

Twelve River RIPPLES

Favourite Poem



Petrol Shortage

by Edwin Muir (c 1956-7)

This mild late-winter afternoon
Everything's unfamiliar;
Vacant silence as of peace
After a fifty-year-long war.

The planes are hunted from the sky,
All round me is the natural day.
I watch this empty country road
Roll half a century away.

And looking round me I recall
That here the patient ploughmen came
Long years ago, and so remember
What they were and what I am.

I think, the aeroplanes will pass,
Power's stupendous equipage,
And leave with simpler dynasties
The mute detritus of an age.

The daring pilot will come down,
Cold marble wings will mark his place,
And soft persuasion of the grass
Restrain the swiftest of his race.

The cycle will come round again,
Earth will repair its broken day,
And pastoral Europe dream again
Of little wars waged far way.

A week refutes a prophecy
That only ages can make true.
The deafening distractions wait,
Industrious fiends, for me and you.

Written at the time of the Suez Crisis (1956-7) a year or two before Muir's death. He was an Orkney man who was traumatised by the enforced move from the island to industrial Glasgow in his teens. After a career with the British Council he retired to Swaffham Prior in Cambridgeshire, close to the Suffolk border.

Edwin Muir was a favourite poet of my father, perhaps because he shared a rural Scottish family background. I have vivid memories of the shutdown of traffic and the silence that took possession of the streets in the industrial town where we lived at that time.

Cameron Hawke Smith