he is improperly dressed and late for embarkation leave. But a few details turn up here and there to hint at his background. He carries in his pocket the latchkey of a house in Stondon Park, Camberwell; he wears a luminous wrist-watch; in his pack he carries one book, the *Oxford Book of English Verse* –

BALL: – the India paper was abominably adhered, especially for split finger-tips –

COMMENTATOR: His way of noting the texture and disposition of things in a line of vision, his sense of the quality of light – these betray the instincts of the painter. And a learned one too; for he sees his subaltern, Mr. Jenkins, as the blond “foreground squire unhelmeted” in Uccello’s “Rout of San Romano”; a French barmaid is washing up glasses, and he sees –

BALL: – her rounded elbows lifted, as Boucher liked them.

COMMENTATOR: As they grope through unknown trenches at night he knows –

BALL: – the stumbling dark of the blind, that Breughel knew about.

COMMENTATOR: But the purpose is to make a poem, not to draw a self-portrait. And it’s in the various and subtle identifications of David Jones with his companions that the central and suffering intelligence is defined. Not least with Aneirin Lewis who –

BALL: – had somewhere in his Welsh depths a remembrance of the nature of man ... for whom Troy still burned, and sleeping kings return, and wild men might yet stir from Mawddwy secrecies ... who worshipped his ancestors like a Chink – who sleeps in Arthur’s lap.

COMMENTATOR: The brooding unnamed “man from Rotherhithe” is an echo of David Jones’s own mother’s father, mast- and block-maker of Rotherhithe, who taught him as a boy all the intricacies of sailing ships; and it is no accident that Jac Pryse, for whom “the Rachels weep,” is a plasterer’s son, for so was Jones’s own father.

MUSIC #3: TENOR VOICE AND HARP: "DAVID OF THE WHITE ROCK."

JONES: I suppose at no time did one so much live with a consciousness of the past, the very remote, and the more immediate and trivial past ... Every man's speech and habit of mind were a showing of many dark and distant things; of *John Barleycorn*, and the Celtic cycle that lies, like a subterranean influence as a deep water troubling ... The texture of one thing is shot through with all sorts of hues, and "each hue has a different cry."

COMMENTATOR: The strongest hue, that runs like a stain through the whole writing, is the dark theme of disaster, of a relentless process moving through accident and betrayal to death: the steel twofold bond of Necessity: the necessity of accident, the necessity of being "under orders"; by implication the *grace* of Necessity, the purifying need to submit to what is given to us to suffer, being under a discipline.

READER 1: "The men march, they keep equal step, to death's sure meeting-place, the goal of their marching; they follow a laughing leader, going down into the host, into the loveless battle."

COMMENTATOR: John Ball was the name of the leader of the 14th century Peasants' Revolt; but *this* John Ball is not Everyman, and the voice of the poem is a rare and individual voice. Throughout the poem there are continuous undertones of the Bible and the liturgy and of liturgical usages. Otherwise many strands declare themselves in the "terrible embroidery" – not in the text only but also in the titles and mottoes provided for each of the seven parts of the poem. Chief among these are four: the sixth century poem of Aneirin called *Y Gododdin*, the early collection of Welsh legends called the *Mabinogion*, Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, and (to a lesser extent) Shakespeare's *Henry V*. For David Jones, these strands are in his blood, in

the tissues of his mind, as the abiding presence and colour of the history and destiny of man –

JONES: A great confluency and dapple, things counter, pied, fragmented, twisted, lost: which is indeed the shape of things all over Britain, but Wales has its own double-dapple.

COMMENTATOR: The interior logic of the poem is constructed upon echoes of three crucial battles – at Camlann, at Catraeth, and at Buellt *or* Builth.

NARRATOR: At Camlann, Arthur – a 5th-century Roman cavalry leader, the “King Arthur” of the later legends – was undone by treachery and came to his death at his son’s hands, which son of necessity he also killed, “upon a down beside Salisbury and not far from the seaside.” Thomas Malory gives a memorable account of it.

The second battle was fought in about the year 590. A well-disciplined group of 300 men, including a band of Welshmen, mustered at Edinburgh and after a year’s preparation “rode to Catraeth” – Catterick – a strategic point in the northern road-system, at the junction of two allied Kingdoms. They attacked at dawn, on horseback, and were annihilated by a vastly superior force of foot-soldiers. Aneirin made a song about it. In one version he says that three men survived; in another, only one man survived, and the poet Aneirin.

The third battle occurred in December 1282 in a wood near Buellt, on the border between Wales and England. Llywelyn, the last native ruler of Wales, was killed by a chance spear-thrust, his assailant not knowing who he was. The English cut off his head and carried it to London, and set it up on the White Tower over the place where the head of the Blessed Brân had

been buried, his face towards the Channel for the protection of the whole island of Britain.

COMMENTATOR: In *In Parenthesis* these are touched upon allusively, as “deeper perplexities”; here in the liturgical use of a name, there with the intrusion of a rhythmic pattern, always with hints of mysterious identities that could disclose the meaning of events by implicating the whole fabric of past experience.

