

A Man of Heart

SAMPLER

Also by Liam Guilar

Rough Spun to Close Weave
I'll Howl Before You Bury Me

Anhaga

Lady Godiva and Me
A Presentment of Englishry

SAMPLE

Liam Guilar

A Man of Heart

Part two of
A Presentment of Englishry.

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Contents

Introduction and Acknowledgements / 7

Part One Sons and Daughters

Fragments. The Formation of the Kingdoms / 11

Chapter One. Myself as witness / 25

Chapter Two. London / 36

Chapter Three. To the Wall / 53

Chapter Four. Vortigern and Hengist / 63

Chapter Five. An Age of Wood / 79

Chapter Six. Married / 92

Chapter Seven. The Good Old Days? / 100

Part Two

Chapter Eight. A Queen in the Wilderness / 113

Chapter Nine. The Hunt for Merlin / 130

Chapter Ten. The Scribe's Story / 145

Chapter Eleven. Things Fall Apart / 171

Ruins / 185

The History of Vortigern. A Timeline / 196

Precisely between their God and Devil, heaven and
hell, white and black, the man of heart walks through.

—Joseph Campbell,
The Masks of God. Creative Mythology (p.37)

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

A Man of Heart, the second part of *A Presentment of Englishry*, is the story of Vortigern and the end of Roman Britain. It is also a story about storytelling. It continues to follow the narrative trajectory of Lázamon's late 12th century version of The Legendary History, the foundation myth of Britain. By the 12th century this had very little in common with 'History' as we understand it in the 21st. Attempts to resolve the discrepancies or reconcile Lázamon's version with what we currently know about the period are futile. Nor is it possible to rationalize the chronology. There are anachronisms, contradictions and inconsistencies in my text. It is not a modern novel.

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Part One

Sons and Daughters

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Fragments. The Formation of the Kingdoms

Maxim 1

History is a record of brutality
tempered by outbursts of idealism.

Memory

There was never enough light.
Even in summer, shade
and shadows contour brightness.
At night, torches and lamps
shiver the edge of sight.
The candle drew attention to itself
while life continued in the silent,
darker ebb and pool beyond.

I remember her hand on the pillar,
a shadow on the white stone.
Her eyes bright in a dark face.
She was worried, there were visitors,
men of power and influence,
come to court her daughter.
Not bad for a freed slave
from the lands around Carthage.
I remember her hand on the pillar,
the light shaking over the mosaic floor.
She had plans. We all had plans.

Returning to the city

Its pavements cracked, the shop fronts
boarded or burnt out. The places

where we played gone wild.
The silence of a storm about to burst.

We lived as squatters in this shanty town,
lean-tos inside the walls,
until one night of panic,
lit by burning homes.

Demented cacophony
of a city torn apart.
Bundling possessions,
I took a wrong turn, alone
somewhere I could not recognise,
backtracked, saw my family, called,
unheard, then saw them killed.
In my nightmares I'm still running,
till I found the gate,
found our meeting point.
Found no one.
Waited. The raiders came.
I was ten years old
when I became a slave.

The Roman soldier

...taught to think in the plural.
We march, we build, we fight.
Exception: *they* died,
even if *they* were men
we'd marched and fought beside.

They sent us on a long patrol
to find the end of marching.
Stood on a mountain gazing at the sea,
returned, ambushed, betrayed
till we saw Roadsend
and gave God thanks.

The fort was empty. *They*
had marched away.
Glad to have a wall around us,
smoke from familiar villages
to orientate the landscape,
snuggled into the border post
waiting for orders.
A trader moving on the road,
challenged at the gate,
said the legions had withdrawn.
No pay wagon creaked towards us.
So the officer said, 'Right my lads.'
(Me with 19 years of service, hardly ladlike.)
'The bastards sailed without us.
We, however, shall continue. Patrols
will establish contact with the villages
ensure taxes are still paid in kind.
In turn, we offer them protection.
They'll need it when the raiders come.

We've fought the Empire's wars.
We've marched through deserts
chasing Persians. We've built bridges
in a nightmare Slavic pass.
Not one of those sad bastards
who abandoned us
can say we haven't held our lines
and done our duty.
We've been, we've done, and now we stay.'

We stood there in the rain.
Not one man cheered. Not one
said, stuff it up your hole
I'm going home. Because
this was our home. Mist,
rain, damp and those rare days
when sun shone on the heather.

The girl who slept with me was from the hills.
I knew her language well enough
to understand her father's jokes.
Our children, hardly Roman.

Better to be led than lead?
Of course, my son. There's always
some jumped up corporal,
acting unpaid with tickets on himself,
burning with an indignation
you could cook your rations on.

And it is fun to listen to him strut his stuff
but when it comes to slaughter,
you will thank your Gods
if the mouth giving orders
is connected to a better brain
than the one directing the lunatics
out to cut your throat.

And that my son, is why we're here.
And why we hang together in the end.

The Council and Vortigern

They have made it clear
that while they are grateful for his service,
it's service not advice that they require.
His knowledge and experience
are theirs to ignore.
You will recruit Foederati,
Germani from the coastal districts.¹
Three boat loads will suffice.
'We have no way of keeping them in line.'

¹ *Foederati* were tribesmen who were recruited into the Imperial army. Their use had been standard Imperial practice for a long time before this story begins.

His objections are ignored.
This is tradition: we speak and you obey.

Old men in togas, fretting in the dark,
they move with all the formal confidence
of self-important men who know their worth.
'A skirmish, nothing more.' 'He'll want a triumph soon.'
They are the ones their friends appointed
because they know what is appropriate,
because of who their fathers were.
Blandly competent, they glide across predestined tracks
rehearsing phrases emptied by centuries of repetition.
Insisting on the dignity of office, the privileges of rank.

