

Wu Ming

Breed's Hill, 17th June 1775
1st prolegomenon to the new novel, December 2005

Translated by Shaun Whiteside, 2009

There are some who maintain that everything exists at the disposal of Man, created so that he may make use of it: animals and plants, water and fire, ether and minerals.

According to these people, metals lie within the belly of the earth to be extracted from it with picks; water rains from the sky or is captured by the rocks so that we can drink it, float upon it, turn it into steam to move machines; the moon and planets are in the sky so that man may contemplate them and who knows, perhaps one day conquer them, dig out their bellies and extract metals from them. How vain all this appears, when we leave for a while the civil consortium, the conglomeration of these human beings, the supposed pivot of the universe. How quickly we realise that man is a small and arrogant part of creation, that the sun does not rise to give us a spectacle of colours, that plants do not rise up, challenging bad weather, so that they may be cut up, drowned in vinegar and harvested with a fork.

In those spaces where man has not yet settled, the vegetation emerges from the ground, absorbs the beneficial power of the sun, grows and receives the pollen carried by the wind, throws out buds that turn into flowers, loads itself with fruits which, eaten by no one, fall to the ground and roll where they will rot, free their seeds and the cycle recommences, without any of our kind witnessing this miracle or drawing benefit from it. Thousands of

animal species come into the world, hunt, make shelters, mate, feed and nurture their young, ignorant even of man's existence and one day, knowing that the time has come, they will weaken and die, still unaware.



To understand the truth of this, you need only observe – let us say – the seagull. Yes, the common gull, *larus ridibundus*, classified by Linnaeus in 1766 but existing in world since long before, and entirely indifferent to this classification.

A bird close to our cities, the *larus*.

The more cunning the more adjacent to our lives, it does not know even the name that we give to it. It feeds on our rubbish and on the leftovers of our tables, but without us it will not die of hunger: wherever we are not, it feeds on worms and insects, and on plants as well.

We find several species of this bird in North America, the site of the events – both large and small – of which we shall give an account. There is the gull known as 'Franklin's' (*Jarus pipxcan*) or – bigger and lighter in plumage – the so-called 'laughing gull' (*Jarus atricilla*), because of its shrill, staccato cry. In these months of siege upon the city of Boston, these creatures have good reason to laugh, because while the population risks dying of starvation, these, in one way or another, put together lunch and dinner, and are clever enough to stay far away, lest they themselves end up on the tables of the besieged.

Besides, they are said to be inedible.

Late spring 1775, hints of a war of independence, a long clash between the Crown of England and the transatlantic Colonies.

On 19 April His Majesty's army, having attempted a sortie into inland Massachusetts with a view to dealing a hard blow to the rebels and arresting their leaders, suffered a defeat in the battle of Lexington, at the hands of irregular forces fighting in an unpredictable manner. They are called 'minutemen', because they are said to be able to mobilise in one minute.

The warriors of George III are accustomed to clashes in the open field, trumpet-blasts and drum-rolls, armies marching against one another, all in step and in perfect order. They certainly did not expect to be attacked without warning, fired at by hidden snipers, ambushed on their retreat.

Returning to Boston: a territory full of forests, hillocks and every kind of hiding-place for the 'banditry' who continued to strike the fleeing army. Disloyalty! Cowardice! Dishonour!

Exhausted, humiliated, their morale damaged, they barricaded themselves in the city, waiting for the best opportunities. In their wake, hundreds of Tories flooded into Boston, loyal subjects that the rabble is chasing from the *rues*, sometimes attacking them with tar and feathers. They are the beacons of their communities, men of law, battered because they consider the patriots to be 'traitors' and the traitors call them 'patriots'.

The news of the defeat spread quickly, among the 'patriots' (or the 'traitors': *quot homines, tot sententiae*). The messengers pass through Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, bringing news from village to village, some reaching as far as New York and Philadelphia. The rumour even travelled as far as Kentucky. As they learn the news, men from sixteen to sixty are taking up their rifles and leaving for Boston. Some of them had been travelling for forty-eight hours after the first gunfire in Lexington.