The battle of Camlann, and Arthur’s death, is first recorded in the *Mabinogion*. Nearly a thousand years after the event, it received its last great creative recension in 1470 in the hands of Sir Thomas Malory, writing in prison. Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* provides *In Parenthesis* with its most pervasive resonance: it gives titles to two parts of the poem, and a great many details in the text – references, for example, to the green tree and the red tree, both magical; to the madness of Launcelot, and Garlon’s invisible weapon; to the brothers Balin and Balan who ignorantly killed each other; to the snake that “by misadventure” brought about the final fatal battle at Camlann. The name of the weedy Welshman Dai, who has an “outsize, misfit greatcoat,” is exalted (in the style of Malory) to “Dai de la Cote Male Taile” to match his great Taliesin boast. The repeated phrase “on both parties” comes from Malory, and so does the standard formula for preparing a castle against siege –

READER 2: “And then he stuffed and furnished and garnished ...”

COMMENTATOR: But beyond these details – pregnant though all of them are – there is the strong hieratic tune of Malory’s prose, as counterpoint to the variations of the poem itself as it shifts and slants from plain prose rhythms to the full musical rapidity of pure poetry. And throughout the whole poem, the sense of doom, betrayal, and loss, which – uniquely in Malory’s version –

shapes the final acts of the legend of Arthur into an ineluctable sequence of tragedy.

*MUSIC #4:*                    *TROMBONE: "L'HOMME ARMÉ."*

SOLDIER 1:                    And but we avoid wisely there is but death.

SOLDIER 2:                    Now, alas, that ever this war began! The death of Gawain's brothers will cause the greatest mortal war that ever was. Wit you well, my heart was never so heavy as it is now. And much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enough, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company.

READER 2:                    And thus they fought all the long day, and never stinted till the noble knights were laid to the cold earth. And ever they fought still till it was near night, and by then was there an hundred thousand laid dead upon the earth. Then was king Arthur mad wroth out of measure, when he saw his people so slain from him.

And so he looked about him and could see no more of all his host and good knights left no more alive but two knights: the one was Sir Lucan de Butler and his brother, Sir Bedivere; and yet they were full sore wounded.

Then King Arthur looked about and was ware where stood Sir Mordred leaning upon his sword among a great heap of dead men.

SOLDIER 2:                    Now, give me my spear, for yonder I have espied the traitor that all this woe hath wrought.

SOLDIER 1:                    Sire, let him be, for he is unhappy. And for God's sake, my lord, leave off this, for, blessed by God, you have won the field.

SOLDIER 2: Now tide me death, tide me life, now I see him yonder alone, he shall never escape mine hands.

READER 2: Then the king gat his spear in both his hands, and ran towards Sir Mordred, crying and saying –

SOLDIER 2: Traitor, now is thy death-day come!

READER 2: And when Sir Mordred saw King Arthur he ran unto him with his sword drawn in his hand, and there King Arthur smote Sir Mordred under the shield, with a foyne of his spear, throughout the body more than a fathom. And when Sir Mordred felt that he had his death's wound he thrust himself with the might that he had up to the burr of King Arthur's spear, and right so he smote his father, King Arthur, with his sword holding in both his hands, upon the side of the head, that the sword pierced the helmet and the skin of the brain. And therewith Mordred dashed down stark dead to the earth.

And noble King Arthur fell in a swoon to the earth, and there he swooned oftentimes, and Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere oftentimes hove him up. And so weakly betwixt them they led him to a little chapel not far from the sea, and when the king was there, he thought him reasonably eased ... And they hearkened by the moonlight how that pillagers and robbers were come into the field to rob the dead and slay the dying.

*MUSIC #5: TROMBONE: "L'HOMME ARMÉ."*

COMMENTATOR: The battle of Catraeth is recorded only in the poem of Aneirin called *Y Gododdin* for the people of the region where the northerly attack was mounted. Aneirin's song is in an ancient obscure form of Welsh, almost

inscrutable. It gives no account of the battle: it is a lament for the individual heroes and for the whole decimated band. David Jones chose from *Y Gododdin* an inscription in Welsh for the title-page of *In Parenthesis*, and for each of the seven Parts a separate motto. This is what the song sounds like in English.

*MUSIC #6: HARP: SINGLE NOTES PUNCTUATE NEXT READING AS DIRECTED.*

READER 1: Men went to Catraeth, familiar with laughter ... The old, the young, the strong, the weak.

Men went to Catraeth as day dawned: their fears disturbed their peace.

Men went to Catraeth ... three hundred men according to plan; and after the ecstasy of battle, silence. Though they had gone to church and done penance, they came to the goal of their marching, death's sure meeting-place.

Three hundred men rode forth, wearing gold torques, defending the land – and there was slaughter. They slew, and they were slain; and they shall be honoured till the end of the world; and of all of us who went forth, kinsmen, none escaped but one man.

Like a home-reared animal in a quiet nook he was, before his day came ... before entering into the prison of earth ...

Ywain – a man in strength, a boy in years, riotous in courage, a thick-maned horse between his thighs; bright blue swords and fringes of wrought gold. He would sooner have gone to battle than to his wedding; he would sooner be food for ravens than get due burial. A beloved friend; and he lies under a cairn.

*MUSIC #6: ENDS.*

COMMENTATOR: A thread more intermittent comes from Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

JONES: Trench life brought that work pretty constantly to the mind.

