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VOLUME VII

SEAN O'CASEY

TO

POETS OF WORLD WAR II

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POETS OF WORLD WAR II

John Press

INTRODUCTION

COUNTLESS books, poems, photographs, and films have imprinted on our memories ineffaceable images of World War I: rat-infested dugouts; fields torn by shells; barbed wire festooned with corpses; men cut down by machine guns as they charged with fixed bayonets; lakes of mud that sucked men under; and brief moments of rest behind the front line in the villages of Flanders or France. World War II presents a different pattern of warfare; one in which mobility largely supersedes the front line and the system of trenches, and tanks and planes become dominant weapons, reinforced by the power of artillery and the courage of trained infantrymen.

C. E. Montague's important work *Disenchantment* (1922) records the process whereby the soldiers who with the noblest ideals and hopes volunteered in 1914 soon became embittered and disillusioned. This did not happen in World War II mainly because only the most naive recruits harbored any illusions that might wither. When Evelyn Waugh's *Put Out More Flags* appeared in 1942, nobody supposed that it would be an undiluted panegyric to the war effort.

During the last two years of World War I many soldiers who were at the end of their tether in the trenches hated their civilian fellow countrymen more than their German fellow sufferers. Siegfried Sassoon's "I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls," written after a visit to a variety theater in Liverpool in January 1917, anticipates Wilfred Owen's letter of 10 August 1918 to his mother, in which he desires that "the Boche would have the pluck to come right in and make a clean sweep of the pleasure boats, and the promenaders on the Spa, and all the stinking Leeds and Bradford war profiteers now reading *John Bull* on Scarborough Sands."

No member of the armed services would have expressed those sentiments in World War II. Air raids, rationing, shortages, the blackout, conscription of

labor, and the absence of husbands and fathers on active service imposed heavy physical and emotional strains on civilians in Britain. Many servicemen enjoying, albeit with a twinge of guilt, the green pastures of Kenya, the pleasures of Egypt, or the imperial grandeur of India might reflect that they were a great deal safer and more comfortable than people in the cities and towns of Britain.

It is significant that whereas some of the best poets of World War I—Julian Grenfell, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Herbert Read—were decorated for gallantry, none of the poets discussed in the present essay received a decoration except Norman Cameron, who was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire for work in political intelligence and propaganda. Moreover, barely half these poets were ever in action: this reflects not on their courage but on the way in which the conduct of war had changed since 1918 and on the army's use of manpower.

There is no equivalent in World War II of the trench songs that were composed by anonymous soldiers in World War I. Instead, the ubiquitous radio poured out its message of synthetic good cheer and saccharine comfort. Vera Lynn, the Forces' Sweetheart, assured all servicemen that "There'll be blue birds over/The white cliffs of Dover," and that "We'll meet again." In the Western Desert, however, the Forces' Sweetheart was the Scandinavian Lala Andersen, who sang on the German radio "Lili Marleen," a song admired equally in its German and English versions by the opposing armies. Such musical internationalism, alas, had its limits, as British troops found when they made contact with Yugoslav partisans: to them "Lili Marleen" was taboo because the Germans had sung it when they marched partisans away to execution.

A High Court judge is said once to have advised an incompetent counsel that if he could not present his case logically or chronologically, he might present it

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alphabetically. It may be expedient to group the poets in this essay geographically, partly because this method enables one to make comparisons between their responses to the same environment. But there is a more cogent reason, which stems from the wartime experiences of many poets. They were moved less by the terror and brutality of war than by the impact on their imaginations of distant lands and unfamiliar civilizations. The main themes of their poems are the physical features, social conditions, and historical backgrounds of the countries where they were stationed.

This essay will first consider the poetry of those whom the fortunes of war dispatched to widely scattered theaters of either battle or comparative peace: Britain, continental Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, East Africa, India, and Burma. It will then look at the work of Alan Ross and Charles Causley, two men who served in the Royal Navy; and finish by surveying the poetry of Sidney Keyes, Keith Douglas, and Alun Lewis, three highly gifted poets who, unlike the others to be discussed, died in active service in North Africa, France, and Burma.

BRITAIN AND EUROPE

DURING the war hundreds of thousands of servicemen spent the years in Britain in barracks, billets, or camps, undergoing training, doing fatigues (labor), polishing boots until they could see their faces reflected in them, polishing the brass collars of anti-aircraft guns until they shone so brightly that German planes could see them miles away, being inspected to check that they had not lost their blankets or acquired venereal diseases—all the traditional means of cultivating the military virtues and enforcing military discipline. It is a melancholy fact that only a handful of good poems came out of the armed forces stationed in Britain. There is no satisfactory explanation for this, unless it is that the perils of battle, the extreme loneliness, the posts in distant countries, and the shock of living in an alien civilization may inspire poetry; whereas boredom, discomfort, and a sense of aimlessness produce a dampening effect on the imagination.