The objective is the settling of scores not so much against King George – whom many believe to be unaware or ill-advised – but against Parliament, a horde of parasites imposing taxes from three thousand miles away and supporting the interests of the Indians. It

has in fact been said that for some time they have wanted to free the Negro slaves.

Besieging Boston, the city in which the rebellion broke out before it did so elsewhere. Occupied by the English army since 1768, Boston saw the first massacre of patriots at the hands of the redcoats, two years later. There too was performed the noisiest gesture, in 1773: patriots dressed as Mohawk Indians threw into the sea the cargo of tea of three ships from the East India Company. They were protesting against a law which it would take too long to explain here. In retaliation, the Parliament in London coercively closed the port.

Their numbers were in the region of... some say eight thousand, some twelve thousand, some twenty thousand. We will say ten thousand. What is certain: never had so many been seen together in the New World. They surrounded the city on the orders of General Artemas Ward, first a disorganised hotchpotch, then a real and proper army, dependent upon the revolutionary Provincial Congress.

Certainly, it is an army without uniforms, covered in rags, each man with a different weapon and a different level of training... But they are making common cause, their lives are converging, and not without enthusiasm. Would a dog, having four feet, move in four different directions?

The great gulf of Boston lies at the mouths of the Mystic, Charles and Neponset rivers, and has a jagged profile. It has various bays and inlets, river estuaries and promontories, islands and peninsulas. Boston rises at the end of a peninsula that runs from south to north, bound to the continent by an isthmus – Boston Neck.

To the north, beyond a stretch of water barely a quarter of a mile away, the last run-up of the Charles before it throws itself into the river, there stands Charlestown, a town currently deserted: its inhabitants have fled for fear of the war.

To the south-west is the third peninsula, Dorchester Heights, a kind of closed fist extending into the Atlantic.

The rebel army has camped at the narrowest point of the Boston Neck, it occupies the nearby village of Roxbury and, in part, Dorchester Heights. These are elevated places from which they dominate a good portion of the gulf. The city had ceased to receive goods by sea, and now they have ceased to come by land as well. It is nothing but an island now, in every respect.

Wretched, the life of the loyalist refugees. Families once well-regarded in their villages are now close to starvation, often without anything that one might call a dwelling. Aristocrats loaf around, gloomy and dirty as everything, on roads trodden by haggard nags. They hope, the Tories, that a ship will bring them back to the Old World, to their families, far from this madness. In their dreams, they see the gangs of Whigs bringing terror from house to house: white hoods, coal-blackened faces, torches, sacks of feathers, barrels of pitch.

The rumours that reach the city blow up in minutes: in the other Colonies war is raging, along Boston neck human sacrifices are performed by moonlight, the rebels are kidnapping and eating children. 'At least they're getting something in their mouths...' some people comment. In the clearings of the great continent, Satan dances. Let us add that there are not only loyalists in Boston: one also meets people of all opinions. Some rebel sympathisers are too poor to leave, or not frightened enough. They reserve cold and hostile looks for the refugees. *Very* hostile. Is it not their fault that the city is under siege and the children have nothing to eat?

Not all places in the city are guarded by soldiers, and eggs should not dance with stones.

Of the Motherland – it's the second half of May – reinforcements come: six and a half thousand men. On board the warship *Cerberus*, three superior officers: Major General William



Howe, Henry Clinton and John Burgoyne. Anxiously awaiting them is Thomas Gage, His Majesty's General and Military Governor of Massachusetts. For weeks he has been directing worried glances northwards, towards Charlestown and its hills, perfect for artillery fire against His Majesty's ships. If the rebels occupied them, the vice would grip Boston once and for all.

It is time for action, time to break the encirclement with one or more amphibious assaults on the enemy positions. Disembark in Dorchester Heights, fortifying them, then moving on to Roxbury. At the same time, occupying Charlestown and from there advancing inland to Cambridge, to the rebel headquarters.

The decision has been taken. The offensive is planned for 18th June. Meanwhile, rumours are circulating. Such is the boredom in the besieged city that it is impossible to keep a secret. Everything of even the slightest interest – anecdote, tale, curiosity – rolls into conversations, a spice that lends savour to the watches, tedious mess-queues and humiliating *corvées*.