*MUSIC #7: SOPRANO RECORDER: EXCERPT FROM THE AGINCOURT SONG, BG NEXT SPEECH.*

COMMENTATOR: The play provides David Jones with the light-hearted title to Part II; but in his poem there is no place for the figure of Shakespeare's Henry – royal, modest, courageous, merciful: in John Ball's war there are no such leaders above the rank of Captain. Echoes are most clearly struck with the theme of noble pity – with Shakespeare's notice of –

READER 4: – the poor honest and afflicted soldiery ... this ruined band ...

READER 3: ... the poor condemnèd English,  
Like sacrifices, by their watchful fires  
Sit patiently, and inly ruminate  
The morning's danger ...

READER 4: They have said their prayers, and they stay for death.

READER 3: Here was a royal fellowship of death!  
Where is the number of our English dead?

READER 4: I am afeard there are few die well, that die in a battle: for how can they charitably dispose of any thing, when blood is their argument?

COMMENTATOR: In Shakespeare's play we hear Welshmen, Scots, and Irishmen –

READER 4: – who could not speak English in the native garb.

COMMENTATOR: In *In Parenthesis* we hear Welsh voices, and Cockney voices, finely modulated; and Dai Great-coat, in his great boast –

READER 4: – articulates his English with an alien care.

COMMENTATOR: The one figure singled out from *Henry V* is Captain Fluellen – who in Shakespeare speaks stage Welsh. Bold as a lion at the siege, devoid of humour, impatient of all human weakness and incompetence, he is so devoted to his study of the military art that every manoeuvre and each detail of conduct is measured against the practice of Alexander the Great, and Pompey, and the inflexible touchstone of –

SOLDIER 3: – the disciplines of the wars.

READER 3: Though it appear a little out of fashion  
There is much care and valour in this Welshman.

COMMENTATOR: We hear his voice several times in *In Parenthesis*.

MUSIC #8: SOPRANO RECORDER: REPRISE FROM THE AGINCOURT SONG.

COMMENTATOR: Of Llywelyn's death in the wood there are very few precise echoes. Yet that shadowy event provides the haunting paradigm for the battle at the close of the poem –

READER 3: – where adolescence walks the shrieking wood.

COMMENTATOR: It may be that “that most joyless undoing in the December wood” at Buellt was for David Jones the image of the disastrous loss of the young men who would otherwise have been the leaders of their generation. And who is to say but that the dead in Mametz Wood, crowned in the end by the Queen of the Woods, were – like the head of Llywelyn at the White Tower, and the head of the blessed Bran – to guard the peace and safety of the kingdom?

JONES: (QUIETLY) They’re worthy of an intelligent song for all the stupidity of their contest.

MUSIC #9: *COLLAGE: “DAVID OF THE WHITE ROCK” (HARP), “L’HOMME ARME” (TROMBONE), THE AGINCOURT SONG (RECORDER), AND “THE ASH GROVE” (HARMONICA AND CONCERTINA).*

JONES: My intention has not been to “edify,” nor – I think – to persuade, but there is indeed an intention to “uncover”; which is what a “mystery” does, for though at root “mystery” implies a closing, all “mysteries” are meant to *disclose*, to show forth something.

COMMENTATOR: War does not set things to rights; it has no happy endings; –

JONES: The *status quo* is not restored, the wrongs go unrighted, the aggressed are aggressed to extinction, the “noble fellowship” is dissolved for ever, no recovery at all – nothing left but old Necessity. But out of that necessity which leaves no choice, there *are* forces that electrify the succeeding order. You can see by what close shaves some of us are what we are.

COMMENTATOR: In all the network of nervous allusion there runs through the poem a continuous and profound irony. The poor bloody infantry, of which David Jones was himself a member, were not the grave and courteous knight’s of

Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, vicious in battle and of a nice conscience in matters of honour and the heart. They were not like the warriors killed at Catraeth – not bulls, or lions, or bears in battle; not men who wore their wounds as badges of honour, and went down into the slaughter joyfully.

JONES: We are in no doubt at all but what Bardolph's marching kiss to Pistol's "quondam Mistress Quickly" is an experience substantially the same as you and I suffered on Victoria Station platform. For the old authors, there appears to have been no dilemma – for them the embrace of battle seemed one with the embrace of lovers. For us it was different.

COMMENTATOR: David Jones has not turned the real experience inside out into a counter-colour. The cutting edge of his imagination seems to say something like this.

We, who hold life precious, and hold precious the sanctity of the person and the holiness of common things; we, –

JONES: – who are of the same world of sense with hairy ass and furry wolf and who presume to other and more radiant affinities;

COMMENTATOR: we, who – at the nostrils' prompting in a desolate place –

BALL: – know the homing perfume of wood burned, at the termination of ways; and sense here near habitation, a folk-life here, a culture already developed, already venerable and rooted;

COMMENTATOR: We who are of this nature can bring ourselves – in bright day, in the open, where there is no cover – to stand in the face of fire, and to come on deliberately when ordered – though naked, though pathetically fragile – in the name of some cause or of no cause at all unless it be a sardonic

acceptance of Necessity and the dignity of human necessity; can come-on to the squalor of anonymous and mutilating death, unwatched, unsung, being no heroic figures; and so come to be – on both parties, mysteriously – of the company of the secret princes.

