THE IMPERIOUS MILE

Come, join the cavalcade of cyclists down the High,

Early May, at Oxford, nineteen fifty-four;

We leave our college quads beguiled by this simple cry:

“Roger Bannister is knocking at our door”.

Cross at Magdalen Bridge and follow round;

We are propelled, the wind is at our back,

To reach the Iffley Road Athletics Ground,

Which has a bona-fide running track.

Three Achilles meet; a target - theirs to snatch;

One of them to run four circuits on the track

Against the second hand’s four circuits of a watch.

Something that the record books still lack.

The wind is going to be a problem, though.

Saint George’s flag flies from the church nearby;

All day it’s had a thorough testing blow.

While there is wind, a record? Just don’t try.

Saint George is both a guardian and a ruler;

His English sons wait for his command.

With minutes left, the sign could not be clearer:

The standard drops – execute the plan in hand.

The plan is simple – four laps at an even pace,

With Brasher pacing at laps one and two;

And Chataway will take the third lap of the race,

Leaving Bannister to do what he can do.

With two saints Christopher, a glory route to forge

Cry “God for England, Roger and Saint George”.

Brasher’s false start - need hardly mention-

Cos all it does is raise the tension.

The crowd of several hundred cognoscenti

Bear the burden of those waiting years.

Chances like tonight are far from plenty;

All the more reason to bring on our cheers.

Fifty- seven point five, at the quarter;

Is this good or is this bad? Who can say?

People are confused; time‘s not what it aught-er;

But, keep shouting - on your feet, come what may.

One fifty-eight point two at the half – looks good;

Brasher’s done well – Chataway takes the lead,

Beyond his best, but pushing, as he should.

“Go on” the crowd shouts; must not lose that speed.

The watchman calls “Three minutes and a bit”,

When Bannister is greeted by the bell.

Time stood still; we question: “Is this it?”

The crowd decides: “It is” and starts to yell.

Chataway paces grimly to the bend

Where Bannister, now free, starts his stride for glory;

The crowd , united in the message that they send:

“Go on, go on, go on”: repeat this simple story.

His adversary, the watch’s sweeping hand,

Is ruthless, chasing like the reaper’s scythe;

But, this stage, carefully, has been planned.

The hope of triumph, still, is very much alive.

Unbroken is his unrelenting stride;

He breasts the tape while several watches click.

A final act - his arms are open wide;

After all these years – has he done the trick?

Norris McWhirter of the Guiness Record Book,

Agent, friend, chauffer, coach, official? – is he not?

Declaims the result, with whatever it took;

And spins it out with whatever he’s got.

We’d no idea what his plan would be;

When it came to times all we heard was “THREE”.

The crowd went wild, showing no restraint

Grown men waived and jumped up in the air

Like anything we’ve met before, it surely ain’t

Oxford, centre of the world*…. and we were there!*

**Fated, we thank the gods for Iffley Meadow**

**And I can claim: “Et in arcadia ego.***©Roger Shakeshaft .April 2024.*