

The Peace Prize Sonnets

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*These poems are dedicated to Abraham Lincoln,
whose Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves,
and who died from an assassin's bullet
at the age of fifty-four,
thirty years before the peace prize was established
in conformance with Alfred Nobel's will.*

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“You say I am a riddle – it may be,
For all of us are riddles unexplained.”
So wrote the young Nobel at 18 years,
So are we all, our natures halfwise tamed.

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1

Alfred Nobel was born into bankruptcy
In eastern Sweden, studied chemistry,
And languages, and, in the course of time,
Machines of war, submarines, land mines.
Experimenting with explosives in
his father’s laboratory, nitroglycerine
He helped to find, discovering economic worth,
igniting it in caps with porous earth.
So he worked *dynamite*, of greatest human power,
For building and for demolition’s hour.
Mansions, factories, patents had he many,
But wives and children had he, never, any.

Thus, when he died and left his fortune’s legacy,
Bitter disputes gave way to *Peace*, its legatee.

2

Nobel's philosophy was ...and was not of his age,
La Belle Epoque, when nations stood to rise
from both cooperative trade and arbitrage,
from both communication and surprise.
Nationalism flourished, while proud empires soared,
Lambs laid down, while restless lions roared;
Men - thousands - died in battles for influence's sake,
Their wasted blood a scourge no peace could make.
Nobel, amidst the 'global' movement's dawn,
Rejected disarmament and arbitration,
Arguing 'twas an unrealistic goal to bond
Agressors to each other by solicitation.

Peace could be reached, he said, through collective securities:
Cooperative nations working to fight & punish *its* enemies.

3 1901

Frederic Passy was called the 'doyen' - 'the Elder,' in his circle,
Those in global peace studies and arbitration work. Though
Studied at law, he preferred economics and 'free trade.'
Thus, as he taught, would *Peace* flourish: with money paid
By those who embraced the free flow of goods between nations,
Unfettered competition, labor and arbitration.
He lectured, created the International Peace Bureau. He gave!
"I have worked incessantly for the peace cause for thirty years!,"
he was noted to say as a French candidate, and his peers
Found his leadership rousing, his posture well-argued and staid.
French losses from floods he compared to war's 'false' disasters
To halt France from war - which he did: no more loss or tears.

Passy, an apostle for the "utopia" of *Peace*, believed and said:
Stop producing weapons, and save our children from the dead.

4 1901

Jean Henry Dunant, also first for the prize, was less
Like Passy, helped war's victims survive their test,
With rational and direct creative vision.
Putting Life first, he waded in - his decision.
He reported the Crimean War's true yelp:
Men wounded without shelter, care or help;
Organized, yet, witnessed many die at Solferino...
Forty thousand! The War's dead were, total, half a million.
He called on man to rescue and to save those wounded,
Without regard to nationality, sharing costs,
All nations to take part in preparations
instituted to give aid, and reduce loss.

Thus, Dunant took mankind's unthinkable despair,
And, linking nations, created the Red Cross.

5

Dunant's own life lacked luck, for though he was born wealthy,
He Lost his fortune in African ventures – food.
Cursed by Geneva partners, he lost his health, he
Dropped from sight, forlorn, but that he would
wander soup kitchens, trains, starved for bread and water,
Move shiftless through the streets, avoiding all there.
He later wrote, "Under these conditions,
I learned to pity the poor." And yet his mission
In life was not complete: he was discovered
by a Swiss editor, who reminded the world of his efforts.
More time for groundwork helped spread *Peace's* foundations,
An international bond to comfort nations.

Too weak to move, or travel to accept the prize,
He was lucky in death– 'twas saved from his creditors when he died.