(SILENCE)

NARRATOR: (QUIETLY) John Ball and the Cockneys and Welshmen of No 3 section have gone forward – with many others – into the battle zone, pawns in the inscrutable scheme of a huge frontal assault. They wait through the night, bivouacked in a hollow place, under artillery fire, and suffer losses. At first light they move to a chalk ridge at the rim of the assault, under murderous fire, suffering losses. After an excruciating wait for zero hour they stand up and advance, slowly, in open order, across the open, in the bright light of morning. Some survive to reach their first objective – “the dark wood.” There is confused encounter there, as they go to “the inescapable meeting-place with death.”

*SOUND AND SINGER: SUDDEN NOISE OF ARTILLERY (SHELLS), MACHINE GUN, AND RIFLE FIRE – AT MAXIMUM LEVEL – AN OCCASIONAL SHOUT MIXED WITH IT. HOLD FOR SEVERAL SECONDS, THEN VERY SLOWLY DOWN. OVER THIS, THE SINGLE TENOR VOICE SINGING “JESU, LOVER OF MY SOUL” TO THE TUNE “ABERYSTWYTH”; THE SOUND OF BATTLE FADING VERY SLOWLY (BROKEN NOW AND THEN BY A RIFLE SHOT) SO THAT ONLY THE SINGING VOICE IS LEFT FOR THE VERY LAST TWO OR THREE NOTES OF ITS CADENCE.*

(SILENCE)

READER 3: In the Little Hours they sing the Song of Degrees

and of the coals that lie waste.  
Soul pass through torrent

NARRATOR: and the beginnings of dawn pale on the chalky deep protected way, where  
it led out to the sunken road, and the rest of the platoon belly-hugged the  
high embankment going up steep into thin mist at past four o'clock of a  
fine summer morning.

READER 3: In regions of air above the trajectory zone, the birds  
chattering heard for all the drum-fire,  
counter the malice of the engines.

JOHN BALL: But four o'clock is an impossible hour in any case.

NARRATOR: They shook out into a single line and each inclined his body to the slope to  
wait.

READER 3: And this is the manner of their waiting:  
Those happy who had borne the yoke  
who kept their peace  
and these other in a like condemnation  
to the place of a skull.

READER 4: Immediately behind where Private 25201 Ball pressed his body  
to the earth and the white chalk womb to mother him,  
Colonel Dell presumed to welcome  
some other, come out of the brumous morning  
at leisure and well-dressed and all at ease  
as thriving on the nitrous air.  
Well Dell!  
and into it they slide ... of the admirable salads of Mrs.

Curtis-Smythe: they fall for her in Poona, and its worth one's while – but the comrade close next you screamed so after the last salvo that it was impossible to catch anymore the burthen of this white-man talk.

READER 3:           And the place of their waiting a long burrow,  
                          in the chalk a cutting, and steep clift –  
                          but all but too shallow against the violence.

READER 1:           No one to care there for Aneirin Lewis spilled there  
                          who worshipped his ancestors like a Chink  
                          who sleeps in Arthur's lap  
                          who saw Olwen-trefoils some moonlighted night  
                          on precarious slats at Festubert,  
                          on narrow foothold on le Plantin marsh –  
                          more shaved he is to the bare bone than  
                          Ysbaddadan Penkawr;  
                          more blistered he is than painted Troy Towers  
                          and unwholer, limb from limb, than any of them fallen at  
                          Catraeth

READER 2:           or on the seaboard-down, by Salisbury,

READER 1:           and no maker to contrive his funerary song.

READER 3:           And the little Jew lies next him  
                          cries out for Deborah his bride  
                          and offers for stretcher-bearers  
  gifts for their pains  
                          and walnut suites in his delirium  
  from Grays Inn Road.

NARRATOR: But they already look at their watches and it is zero minus seven minutes.

JOHN BALL: Seven minutes to go ...

READER 4: and seventy times seven times to  
the minute  
this drumming of the diaphragm.

From deeply inward thumping all through you beating  
no peace to be still in  
and no one is there not anyone to stop  
can't anyone – someone turn off the tap  
or won't any one before it snaps.

READER 3: Racked out to another turn of the screw  
the acceleration heightens;  
the sensibility of these instruments to register,  
fails –

JOHN BALL: you simply can't take any more in.

READER 4: And the surfeit of fear steadies to dumb incognition, so that when they  
give the order to move upward to align with 'A,' hugged already just  
under the lip of the acclivity inches below where his traversing machine-  
guns perforate to powder white –

READER 3: white creature of chalk pounded  
and the world crumbled away

SOLDIER 2: and get ready to advance

READER 4:           you have not capacity for added fear only the limbs are leaden  
                          to negotiate the slope and rifles all out of balance, clumsied  
                          with long auxiliary steel  
                          seem five times the regulation weight

JOHN BALL:           it bitches the aim as well.

SOLDIER 2:           Two minutes to go.

NARRATOR:           He's getting it now more accurately and each salvo brackets more  
                          narrowly and a couple right in, just as 'D' and 'C' are forming for the  
                          second wave.

READER 4:           Wastebottom married a wife on his Draft-leave but the whinnying splinter  
                          razored diagonal and mess-tin fragments drove inward and toxined  
                          underwear.

                          He maintained correct alignment with the others, face down, and you  
                          never would have guessed.

