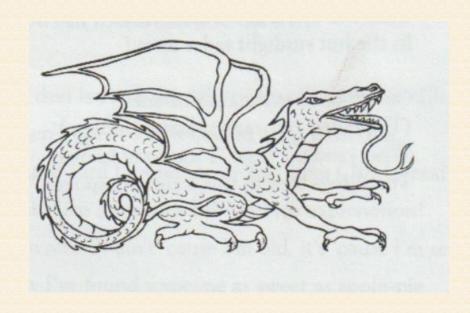
Dragon-Fighter By Patricia Masson

This poem won the 1988 Cædmon Prize for poetry in the Old English style (awarded by Tha Engliscan Gesithas, a British historical society). It was originally published in Withowinde 83, pp. 8-9.

Cursed is the country! · Kingless, nigh hopeless Of any chance of change · in their cheerless doom Of oppression and pain, · the people have suffered long and with loathing, for they lie in thrall to a dread demon · Dragon and warrior both he is, and baneful. · A blaze in the darkness and in sudden slaughter · sleep is ended, farmland and forest-land · with a flame-crop replanted that rises, ripens, · reddens, and withers at last to a drear desert · At the dawn's breaking he shifts his shape, · shows now the semblance of mocked humanity. · Men he has recruited by force or fee · follow and serve him and call him King. With the coming of dark and the fading of light, · as the falling sun's undermost edge · meets the earth's far brink, the linden-shield · lifted to protect him and bloody broadsword · brandished in anger to deal death-blows · drop in a moment clattering in his clutches. · -- claws cannot grip them then his byrnie bursts · as his body grows vast, and like scabs on his skin · scales are seen forming. First of all his flesh · the fierce-eyed countenance And haughty head · are wholly changed, And while manlike on mould · the monster stands A fell fountain of fire · forced from his grinning jaws, Weapon of his worm-shape, · worse to contend with Than sword-blade or spear-point, · seeks out its victim Whose shape shrivels down · into sheer cinders to be wafted away · on the winds of night.

A stranger came striding by. Destruction and harm on all sides he saw, · and the sufferings of the people grieved him greatly. Grim in warfare though young in years, · and used to battle he would fight to set free · folk so tormented. Others had ere this · uttered bold speeches to the merciless monster; · maiming and slaughter rewarded each of them. They weakened in the fight while the dragon-man endured. Doughtier is this hero, strong enough and steadfast · to withstand all harm and by courage and cunning · conquer the enemy. On a ruined riverbank, · to raven-blackness Charred by dragon-breath, · he challenged the tyrant, facing him fearlessly, · defying his menace; waits now in that wasteland · his word to make good either to fall in the field \cdot or free them from their thraldom.



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