

Visiting the Shwe Dagon

One climbs within the Golden Pagoda
Barefoot. Rotten fruit
Or something that a pi-dog left?
A butt-end of cheroot
Appears beneath one's lifted sole.

Grateful for that one
Mercy in a darkened world,
One climbed towards the sun
Which, on the topmost terrace,
Blisters those who crawl
Past tombs set back in little grots
Like bee-cells in the wall.

Mosaiced on the inner stone
Of one such dingy cell
A Union Jack burned faintly
To show that all was well
With some benighted Cantonese
Who came here from Hong Kong
In Queen Victoria's golden days
Before the world went wrong.

I asked the monk who stood there
So how are things today?

He shrugged within his yellow robe's
Bone-emphasis to say
The Shans are drunk, the Padangs are starving,
The Burmans have lost their way.

GRAEME WILSON