READER 3:           Perhaps they'll cancel it.  
                          o blow fall out the officers cantcher, like a wet afternoon  
                          or the King's Birthday.

                          Or you read it again many times to see if it will come different:  
                          you can't believe the Cup wont pass from  
                          or they wont make a better show  
                          in the garden.

READER 4:           Talacryn doesn't take it like Wastebottom, he leaps up & says  
                          he's dead, a-slither down the pale face – his limbs a-girandole  
                          at the bottom of the nullah,

but the mechanism slackens, unfed  
and he is quite still

NARRATOR: which leaves five paces between you and the next live one to the left.

Side over a bit toward where '45 Williams, and use all your lungs:

JOHN BALL: Get ready me china-plate –

READER 4: but he's got it before he can hear you, but it's a cushy one and he relaxes  
to the morning sun and smilingly, to wait for the bearers.

NARRATOR: Last minute drums its taut millennium out

JOHN BALL: you can't swallow your spit  
and Captain Marlowe yawns a lot

READER 3: and seconds now our measuring-rods with no Duke Josue  
nor conniving God  
to stay the Divisional Synchronisation.

READER 4: So in the fullness of time  
the world falls apart  
Sailings and up to scheduled time.

SOLDIER 2: and Mr. Jenkins takes them over  
and don't bunch on the left  
for Christ's sake.

READER 1: and the Royal Welsh sing:  
Jesu

lover of me soul ... to *Aberystwyth*.

JOHN BALL: But that was on the right with  
the genuine Taffies

SOLDIER 1: but we are rash levied  
from Islington and Hackney  
and the purlieus of Walworth  
flashers from Surbiton  
men of the stock of Abraham  
from Bromley-by-Bow  
Anglo-Welsh from Queens Ferry  
and two lovers from Ebury Bridge,  
Bates and Coldpepper  
that men called the Lily-white boys  
Dynamite Dawes the old 'un  
and Diamond Phelps his batty

SOLDIER 3: both learned in ballistics  
and wasted on a line-mob.

SOLDIER 2: Young gentlemen wearing the Flash,  
from reputable marcher houses

READER 1: prince-pedigreed  
from Meirionedd and Cyfeiliog.

SOLDIER 2: Heirs also of tin-plate lords  
from Gower peninsula,

READER 4: detailed from the womb

to captain Industry  
if they dont cop a packet this day  
nor grow more wise.

READER 3: These stood, separate, upright, above ground,  
blinkt to the broad light  
risen dry mouthed from the chalk  
vivified from the Nullah without commotion  
and to distinctly said words,  
moved in open order and keeping admirable formation  
and at the high-port position  
walking in the morning on the flat roof of the world.

FEMALE VOICE: But sweet sister death has gone debauched today and stalks  
on this high ground with strumpet confidence,  
By one and one the line gaps, where her fancy will – how-  
soever they may howl for their virginity  
she holds them – who impinge less on space  
sink limply to a heap  
nourish a lesser category of being

READER 2: like those other who fructify the land  
like Tristram  
Lamorak de Galis  
Alisand le Orphelin  
Beaumains who was youngest  
or all of them in shaft-shade  
at strait Thermopylae  
or the sweet brothers Balin and Balan  
embraced beneath their single monument.

Jonathan my lovely one

on Gelboe mountain  
and the young man Absalom.  
White Hart transfixed in his dark lodge.  
Peredur of steel arms  
and he who with intention took grass of that field to be for  
him the Species of Bread.  
    Taillefer the maker,  
and on the same day,  
thirty thousand other ranks.  
And in the country of Béarn – Oliver  
and all the rest – so many without memento  
beneath the tumuli on the high hills  
and under the harvest places.

READER 4: But how intolerably bright the morning is where we who are alive and remain, walk lifted up, carried forward by an effective word.

NARRATOR: and you go forward, foot goes another step further.

JOHN BALL: and the high grass soddens through your puttees

NARRATOR: and dew asperges the freshly dead.

READER 4: There doesn't seem a soul about yet surely we walk already near his preserves; there goes old Dawes as large as life and there is Lazarus Cohen like on field-days, he always would have his entrenching-tool-blade-carrier hung low, jogging on his fat arse.

    They pass a quite ordinary message about keeping aligned with No. 8.

READER 3: You drop apprehensively – the sun gone out,

strange airs smite your body  
and muck rains straight from heaven

NARRATOR: and everlasting doors lift up for '02 Weavel.

READER 3:           you cant see anything but sheen on drifting particles and  
you move forward in your private bright cloud like  
one assumed  
who is borne up by an exterior volition.

READER 4:           You stumble on a bunch of six with Sergeant Quilter getting  
them out again to the proper interval, and when the chemical  
thick air dispels you see briefly and with great clearness what  
kind of show this is.

READER 3:           To your front, stretched long laterally,  
and receded deeply,  
the dark wood.

READER 4:           And now the gradient runs more flatly toward the separate  
scared saplings, where they make fringe for the interior thicket  
and you take notice.

READER 3:           There between the thinning uprights  
at the margin  
the Jerry trench.

NARRATOR:           Mr. Jenkins half inclined his head to them – he walked just barely in  
advance of his platoon and immediately to the left of Private Ball.

