

THE INVASION THEME IN ENGLISH POETRY

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*Shout, for a mighty victory is won!
On British ground the invaders are laid low;
The breath of heaven has drifted them like snow,
And left them lying in the silent sun
Never to rise again.*

THESE lines, predicting the overthrow of an invader on British soil, were written, not by a contemporary poet inspired by the danger which has threatened England for the past two years, but by William Wordsworth in 1803. They serve to remind us that the present crisis is by no means unique,—that less than 150 years ago England was for nearly a decade under almost constant threat of invasion by the armies of France. The round Martello towers still standing at strategic points along the south coast, and the Royal Military Canal which skirts the inner margin of the great Romney Marsh, bear witness to the elaborate defence preparations against the foreign menace. And Thomas Hardy tells us that:

Down to the middle of the (nineteenth) century there were not wanting . . . casual relics of . . . our preparations for defence against the threatened invasion of England by Buonaparte. An outhouse door riddled with bullet-holes, which had been extemporized by a solitary man as a target for firelock practice when the landing was hourly expected, a heap of brick and clods on a beacon-hill, which had formed the chimney and walls of the hut occupied by the beacon-keeper, worm-eaten shafts and iron heads of pikes for the use of those who had no better weapons, ridges on the down thrown up during the encampment, fragments of volunteer uniform, and other such lingering remains, brought to my imagination in early childhood the state of affairs at the date of war more vividly than volumes of history could have done.

All England was affected by the invasion threat, but its impact was greatest upon the minds and lives of the people living along the channel coast. Since ignorance breeds fear, it was only natural that the South Country folk should regard Napoleon with a superstitious awe not at all apparent in the

attitude of their cinema-and-B.B.C.-enlightened descendants towards Hitler. Strange and terrifying legends developed around the sinister figure who, just across the channel, was assembling huge forces to strike suddenly in the darkness, no man knew when or where. Thomas Hardy records a tradition to the effect that Napoleon actually crossed the channel by night in a small boat and personally selected a landing place for his veterans. The "Corsican Ogre" has, in fact, become a part of English folklore, and lives in many a fantastic tale, many a South Country ballad.

The effect of the Napoleonic invasion threat upon the literature of the time is worth examining, since it may enable us to reach some conclusions about the kind of poetry which the still-unfinished Battle of Britain is likely to call into being. So far, the war as a whole has been the inspiration of very little outstanding verse. Edmund Blunden, by way of accounting for the absence from among the forces of "all those mischievous ballads and snatches, *libres* and *joyeuses*," which were so much a part of the past conflict, has this to say:

Far be it from me, especially with the awareness of most imperfect contact, to deny to the new generation of British fighting men a great feeling of adventure and "the humour of it" in respect of what may befall them in this war. And yet, not hearing them let loose the lyrical impulse as much as we did formerly, I conjecture a difference. They have the history not only of the last war, impartially recorded, but also of the years that succeeded, in more or less of detail in their minds. They have come into action not unprepared by the period preceding it, and mostly after a good deal of debate, internal and external, on what this war means. Some of my young friends have said to me, "I thank God I've got a better war than you people had." This seriousness it may be that characterises the world war about us, and defines it as rather a huge business demanding unremitting co-operation, and capable of a result founded in efficiency, than a great adventure. (*Between Two Wars*).

It is true that the attitude towards the present war, not only of the men on active service but of the whole British people, is a realistic one, unlikely to foster another Rupert Brooke. There is to-day no conviction that Honour has returned as a king to earth, or that Nobleness walks in our ways again: only a fixed determination to do a dirty—and familiar—job thoroughly. None the less, the Battle of Britain, being without parallel in the element of novelty for the

England to heroic utterance, even though the general theme of war no longer inspires? To find a situation in any way comparable, it is necessary to go back to the time of the Napoleonic invasion threat, and a consideration of the poetic response which that earlier hour of peril called forth may help to answer our question.

Most of the writers of the time were affected in varying degrees by the crisis, but few of them appear to have considered it a theme suitable for poetry. Sir Walter Scott was chiefly concerned, during the decade 1796-1805, with his ballad collections and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. The danger of invasion occasioned only one or two conventional exhortations urging his countrymen to stand firm against "Gaul's ravening hosts." However, Scott's intense hostility towards the French Republic, together with his patriotic energy and his traditional interest in matters relating to war, led him to take an active part in the organization of a volunteer troop of cavalry—The Royal Edinburgh Volunteer Light Dragoons—for the defence of Scotland. In a letter to George Ellis, dated October 14, 1803, Scott casts some light upon the nature of the measures which were being taken against possible invasion:

The necessity of the present occasion has kept almost every individual, however insignificant, to his post. God has left us entirely to our own means of defence, for there is not above one regiment of the line in all this ancient kingdom. In the meanwhile we are doing our best to prepare ourselves for the contest, which, perhaps, is not far distant. A beacon light, communicating with that of Edinburgh Castle, is just erecting in front of our quiet cottage . . . Charlotte, with the infantry (of the household troops, I mean,) is to beat her retreat into the Etrick Forest, where, if the Tweed is in his usual wintry state of flood, she may weather out a descent from Ostend. Friday se'ennight our corps takes the field for the second time in three months—which may explain the military turn of my epistle.

