

1914<sup>1</sup>

Peter J. King

“In September 1914, a man had to stand five feet eight to get into the army. A month later, so great was the need for recruits, the minimum height requirement was lowered to five foot five; in November, after the losses sustained in the First Battle of Ypres, it was lowered again, to five foot three.” (Catherine Bailey, *The Secret Rooms*, p.248)

### **August**

When war broke out I was too short;  
they shook their heads  
showed me the door.  
I sat at home and fretted that  
I wasn't five foot eight.

### **October**

As thousands died, they changed their minds;  
I tried again —  
but still too short  
I cycled home and fretted that  
I wasn't five foot five.

### **November**

But things were bad along the Front;  
third time's a charm,  
they shook my hand,  
and I embarked in khaki drab,  
a manly five foot three.

### **December**

I fell for good at Plugstreet Wood<sup>2</sup> —  
our guns or theirs,  
I wasn't sure;  
my legs were shattered by a shell,  
and struggling for one last breath  
amid the sounds and smells of hell  
I fretted that I'd meet my death  
too short once more.

---

<sup>1</sup> first published in *Oxford Magazine* 374, 2016; reprinted in *Adding Colours to the Chameleon* (Wisdom's Bottom Press, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> Ploegsteert Wood was part of the Ypres salient; it later became a rest and recuperation centre.