READER 3:           He makes the conventional sign



you stand waist-deep  
you stand upright  
you stretch out hands to pluck at Jerry wire as if it were bram-  
ble mesh.

NARRATOR: No. 3 section inclined a little right where a sequence of 9.2's have done well their work of preparation and cratered a plain passage. They bunch, a bewildered half dozen, like sheep where the wall is tumbled –

READER 3: but high-perched Brandenburgers  
from their leafy vantage-tops observe  
that kind of folly:  
nevertheless, you and one other walk alive before his para-  
pets.

READER 4: Yet taut prehensile strand gets you at the instep even so, and sprawls you  
useless to the First Objective.

READER 1: But Private Watcyn takes it with blameless technique, and even  
remembers to halloo the official blasphemies.

READER 4: The inorganic earth where your body presses seems itself to pulse deep  
down with your heart's acceleration ... but you go on living, lying with  
your face bedded in neatly folded, red-piped, greatcoat and yet no cold  
cleaving thing drives in between expectant shoulder-blades, so you get to  
your feet, and the sun-lit chalk is everywhere absorbing fresh stains.

But the sun shines also  
on the living

and on Private Watcyn, who wears a strange look under his iron brim, like a small child caught at some bravado in a garden, and old Dawes comes so queerly from the thing he saw in the next bay but one.

But for all that it is relatively pleasant here under the first trees and lying in good cover.

But Sergeant Quilter is already on the parados. He sorts them out a bit

NARRATOR: they are five of No. 1  
six of No. 2  
two of No. 3  
four of No. 4  
a lance-jack, and a corporal.

READER 3: So these nineteen deploy  
between the rowan and the hazel,  
go forward to the deeper shades.

READER 4: And they try short rushes and there where a small pathway winds and sun shafts play, a dozen of them walk toward, they come in file, their lifted arms like Jansenist Redeemers, who would save, at least, themselves. Some come furtively who peer sideways, inquisitive of their captors, and one hides a face twisted for intolerable pain and one other casts about him, acutely, as who would take his opportunity, but for the most part they come as sleep-walkers whose bodies go unbidden of the mind, without malevolence, seeking only rest.

SOLDIER 1: '89 Jones  
'99 Thomas

NARRATOR: are detailed for escort.

They spring to it, very well pleased.

READER 3: Perhaps they had forgotten his barrage down on the approaches, storming in the valley, reducing the reserves by one in three. Impaling this park on all sides but one, at which North gate his covering parties tactically disposed themselves:

from digged-pits and chosen embushments  
they could quite easily train dark muzzles  
to fiery circuit  
and run with flame stabs to and fro among  
where adolescence walks the shrieking wood.

READER 4: Now you looked about you for what next to do, or you fired blindly among the trees and ventured a little further inward; but already, diagonally to your front, they were coming back in ones and twos.

You wished you could see people you knew better than the 'C' Company man on your right or the bloke from 'A' on your left, there were certainly a few of No. 8,

JOHN BALL: but not a soul of your own – which ever way.

READER 3: No mess-mates at call in cool interior aisles, where the light came muted, filtered from high up trceries, varied a refracted lozenge-play on pale cheeks turned; on the bowels of Sergeant Quilter, and newly dead the lance-jack from No. 5, and three besides, distinguished only in their variant mutilation.

SOLDIER 3: But for the better discipline of the living,  
a green-gilled corporal,  
returned to company last Wednesday

from some Corps sinecure,  
who'd lost his new tin-hat, his mousey hair and pendulous  
red ears like the grocery bloke at the Dry  
said his sentences.

His words cut away smartly, with attention to the prescribed form, so that  
when he said do this they bloody did it, for all his back-area breeze-up  
high.

But he'd got them into line at the prone, and loosing off with economy;  
and he himself knelt at the further beech bole to control their fire.

READER 4:                   and John Ball took his position next to Private Hopkins and they filled the  
green wood about them with their covering musketry; till Captain  
Marlowe came all put out and withdrew them another forty yards – then  
you had to assemble your entrenching-tool parts and dig-in where you  
stood, for: Brigade will consolidate positions on line: – V, Y, O & K.

JOHN BALL:                But why is Father Larkin talking to the dead?  
Where's Fatty and Smiler –

READER 1:                and this Watcyn boasts he'd seen the open land beyond the trees, with  
Jerry coming on in mass –

READER 3:                and they've left Diamond between the beech boles  
and old Dawes blaspheming quietly;  
and Bates without Coldpepper  
digs like a Bunyan muck-raker for his weight of woe.

SOLDIER 1:               But it's no good you cant do it with these toy spades, you want axes,

READER 3:                heavy iron for tough anchoring roots, tendoned deep down.

READER 4: When someone brought up the Jerry picks it was better, and you did manage to make some impression. And the next one to you, where he bends to delve gets it in the middle body. Private Ball is not instructed, and how could you stay so fast a tide,

JOHN BALL: it would be difficult with him screaming whenever you move him ever so little,

READER 4: let alone try with jack-knife to cut clear the hampering cloth.

The First Field Dressing is futile as frantic seaman's shift bunged to stoved bulwark, so soon the darking flood percolates and he dies in your arms.

And get back to that digging can't yer –  
this aint a bloody Wake  
for these dead, who soon will have their dead  
for burial clods heaped over.