Altogether there were about 300,000 volunteers in England and Scotland by 1805. Scott's corps, The Royal Edinburgh Light Dragoons, was probably fairly well trained, but most contemporary references impel the belief that in actual combat the average volunteer unit would have been more enthusiastic than effective. Thus Leigh Hunt describes, in his *Autobiography*, the regiment of volunteers to which he belonged, with such engaging frankness as to make it impossible for the reader to

I must own that I never had the slightest belief in the coming of Buonaparte . . . Nobody, I thought, could believe it possible who did but see and hear the fine, unaffected manly fellows that composed our own regiment of volunteers and whose counterparts had arisen in swarms all over the country. It was too great a jest. And with all due respect to French valour, I think so to this day . . . They (the English) were an abler-bodied nation than the French; they had been bred up, however erroneously, in a contempt for them, which, in a military point of view, was salutary when it was not careless; and in fine, here were all these volunteers, as well as troops of the line, taking the threat with an ease too great even to laugh at, but at the same time sedulously attending their drills and manifestly resolved, if the struggle came, to make a personal business of it, and see which of the two nations had the greatest pluck.

The regiment was for a time in charge of a Major Downs—"an undertaker in Piccadilly, very fat and jovial, yet active withal, and a good soldier." In due course a colonel was appointed, and introduced to his command at an elaborate ceremony which appears to have been conducted in a manner typical of most of the regimental activities:

At length the moment arrived—the colonel was named; he was to be introduced to us; and that nothing might be wanting to our dignity, he was a lord, and a friend of the minister . . .

Our parade was in the courtyard of Burlington House. The whole regiment attended. We occupied three sides of the ground. In front of us were the great gates, longing to be opened. Suddenly the word is given "My lord is at hand!" Open burst the gates—up strikes the music. "Present arms!" vociferates the major. In dashes his lordship, and is pitched right over his horse's head to the ground!

The entire performance is suggestive of a comic opera; and there can be no doubt that the officers of the St. James were well-qualified to maintain the traditions of that most redoubtable of train-band captains—John Gilpin!

In common with Scott and Leigh Hunt, most of the outstanding writers of the day took the invasion threat seriously enough to participate actively in plans for defence without being sufficiently moved by the danger to write about it. But the two greatest poets of the time were stirred much more deeply than their contemporaries.

For Coleridge the invasion threat actually marked a turning point in his political thought. He had been a warm supporter

had denounced the antagonistic attitude of the European monarchies towards the new order. As late as 1796 he was still speaking of his own country in terms of bitterest reproach:

Forever shall this bloody island scowl?
 Forever shall this vast and iron bow
 Shoot famine's evil arrows o'er the world?
 Hark, how wide Nature joins her groans below:
 Rise, God of Mercy, Rise! why sleep thy bolts unfurl'd?

But the French invasion of Switzerland early in 1798, an apparently wanton act of aggression, shocked Coleridge. Confused and disillusioned, he turned his back on the eighteenth century belief in man's natural goodness, and attempted to take refuge in the beauties of Nature. Then came rumours of impending invasion, and Coleridge, surrendering to a powerful emotional impulse, wrote *Fears in Solitude*, a passionate assertion of loyalty to his country in her hour of danger. The England that is threatened by the invader is not, he feels, the land of reactionary institutions and tyrannical governments—for they are transient—but the land of green hills and quiet valleys, ageless and eternal:

O native Britain! O my Mother Isle!—
 How should'st thou prove aught else but dear and holy
 To me, who from thy lakes and mountain-hills,
 Thy clouds, thy quiet dales, thy rocks and seas,
 Have drunk in all my intellectual life,
 All sweet sensations, all ennobling thoughts,
 All adoration of the God in Nature,
 All lovely and all honourable things,
 Whatever makes this mortal spirit feel
 The joy and greatness of its future being?
 There lives not form nor feeling in my soul
 Unborrowed from my country! O divine
 And beauteous Island! thou hast been my sole
 And most magnificent temple, in the which
 I walk with awe, and sing my stately songs,
 Loving the God that made me!

