

Sopwith Camel

[Of the 55,000 aircraft that were manufactured for the Royal Flying Corps during World War I, only 20 remain in airworthy condition.]

The woodcutter carves and refines, skilled with a plane,
greases the flight sergeant's oily rag, makes the wings rock,
lets the novice's undercarriage bounce on the bumpy terrain,
maps out the foreign land of fuselage, strut and chock,

a treasure chest of offcuts on the floor of every page,
the mysterious words and well-turned phrases strung
gracefully like a staffel of Fokkers in flight, an age
of new vocabulary gorged eagerly like chocolate on the tongue.

*I flew my first mission across enemy lines aged nine,
navigated the world before I was ten,
met Archie and Sam Browne, flew Camels*, drank wine,
battled the Boche/Hun/Jerry, led men,*

*showed bravery amidst all the ballyhoo;
I was Captain Bigglesworth of 266 Squadron
with Algy and Ginger and Wilks and the crew,
flying east, west, south, north, but never, so to speak, undone.*

*Charts unravelled for this awe-struck child
as I travelled to France, Spain and Africa,
China, Brazil, the Gobi desert and other wild
places, foiling dastardly plots, defying the Swastika,*

*rescuing fine chaps for the honour of the nation,
always doing the decent thing, a survivor of wars,
an ace outflanking death on many an occasion,
a champion of the virtue of esprit de corps.*

The books have gone west now, collectors' items bar none,
but ah the nouveau correctness, the bombastic smokescreen,
unloading all their eggs on the whisky and the Hun
condemning the innocents by wanting it clean.

Onward the campaign - to defend the nation's flowerbeds,
to strafe the trenches of the duly elected,
dog-fight with the brass-hats and the dunderheads,
and salute the Captain as he flies into the sunset, duly respected.

* *Sopwith Camel*, a fighter aircraft used extensively by the Royal Flying Corps in World War I.