

For the Living

Selected Writings 1: Longer Poems 1965–2000

RICHARD BURNS was born in London in 1943, into a family of musicians. He has lived in Italy, Greece, the USA and Yugoslavia. His perspectives as a poet combine English, French, Mediterranean, Jewish, Slavic, American and Oriental influences. He deals equally with historical and political material, with inner worlds, and with relationships and everyday life. In the 1970s, he founded and ran the international Cambridge Poetry Festival. His work has been translated into 18 languages.

Also by Richard Burns

The Easter Rising 1967

The Return of Lazarus

Double Flute

Avebury

Inhabitable Space

Angels

Some Poems, Illuminated by Frances Richards

Learning to Talk

Tree

Roots/Roots

Black Light

Half of Nowhere

Croft Woods

Against Perfection

The Manager

Book With No Back Cover

As Editor

An Octave for Octavio Paz

Ceri Richards: Drawings to Poems by Dylan Thomas

Rivers of Life

In Visible Ink: Selected Poems, Roberto Sanesi 1955–1979

Homage to Mandelstam

Out of Yugoslavia

For the Living

SELECTED WRITINGS 1
LONGER POEMS 1965–2000

RICHARD BURNS



CAMBRIDGE

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To Melanie

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Editorial Note

This book is the first volume of *Selected Writings* by Richard Burns. It consists of longer poems and poem-sequences written between 1965 and 2000, in Greece, Italy, England and former Yugoslavia. By and large, contents appear in order of composition, though with several minor departures from chronology. Notes at the end of the book give dedications, dates and places of composition, and some contexts and references.

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RB

CAMBRIDGE, SEPTEMBER 2004

The Easter Rising 1967

I

I am sick of the twittering of swallows' voices,
My Lord, I have come down from the North
To find only You, but sitting by the well
I was assaulted by perfumes
And the babbling of a thousand animals
Performing the rites of Spring. I am sick to death
Of them all, My Lord,
You do not walk among them.



II

The army has taken over the state
Lord I am sick
Citizens are forbidden
To gather in groups of more than five
For the safety of all citizens
The king is chewing his nails in the palace
His signature has been faked
Tanks patrol the city streets
And half the people's ministers are in prison
Including three past premiers
Citizens are forbidden
To walk outside their houses
The constitution has been suspended
By the order of the army and the police
Civil crimes will be judged under martial law
For the safety of all citizens
Newspaper radio telephone telegraph
And all forms of transport and communication
Have been suspended
No one shall enter or leave the country
Any citizen seen on the streets after dusk
Will be shot on sight
For the safety of all citizens
We shall discover a communist plot tomorrow
And concoct a suitable scapegoat
Citizens are forbidden
To criticise the regime
By the order of the army and the police
Lord I am sick

For the safety of all citizens
Citizens are forbidden
Citizens have been suspended



III

The green corn grows but the poppies grow higher
And other red memories spatter the fields
The shepherds are bringing their flocks from the hills
Down into town for the Easter slaughter
The women have painted the house fronts white
The peasants wade knee deep in green corn
But the blood of the poppy covers the land
A shepherd who had not heard the news
Came down into town after dusk and was shot
The lambs are brought down for the Easter slaughter
And my firstborn son is a conscript now
The blood of the poppy covers the land
Other red memories spatter the fields
Must I live through them all over again
Lord I have been drunk all day
But I am sick to death of it all



IV

In martial formation the swallows returned
They came with the tourists all twittering
But they have brought us no news
They sing for themselves and hear no one else
They are afraid for their lives
They chatter in high pitched foreign dialects
And I cannot understand a word that they say
Lord all our newspapers are ten days old
The neighbours have told the police
That my cousin is a guest in my house
Lord they have confiscated my rifle and his
We shall hunt no more the hares on the hills this year
Lord I hear the summer flies buzzing
They interfere with every other sound
Lord the shit in the shithouse is piled up to the ceiling
And no one so strong as to clear it away
All the radio stations screech in foreign languages
I have twiddled the knobs all day
My friends are all afraid to speak to me
To whom shall I turn
Lord I do not know what is happening
Lord I am sick
These foreigners these barbarian swallows
How cruel is their oblivious song
They are speaking about us I know
But I am not immune like them
Lord I am sick
Help me



V

Theodorakis

Who composed the beautiful dances and songs

Papandreou

Who fought for a vote for each man

Unrigged elections

Pensions and better education

Kanellopoulos

Who led the last government

Glezos

Who won a prize for peace

And so the story goes (apocryphal or not)

Climbed the Acropolis

To plant the Greek flag instead of the Swastika

While the Nazis murdered our women and children

And the S.S. sprawled in Merlin Street

An idiotic schoolboy gesture

That gave our hearts fresh blood

Spyridoula

Who has a shop in the high street

Which sells stoves and cylinders of calor gas

Sotiriou

Who lost an arm in the war at the age of seventeen

Pappageorgiou

Who drives a lorry

Whose son is my son's friend

Ploumbis

Who played backgammon with me last week

Where are they now?
Where are they now?

Neigh for them
Till the cows come home

Are we
Or they
Imprisoned?



VI

And I am sick of the song of the military
The captains who strut like pigeons down the street
Having just been promoted
And the raucous laughter of beardless conscripts
Parading in the market place
 With wolf whistles and dirty jokes
 And swearwords cram-full of innocence
 And tanks outside the post office
 And tommy-guns outside the electricity board
 And bayonets fixed outside the telephone exchange
 Stopping the traffic on the highways
 Arresting people in their homes
 Publicly picking up whores below the Acropolis

They do not understand
I am sick of people who do not understand
Because they are innocent
I am sick of innocence

And I am sick of the smiles of friendly policemen
Whose eyes betray their fear of being removed
From their meagre wages and wives and mothers
They too are innocent

And I am sick of the cowed silence of peasants and shopkeepers
Who want peace and quiet at any price
I am sick of them because they are right as usual
I am sick of watching their foreheads furrowed by worry
The complaints of their whispering women
The puzzled uncertain eyes of their children
The silence punctuated by forced laughter in the coffee houses
And bars and taverns where men cannot talk as they please