From 1798 on, Coleridge's expressions of loyalty to England become more and more fervent. By 1803 he was able to write to his brother George that "Bad as we may be, we are assuredly the best among nations." In the event of an invasion, he looks forward eagerly to a bayonet-to-bayonet encounter with the enemy, and is unable to foresee any outcome other than the

sudden shock of seeing what he most loved threatened with destruction was not repeated; and in any case, after 1798, poetic inspiration was a rare visitant.

In a letter to Thomas Poole, written in 1803, Coleridge hinted that Wordsworth was not much interested in the defence of his country, being too much concerned with his "hypochondriacal sensations." It is true that Wordsworth took no part in volunteer activities, nor is there any reference to the perils of the time in his correspondence, but he had not as yet retreated completely into the fastnesses of his own soul. He still lived enough in the world to be aware of certain dangers which were threatening English society from within, and in a series of memorable sonnets, begun in the autumn of 1812, he called upon the English people to turn from the course of self-destruction upon which, by reason of their complacency and greed, they were embarked:

Rapine, avarice, expense,
This is idolatry, and these we adore:
Plain living and high thinking are no more:
The homely beauty of the good old cause
Is gone; our peace, our fearful innocence,
And pure religion breathing household laws.

England's betrayal of herself was, so Wordsworth felt, all the greater because of the greatness of her heritage,—because fundamentally she was the first of nations:

In our halls is hung
Armoury of the invincible knights of old:
We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held.—In everything we are sprung
Of earth's first blood, have titles manifold.

But although his anger was deeply stirred by the follies of his own generation, Wordsworth's belief in the essential worth of his country was never seriously shaken:

. . . some fears unnamed
I had, my country, was I to be blamed?
Now, when I think of thee and what thou art,
Verily, in the bottom of my heart,
Of these unfilial fears I am ashamed!
For dearly must we prize thee, we who find
In thee a bulwark for the cause of men;
And I by my affection was beguiled:
What wonder if a poet now and then,

And when, in 1803, it became apparent that grave danger was threatening the country, Wordsworth, like Coleridge five years before, flew to her defence. It was his privilege to chide her selfishness and stupidity, but it was equally his privilege to be her champion in time of stress.

The fear of invasion appears to have reached a peak in October, 1803. At that time Wordsworth wrote two sonnets dealing specifically with the invasion threat. The first exhorts the men of Kent to hurl the invader into the sea; the second, entitled *Anticipation*, predicts the disaster which will befall any enemy who sets foot on the shores of England, and the sacred rapture of the victors:

—the work is done.

Come forth, ye old men, now in peaceful show
And greet your sons! Drums beat and trumpets blow!
Make merry, wives! ye little children, stun
Your grandame's ears with pleasure of your noise!
Clap, infants, clap your hands! Divine must be
That triumph, when the very worst, the pain,
And even the prospect of our brethren slain,
Hath something in it which the heart enjoys:—
In glory will they sleep and endless sanctity.

The responses of Wordsworth and Coleridge to the invasion threat thus set a pattern which has become familiar to us since the outbreak of the present war. During the years of vacillation and appeasement, many British poets, with a bitterness reminiscent of the early spirit of the two great Romantics, denounced their country: now, in her grim hour, they are defending her with their very lives.

But although Wordsworth was able to overcome his "hypochondriacal sensations" sufficiently to write more and better poetry inspired by the invasion threat than any of his contemporaries, even he wrote little on the theme that added to his reputation. The truth of the matter seems to be that none of the writers of the time found in the danger which menaced England inspiration that evoked from him his best verse.

If, therefore, we are to judge by the response to the Napoleonic invasion threat, it seems unlikely that England's most desperate hour—the present crisis—will be commemorated in great poetry. But the circumstances of the crises are, of course, by no means identical. Particularly must it be

enemy, who, as far as they were concerned, belonged to a world of rumor and romance. But the young poets of England to-day are fighting her battle in the sky, on the channel, in the streets of her battered cities. Antoine de Saint Expurey, the brilliant French aviator-author, is reported to have said: "Nobody has the right to write a word to-day who does not participate to the fullest in the agony of his fellow human beings. If I did not resist with my life, I should be unable to write . . . One must write with one's body." No one can question that the young English writers of to-day are participating in their country's agony. For them there has been none of those periods of tranquillity in which, according to Wordsworth, the poet recollects and relives his moments of powerful emotion and writes his best poetry. So it may be that when peace comes, the invasion theme will prove the inspiration of deathless song. Or it may be that on such a subject Shakespeare has said all things, and for all time:

This England never did, nor never shall,
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror . . .
Come the three corners of the world in arms,
And we shall shock them. Nought shall make us rue,
If England to itself do rest but true.