

Alas Arras 1917

What was it like at Arras?

*On that grim, European frontline,
Where the Germans saw fit to trespass,
And lay 'another' land mine;
There was no turning back,
Yet nowhere to run,
All paths were blocked from Dunkirk to Verdun,
Save to an unknown grave*

What was it like at Arras?

*No season tickets, or special pass,
Only the charge of sons of men,
Well exposed to horror and squaller by then,
But with boots, as heavy as lead,
Not knowing where safe to tread,
Low and behold - tin helmets rolled,
To an unknown grave*

What was it like at Arras?

*No flowers, spas or grass,
Only a sea of Red mud,
Spilling over with precious young blood,
The shuddering thud of shell fire,
Pounding them into barbed wire,
And an unknown grave*

What was it like at Arras?

*Of silver and gold, there was none,
Only Big noises - top brass,
Summing up how next to beat the hun,
Not caring to count the high cost,
In terms of wounded, or lost
To an unknown grave*

What was it like at Arras?

No SOS calls for the SAS

Only the ROAR, it was afterwards said,

Of LIONS, like lambs to the slaughter led,

By donkeys - and while 'tied up'

The unicorn remained,

Champagne flowed, and,

'in chains' the Cream of Britain drained

To an unknown grave

What was it like at Arras?

No stubborn mules, or pompous ass,

Only long-suffering military horses,

Impartial parts of biased armed forces,

Obliged to trust the cavalry,

To deliver them, even from Calvary,

An unknown grave

What was it like at Arras?

No stained or battered carcass,

Only immobilised mobile canteens,

Hard pressed to serve the tommies

When hunger, and thirst for righteousness,

Had little to do with the needs of tummies,

Much more the meaningless greediness,

Of an unknown grave

What was it like at Arras?

No special occasions, or celebrations,

Only the prelude to Martinmas,

With all its sordid implications,

For Armistice Day was still far away,

From the truce they made

Upon Christmas Day,

And an unknown grave

*What was it like at Arras?
No airlifts there, or Paras,
Only the flying corps, brilliant and bold,
Dog fighting in combat, yet dogged by the cold,
And by dodging not issues that tabbed them since birth,
To fall, as fire balls, to Earth,
And an unknown grave*

*What was it like at Arras?
No rare perfumes, or exotic smells,
Only blankets of mustard gas
Driving heavenly Privates to private hells,
As unable to catch their last breath,
One by one they choked to death,
And an unknown grave*

*What was it like at Arras?
No canopies, or tent,
Only frayed fragments, of canvass,
From life's tapestry, sorely rent,
And labyrinths its broken threads,
Entwined in a landscape torn to shreds,
An unknown grave*

*What was it like at Arras?
No movie stars or cinemas,
Only camera crews capturing scenes,
That would ridicule propaganda screens,
In village schools, where the curious queued,
To review the stale and bitter fued,
For an unknown grave*

*What was it like at Arras?
No prizes for top of the class,
Only, bull ring, crash courses,
On staying alive,
Pips on an Officer's shoulder,
And medals, to wear,
If they chanced to survive,
All the odds against growing older,
Than an unknown grave*

*What was it like at Arras?
No mirrored halls, or looking glass,
Only fast fading, personal reflections,
Vague visions of things as they were,
Before disillusionment damned recollections,
And heroes staggered stunned and blur,
Across an unknown grave*

*What was it like at Arras?
No survey maps or compass,
Only senses, so sharp that they
Would keep surprise attacks at bay,
And instincts that were too astute,
To deliberately go, in blind pursuit,
Of an unknown grave*

*What was it like at Arras?
No orchestras, or operas,
Only reveilles, rallying troops,
From total confusion, to orderly groups,
Songs about dear old Blighty,
And rolls that rang of Almighty tolls,
To an unknown grave*

What was it like at Arras?

No lover, and his lass,

Only husbands parted from wives

For the length of a war, or the rest of their lives,

Volunteers, recruits, conscripts and others,

And boys, crying out, though in vain, for their mothers

From an unknown grave

What was it like at Arras?

No nurses to tease, or harass,

Only streams of desolate damnification,

Trickling toward a bandage station,

Not that these could conjure a cure,

For such deep eternal scar of war,

As an unknown grave

What was it like at Arras?

No understudies, or extras,

Only soldiers, staging dramas,

In theatres of war,

With costumes uniform, scripts in semaphore,

And casts, who knew for certain,

That to entertain, in person,

Was to face the final curtain,

And an unknown grave

How did they storm Vimy Ridge?

When the signals were given, all clear,

Although it must have reigned terror and fear,

Did those, at the fore, form a human bridge?

For all these seething up, from the rear,

If they did then they had no sure footing,

And in a hail of mortars shooting,

Slipped to an unknown grave

*What it was like at Arras,
No transient of time can surpass,
Only now, 'another' war later,
In an overgrown trench or crater,
Cattle and sheep, may graze,
Though nothing can ever erase,
Noble names, engraved upon hearts,
Of forebears, who vanished in foreign parts,
That stretched from Dunkirk to Verdun, for some,
Unless they were blown to Kingdom Come!*

By Valerie J Croucher