Opening a door in Province House, a Welsh non-commissioned officer overhears a scrap of a meeting and passes it on to one of his peers. He in turn has snatched two phrases in passing from Lord Clinton's coach. A soldier hears them talking, joins a group of dice-players and begins with one of those phrases that don't end up in the history books: 'Let's shift our arses from this shit-hole, and smartish!'

The group widens and the news – embellished – comes and goes from orderly offices, tents and brothels. Plainly the pairs of ears that hear it do not all belong to loyal servants of the Crown. Stumbling lips cause more damage than stumbling feet, and here we have a mouth stumbling in the presence of a Connecticut trader, who has a pass to enter and leave the city, and who sympathises

with the rebels. Here he is, down below, he has left Boston Neck behind him and is already planning to inform the besieging forces.

To sabotage enemy plans, General Artemas Ward gives the order to occupy the Charlestown Peninsula, climb on top of Bunker Hill and construct a redoubt. The fortress, well-placed on the straits, facing the port of Boston and His Majesty's fleet at anchor, will force the English to move at great haste and attack the hill, distracting attention from the taking of Dorchester Heights. Ward takes the decision on 15th June.

Bunker Hill is an elevation of one hundred and ten feet to the rear of the peninsula. As far as we can tell, there is no bunker there. The hill owes its name to one George Bunker, who bought the land many years ago. We don't know if it is still the property of any of his descendants.

At any rate, what will become famous under the name of the 'Battle of Bunker Hill' will not in fact occur on this hill.



At first sight a rifle is a trivial, obvious thing, but, once analysed, it becomes something extremely complicated, full of metaphysical subtlety and theological whimsy.

Everything can be reduced, in the end to a little piece of rounded lead expelled from a barrel after a small explosion. But is not the rifle also a door thrown open onto mystery, the very greatest of mysteries? A trigger is pulled, a fragment of flint produces a spark, the breath of life leaves a body. The action begins in our world and ends in the Beyond, or in nothing, or perhaps still in the world, but a world that is no longer *ours*. A world that disregards us, where the birds laugh at us.

With the exception of the owl, all other birds are asleep, it being the heart of night. Colonel William Prescott crosses the Charlestown Peninsula with one thousand five hundred men. We are straddling the 16th and 17th of June.

As they leave their houses, many rebels have picked up the nearest weapon to hand, even if it be unsuited to its task. Knives, agricultural instruments, old pistols with trumpet-shaped mouths that work by a miracle... The best weapons are the 'Kentucky' hunting rifles (lighter and more tapered than their European 'Jaeger' cousins), plus some glorious 'Brown Bess' muskets, a weaon built by the Empire and, irony of fate, preparing to fire upon it. The arsenal of Prescott's men is heterogeneous in terms of weight, calibre and range, and short of ammunition. Someone has turned up with a slingshot like David's, saying, 'If I can kill a crow at fifty yards with this, I can split a Tory's head with it!'

Dirty, Prescott's men. Filthy. Doing the laundry is women's work, and there are no ladies here, in the rebel camps. Sometimes some whores arrive, but not to wash underwear. If anything, they come to make it dirty.

A different matter in the English camps in Boston, where they employ washer-women, sempstresses and cooks. It is from the latter that the *Lari Atricillae* do not want to get too close.

Returning to the rebels, rather than feminising themselves, the enemies of General Gage are rotting with their clothes on. The only piece of clean cloth is the banner that they carry with them: red, white and blue, with the stylised profile of a pine-tree, the emblem of the Colony of Massachusetts. They don't occupy the land of the heirs of George Bunker: they climb back up Breed's Hill, the lowest hill overlooking the strait, and there they begin to build their fortress. Why on earth? According to some, because they

reach the hill in darkness, it's a simple mistake. According to others, it's the fault of Prescott's map: many maps confuse the names of the two hills. A third hypothesis, perhaps the closest to reality, is that Breed's Hill is closer to the British ships, and hence more threatening. Four hours of furious digging and they have built a notable redoubt, one hundred and sixty feet long and eighty wide, with ditches and low earth walls. As soon as the sun rises, this work of military genius will be seen all the way from Boston. Dawn rises, and in the summer it rises early.

