In Town for the March

Clive James

Today in Castlereagh Street I
Felt short of breath, and here is why.
From the direction of the Quay
Towards where Mark Foy’s used to be,
A glass and metal river ran
Made in Germany and Japan.
Past the façade of David Jones
Men talked on mobile telephones,
Making the footpath hideous
With what they needed to discuss.
But why so long, and why so loud?
I can recall a bigger crowd
In which nobody fought for space
Except to call a name. The face
To fit it smiled as it went by
Among the ranks. Women would cry
Who knew that should they call all day
One face would never look their way.
All this was sixty years ago,
Since when I have grown old and slow,
But still I see the marching men,
So many of them still young then,
Even the men from the first war
Straight as a piece of two-by-four.
Men of the Anzac Day parade,
I grew up in the world you made.
To mock it would be my mistake.
I try to love it for your sake.
Through cars and buses, on they come,
Their pace set by a spectral drum.
Their regimental banners, thin
As watercolours fading in
The sun, hint at a panoply
Dissolving into history.
As the rearguard outflanks Hyde Park,
Wheels right, and melts into the dark,
It leaves me, barely fit to stand,
Reaching up for my mother’s hand.