READER 3: Nor time for halsing  
nor to clip green wounds  
nor weeping Maries bringing anointments  
neither any word spoken  
nor shaving of the head

FEMALE VOICE: No one sings: Lully lully  
for the mate whose blood runs down.

NARRATOR: And it's nearing dark when the trench is digged and they brought forward R.E.'s who methodically spaced their picket-irons and did their work back and fro, speak low –

JOHN BALL: You can hear their mauls hammering under the oaks.

NARRATOR: And when they've done the job they file back carrying their implements, and the covering Lewis team withdraws from out in front and the water-party is up at last with half the bottles punctured and travellers' tales.

READER 3: Carrying-parties,  
burdened bearers walk with careful feet  
to jolt him as little as possible,  
bearers of burdens to and from  
stumble oftener, notice the lessening light,  
and feel their way with more sensitive feet –  
you mustn't spill the precious fragments, for perhaps these  
raw bones live.

READER 4: They can cover him again with skin.  
Nothing is impossible nowadays.  
Give them glass eyes to see  
and synthetic spare parts to walk in the Triumphs, without  
anyone feeling awkward.

READER 3: Lift gently Dai, gentleness befits his gun-shot wound in the lower bowel –

READER 4: go easy – easee at the slope – and mind him  
– wait for this one and

slippy – an’ twelve inch an’ all – beating up for his counter-  
attack and – that packet on the Aid-Post.

Lower you lower you – some old cows have malhanded  
little bleeders for a mother’s son.  
– down cantcher – low – hands away me  
ducky –

READER 3: down on hands on hands down and flattened belly  
and face pressed and curroodle mother earth  
she’s kind:  
Pray her hide you in her deeps  
she’s only refuge against  
this ferocious pursuer  
terribly questing.  
Maiden of the digged places  
let our cry come unto thee.

READER 1: *Mam, moder, mother of me*

READER 2: Mother of Christ under the tree

READER 3: But on its screaming passage  
their numbers writ

READER 4: and stout canvas tatters drop as if they’d salvoed grape to the  
mizzen-sheets and the shaped ash grip rocket-sticks out of  
the evening sky right back by Bright Trench  
and clots and a twisted clout  
on the bowed back of the F.O.O. bent to his instrument.

SOLDIER 2: ... theirs ... H.E. ... fairly, fifty yards to my front, 35 degrees left ... he's definitely livening.

NARRATOR: And the storm rises higher

READER 4: And now no longer light of day on the quick  
and the dead but blindfold beating the air  
and tentative step by step deployment.

JOHN BALL: You know the bough hangs low, by your bruised lips and the smart to your  
cheek bone,

READER 4: & on your left Joe Donkin walked, where  
only weeds stir to the night-gusts if you feel with your hand.

NARRATOR: When they put up a flare, he saw many men's accoutrements medleyed  
and strewn up so down and service jackets bearing below the shoulder-  
numerals the peculiar sign of their battalions.

READER 2: And many of these shields he had seen knights bear beforehand.

READER 3: And the severed head of '72 Morgan,  
its visage grins like the Cheshire cat  
and full grimly.

It fared under him as the earth had quaked – and the nose-  
cap pared his heel leather.

READER 2: Who's these thirty in black harness that you could see in the  
last flash,  
great limbed, and each helmed:  
if you could pass throughout them and beyond

– and fetch away the bloody cloth:  
whether I live  
whether I die.

READER 4: But which is front, which way's the way on and where's the corporal and what's this crush and all this shoving you along, and someone shouting rhetorically about remembering your nationality –  
and Jesus Christ – they're coming through the floor,

READER 2: endthwart and overlong:

SOLDIER 1: Jerry's through on the flank ... Beat it! –

READER 4: that's what that one said as he ran past:  
Bosches back in Strip Trench – it's a  
monumental bollocks every time

READER 2: and but we avoid wisely there is but death.

READER 4: Lance-Corporal Bains, sweating on the top line, reckoned he'd clicked a cushy get away; but Captain Cadwaladr holds the westward ride, & that's torn it for the dodger. Captain Cadwaladr is come to the breach full of familiar blasphemies. He wants the senior private – the front is half-right and what whore's bastard gave the retire and: Through on the flank my arse.

SOLDIER 3: Captain Cadwaladr restores  
the Excellent Disciplines of the Wars.

READER 2: And then he might see sometime the battle was driven a bow draught from the castle and sometime it was at the gates of the castle.

READER 4:           And so till midnight and into the ebb-time when the spirit slips lightly from sick men and when it's like no-man's-land between yesterday and tomorrow and material things are but barely integrated and loosely tacked together, and all these here lying begin to die on both parties.

NARRATOR:           And after a while they again feel forward, and at this time the gunners seemed preoccupied, or to have mislaid their barrage-sheets, or not to be interested, or concerned with affairs of their own; and in the very core and navel of the wood there seemed a vacuum, if you stayed quite still, as though you'd come on ancient stillnesses in his most interior place.

READER 3:           Down in the under-croft, in the crypt of the wood,  
these long strangers,  
under this vaulting stare upward,  
for recumbent princes of his people.  
Stone lords coiffed  
long-skirted field-grey to straight fold  
for a coat-armour  
and for a cere-cloth, for men of renown.

