

Clockwork tractor

Curtains rise at seven to midnight.
The first act of '47 is farming,
The second act progress,
The final act sees 26 in chorus.

150,000 weren't wrong
To want a new system, to fight
Hunger and poverty, to grow
More food, more cheaply.

Peacetime machines turned
Swords into ploughshares
And farmland in 76 nations
Was stripped monochrome grey.

Little England entered act three,
And each monotonous point
Swung its loose linkage,
Like an old clock weight.

The pendulum is stopped
Hanging in the air like a tick,
Or a mechanical reaper's blade.
Marking the last 100 seconds.

Ollie Douglas
October 2021



The clockwork model was originally grey (MERL 2014/16/1-8)

About the poem

This poem responds to a demonstration model tractor held by The MERL, examples of which were used in the UK and in overseas development contexts to promote the Ferguson System of machinery. It explores the part played by mechanised and big corporate approaches to farm technology in environmental and food security challenges.

The Ferguson TE 20 ('Tractor England 20'), was released in 1946, a year before the Agriculture Act and the Doomsday Clock, which both arrived in 1947. The Agriculture Act of '47 marks a moment of

seismic change in UK farming and the Doomsday Clock was devised as a way to highlight things seen to be threatening global destruction. In this mid-century moment the Clock was largely focussed on nuclear threats and was set at seven minutes to midnight. Today the main concern is climate breakdown and the clock is currently sitting at 100 seconds to midnight.

Some of the phrases in the poem are drawn directly from Ferguson marketing materials, including an advertisement that featured in the Festival of Britain guide. Slogans variously celebrated the number of farmers who had invested in the System (150,000), the number of different countries where the System was in active use (76), its potential value in fighting food poverty, and the progressive technological wonder of its patented three point linkage. The latter makes a subtle appearance in the fourth stanza.



This advertisement for the Ferguson System appeared in the guide to the Festival of Britain Southbank site.

The wider piece is intended to be suggestive of the enormity of challenges facing global food and agriculture, the various ways in which we have driven ourselves slowly into this difficult place, and the massive uncertainties surrounding the role of technology work in our food and farming futures.

About the poet

Ollie Douglas is the Curator of MERL Collections and helped devise *51 Voices*. He grew up on a farm and his father is a farmer-poet. Ollie himself occasionally writes a line or two himself.