At about four in the morning, a sentry on board the HMS *Lively* looks up at Breed's Hill. Last night there was nothing there, now there's a fortification, and men with spades and rifles. The rumour spreads, the *Lively* opens fire and forces the Whigs to interrupt their work. Admiral Graves, who was sleeping on HMS *Somerset*, is furious to be woken by cannonfire: who gave the order? He is about to give the order to cease fire, but changes his mind when he goes out on deck and sees the redoubt, up there on the hill. A redoubt like is erected in five or six hours. Were the sentries asleep? Was everyone asleep? Well, by hook or by crook, they will wake up: let all hundred-and-eighty cannon in the port open fire upon the rebel position.

But the cannon on the ships are little use: they can't be tilted upwards, the cannonballs don't reach the summit of the hill. Now what's to be done?

They will launch an attack on Breed's Hill. On three flanks. It will take at least twenty units of light infantry and grenadiers.

By hook or by crook, the men will wake up. Some will wake to die. In summer the dawn comes early, it announces days that seem endless, but this one, for some has begun and ended. There will be no others. Yesterday's sunrise was the last, infantryman, put on your jacket and go.

The North-West side of the peninsula. It has taken a few hours to organise the infantry, rally them together and review them. It has taken a number of journeys, a good few boats, to transport them all. What does a redcoat think, a quarter of the world from home, as he marches up the hill through the tall grass, musket and bayonet, sixty pounds of equipment (including a blanket), sweating and hot in the scarlet wool, shining in the sun, red on a green background, a perfect target in early afternoon.

The rebels aren't shooting. They're waiting for you to get closer. 'Fire when you see the whites of their eyes!' Prescott said. Ammunition is short, you have to be sure you're going to hit.

What does a redjacket think as he risks breaking a calf, in the grass, amongst rocks and invisible bits of ruined wall.

What does an ex-convict think, poor as a church mouse, or an eighteen-year-old who enlisted so as not to be hanged.

A quarter of the world from home, four shillings and sixpence a week, the sixpence held back to pay for uniform and medication, plus half a penny to pay for the orderly mess and the field surgeon. Whatever happens, you will never know who swings the slingshot, the stone will still split your forehead. Red on a green background.



Shots are fired, eardrums burst, legs are severed, hot lead shatters spines. Lead breaks teeth, uphill shots, the bones of the nose piercing the brain, an eyeball hanging from a branch like a strange fruit. The first attack has been repelled.

Rebel reinforcements climb onto the roofs of Charlestown, His Majesty's ships want to flush the out with cannon-fire, the city takes fire, it's razed to the ground.

Other reinforcements, men from New Hampshire, on the left of the redoubt, behind a fence that runs up the hill. They have planted a stick, fifty yards down. They are waiting for the soldiers to reach it before they start firing. The Whigs repel the second attack. They are out of ammunition, and they can't sustain a bayonet attack: many don't have them.

The third attack comes on all flanks, converging on the redoubt. One thousand four hundred rebels against two thousand six hundred soldiers. Flowers of blood blossom as the sun sets.

The rebels retreat, withdraw, put themselves in safety. His Majesty's army takes Breed's Hill, but who won?

On the rebel side, one hundred and forty dead, three hundred wounded, thirty prisoners.

In the service of King George, this afternoon, two hundred and twenty-six men have died, eight hundred and twenty-eight have been injured. Among the dead, almost all of General Howe's officers. General Clinton, Sir Henry Clinton, will say: 'Another victory like that and we are done for'. The huge losses prevent them from pursuing their all-out attack: there is no hope of breaking through the encirclement and reaching Cambridge. Boston remains under siege. The news will travel, along the coast and beyond the ocean: it will give heart to the rebels, it will persuade the sovereign that the situation is grave. There is no more time for skirmishes, the senior officers thing: there is a real war to be fought, and many men are needed. The ones we haven't got we will have to buy in Europe.

Misfortune enters like a needle and widens like the trunk of an oak. Decisions are made. Contingents are recruited from every corner of the kingdom, from Scotland to Wales, Ireland to the Midlands. And in Germany. In Hessen, to be precise, where King George III finds a useful ally in the Landgrave, a relative of his. The worst rabble is recruited in those lands, in exchange for a wage and a quick way of getting to America.

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