READER 1:           And here and there and huddled over, death-halsed to these, a Picton-five-foot-four paragon for the Line, from Newcastle Emlyn or Talgarth in Brycheiniog, lying disordered like discarded garments or crumpled chin to shin-bone like a Lambourne find.

FEMALE VOICE:      the gentleman must be mowed.

NARRATOR:           And to Private Ball it came as if a rigid beam of great weight flailed about his calves.

He thought it disproportionate in its violence considering the fragility of us.

The warm fluid percolates between his toes and his left boot fills, as when you tread in a puddle – he crawled away in the opposite direction.

READER 4: It's difficult with the weight of the rifle.

JOHN BALL: Leave it – under the oak.

READER 4: Leave it for a salvage-bloke

READER 3: let it lie bruised for a monument  
dispense the authenticated fragments to the faithful.

READER 4: It's R.S.M. O'Grady says, it's the soldier's best friend if you care for the working parts and let us be 'aving those springs released smartly in Company billets on wet forenoons and clickerty-click and one up the spout and you men must really cultivate the habit of treating this weapon with the very greatest care and there should be a healthy rivalry among you – it should be a matter of very proper pride and  
Marry it man! Marry it!

READER 3: Cherish her, she's your very own.

READER 4: Coax it man coax it – it's delicately and ingeniously made – it's an instrument of precision – it costs us tax-payers, money – I want you men to remember that.

Fondle it like a granny – talk to it – consider it as you would a friend – and when you ground these arms she's not a rooky's gas-pipe for greenhorns to tarnish.

READER 3:           You've known her hot and cold.  
You would choose her from among many.  
You know her by her bias, and by her exact error at 300, and  
by the deep scar at the small, by the fair flaw in the grain,  
above the lower sling-swivel –

JOHN BALL:           but leave it under the oak.

READER 4:           Slung so, it swings its full weight. With you going blindly on  
all paws, it slews its whole length, to hang at your bowed neck  
like the Mariner's white oblation.

          You drag past the four bright stones at the turn of Wood  
Support.

READER 3:           It is not to be broken on the brown stone under the gracious tree.  
          It is not to be hidden under your failing body.

READER 4:           Slung so, it troubles your painful crawling like a fugitive's irons.

READER 3:           The trees are very high in the wan signal-beam,  
                          and under each a man sitting;  
their seemly faces as carved in a sardonyx stone; as undiademmed  
princes turn their gracious profiles in a hidden seal, so did  
these appear, under the changing light.

READER 4:           Hung so about, you make between these your close escape.

READER 3:           The secret princes between the leaning trees have diadems given them.  
  
The Queen of the Woods has cut bright boughs of various flowering.

These knew her influential eyes. Her awarding hands can pluck for each their fragile prize.

She speaks to them according to precedence. She knows what's due to this elect society. She can choose twelve gentle-men. She knows who is most lord between the high trees and on the open down.

Some she gives white berries

some she gives brown

Emil has a curious crown it's

made of golden saxifrage.

Fatty wears sweet-briar,

he will reign with her for a thousand years.

For Balder she reaches high to fetch his.

Ulrich smiles for his myrtle wand.

JOHN BALL: That swine Lillywhite has daisies to his chain – you'd hardly credit it.

FEMALE VOICE: She plaits torques of equal splendour for Mr. Jenkins and Billy Crower.

Hansel and Gronwy share dog-violets for a palm, where they lie in serious embrace beneath the twisted tripod.

Siôn gets St. John's Wort – that's fair enough.

Dai Great-coat, she can't find him anywhere – she calls both high and low, she had a very special one for him.

She carries to Aneirin-in-the-nullah a rowan sprig, for the glory of Guenedota.

SOLDIER 3: You couldn't hear what she said to him, because she was careful for the Disciplines of the Wars.

READER 4: At the gate of the wood you try a last adjustment, but slung so, it's an impediment, it's of detriment to your hopes, you had best be rid of it – the

sagging webbing and all and what's left of your two fifty – but it were wise to hold on to your mask.

READER 3: You're clumsy in your feebleness, you implicate your tin-hat rim with the slack sling of it.

Let it lie for the dews to rust it, or ought you to decently cover the working parts.

It's the Last Reputable Arm.

But leave it –

JOHN BALL: under the oak.

READER 3: leave it for a Cook's tourist to the Devastated Areas and crawl as far as you can and wait for the bearers.

FEMALE VOICE: Mrs. Willy Hartington has learned to draw sheets and so has Miss Melpomené; and on the South lawns, men walk in red white and blue under the cedars and by every green tree and beside comfortable waters.

READER 4: But why dont the bastards come –

JOHN BALL: Bearers! – stret-cher bear-errs!

READER 4: or do they divide the spoils at the Aid-Post.

But how many men do you suppose could bear away a third of us:

drag just a little further – he yet may counter-attack.

READER 3: Lie still under the oak  
next to the Jerry  
and Sergeant Jerry Coke.

NARRATOR: The feet of the reserves going up tread level with your forehead; and no  
word for you; they whisper one with another; pass on, inward.

READER 1: Oeth and Annoeth's hosts they were  
who in that night grew  
younger men  
younger striplings.

READER 2: The geste says this and the man who was on the field ... and who wrote  
the book ... the man who does not know this has not understood anything.

(END ON SILENCE)