He saw a group of dancers who had learnt their steps
until they could pirouette without a thought.
But the dance required a polished floor,
marble, music, painted walls, and Empire
to validate the meaning of each move.
Now the lamps were out, the music silent,
they stumbled on a windy hillside in the dark
where time had rendered them ridiculous and irrelevant.

'We'll name the three ships:
Ariovistus, Alaric, Arminius.'²
Impatient gestures send him on his way.
'Call them what you like.'
He leaves them to their ignorance.
They know nothing of tradition,
or the history that underwrites their titles.

² The three names were mercenaries hired by the Romans who turned on them.

On the Beach

A grey sky and a torpid sea.
Red cloaks on the littered sand.
Move closer you can listen in.

‘Why are we meeting on the beach?’

‘They fear our magic in a confined space.’

Their chiefs come down the dunes.
He cannot feel the Empire at his back.
The tide has washed him here
on the ocean’s edge,
where the flat land
drifts towards the sky,
and the armed men
standing in a ragged line,
are rubbish on a rising wave.

If you cross the Rubicon
better have the 13th at your back,
battle hardened veterans,
disciplined and loyal.
Not the grey sea and beyond
a land of ghosts and shadows
where 3rd rate actors strutted
on a broken, darkened stage.

Maxim 2

A father will trade his daughter for a Kingdom
A daughter will trade her body for a crown.

Imperial soldier #2

There were stories of a girl.
Someone he'd met on RandR.
A dream of home
and who was I to laugh?
Next time I saw him
pinned to a tree, split
all ends up, I had to double take
to recognise the mess, so
when we moved into that pigsty
of a village, saw the child playing
with a helmet-his? who knows.
We forgot about 'respecting tribal culture'
and 'negotiating ethnic differences'.
We heaped the corpses in the middle
and torched the lot. A habit forming
reflex action, becoming
easier with practice.

The Tyrant³

When did I notice the world was coming to an end?
That summer, there were far more people on the road,
whole families with their bundles, or their carts,
some heading somewhere, to a distant relative
some just trying to get away. And who'd have thought
a store front by the road could do such trade?
We upped the prices but they kept on paying.
Give me your coins, no coins, what's in the cart
then trade your wife and daughter for an hour.
Occasionally someone remembered dignity and drew a sword
but I was hiring swords by then, ex-soldiers
who'd been left behind or slipped away

³ A non-derogatory term meaning ruler, but in the context of 5th century Britain a ruler of a small kingdom.

and the straggling line never coalesced
behind a common purpose. Coins, jewels,
or women. You want to eat. You pay.

When the winter came the silence between travellers
grew longer till no one moved along the road.
I was clinking rich, so many coins. So many
jewelled pieces. But I soon learnt you can't eat coins
and the local farmers wouldn't sell a starved cow for the Grail.
So I took the things I wanted. If they complained they died.
We moved the operation to this hill, where we could see
our natural resources and the road.

These are the Good Old Days #1

There must have been sunshine.
Good days when a man unbent from his work
and smiled to see the healthy children play.
When women turned drudgery into a game.
Long evenings by a fire, the comfort
of old acquaintances, good friends, stale jokes
older stories. A shy glance across the flames.
The promise of a willing body.
Shared satisfaction in a job well done, a problem shared,
the beauty of things, well made and functional.
The crops abundant, the cattle healthy
promise of babies, wisdom of age.
Lovers by the river bank paused by the moon,
stars flung back to clutter a clear sky.
Of course, there was bitterness, frustration
resentment, jealousy, the savage tongue,
the casual cruelties, the stink of desire turning sour.

Some died as children, other accident took off,
but some reached old age, dying in their sleep.
A hard life, a tough life, a short life.

Daily victories that never made the chronicles.
The beauty of the passing days
in this little portion of the world
they labelled home, made life worth living.

The young man

Mouth don't eat if hands don't make.
I looked out on perfection,
knew each day was beautiful.
I heard the poetry in other voices,
saw with muddied clarity
the world beneath the surface.
Had I been nurtured, trained,
I would have been a poet or a priest
because I understood the divine
that radiates from everything,
from rock and tree and river,
the awe inspiring *is* that *is*.
But not my village, nor my dad.
Mouth don't eat if hands don't make.
What use is poetry or music
when hard work must be done against the winter?
Stories are for priests and old men.
Neither feed themselves.
So I learnt to be someone else.

Vortigern

Your words won't work.
Call him Caesar, Imperator, Rex,
Comes, Dux bellorum,
Arglywd, Brenhin, Tyrannus.
His palace is a wooden barn
encircled by a makeshift fence,

his kingdom scattered settlements
whose people dread the sound of hooves.
Its boundary is that tiny stream
and that slight rise on the horizon
they dignify by calling it 'The Ridge'.
His army, twenty thugs with swords
who squabble at his table,
will follow him until his luck runs out.

He has no policy, no pension plan,
retirement scheme. He fears his sons
will knife him when he sleeps before
his enemies carve him on the battle field
or nail him to his burning hall.

He wears a gown of raven feathers,
or a bear skin with the head as hood.
Strong men don't look him in the eye,
they say he measures them for burial.
He lives for shadows, trusting no one:
a dead friend is better than a live enemy
and women can easily be replaced.
Addicted to the raid, to stealing cattle,
selling slaves, exuberant, but cunning, watchful,
bribing the young men with rings, gold,
promises of better days ahead.
Scheming to improve the limits of his power
before death dumps him out of history,
or into genealogy, if he's worth the space.
Call him Hlaford, Cyning, Tigernos,
Superbus Tyrannus, Vortigern.⁴

⁴ Caesar, Imperator, Rex... all words roughly meaning 'Man in charge'.