

# THE SHEEPFOLD

*from* The Battle of Aughrim

**Richard Murphy**

On Kelly's land at Aughrim, all is the same  
As the old people remember, and pray it will be,  
Where his father grazed sheep, like all before him.

Mullen the herd, propped by a fallen tree,  
His mouth scabbed and his cheeks pitted by pox,  
Blows on a reed pipe a fatal melody.

Ripe seeds are bending the tall meadowstalks.  
He stops, when the sun sparks on a cuirass,  
A goatskin drum across the sheepwalk tucks.

Buff-coated horsemen jump the walls, and press  
The bleating flock, while Kelly pleads for pay:  
"By the Holy Virgin, give us gold, not brass!"

Raw lancers goad their footsore ewes away  
With rancid udders drained by thriving lambs:  
"Do you grudge men food who fight for you?" they say.

Soon they reach camp, where flies hover in swarms  
On entrails at the bivouacs, and they smoke  
The meat on spits, lice crawling in their uniforms.

Farmer and herd follow with crook and stick,  
Their grey slack tweed coats tied with twists of straw,  
Reeking of wool and sour milk and turf smoke,

Up hill through hedgegaps to an ancient rath  
Embanked by hawthorn, where the Catholic flag  
Blazoned with Bourbon lilies for St Ruth

Float white and gold above a deep red bog,  
And here they halt, blessing themselves, and kneel:  
"Christ make the Frenchman pay us for our flock!"

Inside, they see a hand with a swan quill  
That writes and writes, while powdered clerks translate,  
Quoting with foreign voice the general's will:

"Children, I bring from France no better aid  
To toast the image-wreckers on hell fire  
Than my own skill to lead your just crusade.

"It is your duty, since I wage this war  
For your souls' sake, to lose your flock, but win  
A victory for your conscience and my honour".

“Give back our fleeces!” begs the shepherd, then  
St Ruth’s head rises: “Foutez-moi le camp!”  
Guards clash steel halberds, and the natives run.

Through glacial esker, by the river Suck  
They choose the bog path to the richer camp  
With tongues to talk and secret prayers for luck.

All day packhorses laden westwards tramp  
Trundling bronze cannon behind casques of shot,  
While eastwards, armed with spite, two traitors limp.

The Danish mercenaries they chance to meet  
Standing in hogweed, sheltered by a ditch,  
Assume they’re spies, with no one to translate,

So fetch them to a grey house, where the Dutch  
Commander who serves England’s Orange king  
Shakes hands, and gives them each a purse to clutch,

While a blond adjutant runs off to bring  
The gunner Trench, who’ll need their eyes next day,  
When the cold cannon mouths start uttering.  
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Gerald Dawe, The Irish Times

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