Henry Reed (born 22 February 1914), joined the army in 1941 and transferred to the Foreign Office the next year. His few months in the army gave him the material for *Lessons of the War*, his sequence of

three poems—"Naming of Parts," "Judging Distances," and "Unarmed Combat"—that won instant recognition as the definitive comment on one aspect of military life.

All three poems are divided between two voices: that of the noncommissioned officer who is instructing the squad and that of the recruit. The difference in idiom and in sensibility between the two voices appears less and less perceptible as the trilogy unfolds, maybe in order to suggest that the recruit is becoming assimilated to the army and learning the martial virtues. But these nuances are of secondary importance, compared with the central fact that the two voices represent two diametrically opposed principles and responses to the world: the ethos of unquestioning obedience, submission to duty, subordination of the individualistic self to the common purpose imposed from above; and the attitude that values skepticism, irony, the right to judge moral behavior for oneself.

"Naming of Parts" is the richest of the poems, because it moves with a sensuous grace not found in the other two and because Reed sustains throughout its five stanzas a series of witty puns that contrast the different parts of the rifle with the vibrant world of japonica, almond blossom, bees, and branches observed by the recruit as the instructor drones on:

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.

(19-24)

The fusion of the instructor's demotic syntax and speech rhythm with the recruit's gentle, meditative reflections is a triumph of poetic skill; and the delicate sexuality that pervades "Naming of Parts" lends it a further layer of richness.

A full analysis of the poem and of its companion pieces would reveal how wittily and movingly Reed has demonstrated, without self-pity or even protest, the struggle of the individual to keep alive his humanity, despite the attempt by the army to make him part of an impersonal machine. The final lines of "Unarmed Combat," which can be read as a straightforward acknowledgment that the individual must submit to authority, undermine by their tone and inflection the message they purport to give:

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. . . and we must fight
 Not in the hope of winning but rather of keeping
 Something alive: so that when we meet our end,
 It may be said that we tackled wherever we could,
 That battle-fit we lived, and though defeated,
 Not without glory fought.

Reed, unfortunately, has not published a book of poems since *A Map of Verona* (1946). Gavin Ewart (born 4 February 1916), on the other hand, is a prolific poet, although it is only since 1964 that he has been in full spate. In the war poems section of *The Collected Ewart 1933-1980* (1980) there are only nine works, all displaying various facets of his talent but none so distinctive as the best of his postwar verse, which is often extremely funny and outrageously bawdy, and sometimes genuinely moving.

"Officers' Mess" explores the vein of riproaring verse opened up with precocious skill by the school-boy and undergraduate Ewart between 1933 and 1939:

And then that new MO came in, the Jewish one, awful
 fellow,
 And his wife, a nice little bit of stuff, dressed in a
 flaming yellow.

(5-6)

That is one reaction to the war. Another, more tender and troubled, derives its pathos from the fragility of love menaced by the shadow of separation and of approaching battle, as in the sextet of "Sonnet, 1940":

And I, before the happy tough battalions
 Engulf me or the frozen seas of Norway,
 Have still my dreams of cities and of dalliance,
 But most of you as standing in a doorway,
 Who might, though I so dissipate my life,
 Be mistress or, fear of the young, a wife.

(9-14)

Ewart wrote another good sonnet, "War Dead," at La Spezia in April 1945, but his most harsh and somber war poem is "When a Beau Goes In," a Beau being the shortened form of Beaufighter, one of the best-known British fighter aircraft. The long, languorous line in stanza 2, with its echoes of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Alfred Tennyson, works against the jerky, jokey short lines and accentuates Ewart's bitterness at the cult of the stiff upper lip in the face of other people's deaths:

Although its perfectly certain
 The pilot's gone for a Burton¹
 And the observer too
 It's nothing to do with you
 And if they both should go
 To a land where falls no rain nor hail nor driven
 snow—

Here, there or anywhere,
 Do you suppose *they* care?

(9-16)

Behind the exuberant, baroque facade of the riotously lewd jokes that Ewart revels in, there lurk always fury and grief at the raw facts of pain and death.

Ewart is a tough-minded poet, as is Vernon Scannell (born 23 January 1922), who saw hard fighting from El Alamein to Tunis as well as in the invasions of Sicily and Normandy. His war poems are unusual in that they appear in seven collections published between 1957 and 1975 and are as much concerned with World War I as with World War II. Almost all of them dwell on the terror of battle recalled in memory or dream and on those who died in action. Scannell portrays his fellow soldiers as he knew them in all their strong and sometimes coarse physicality. These vigorous poems offer a view of war that is not to be found elsewhere, and they deserve to be more widely known. "Walking Wounded," which has, in addition to the qualities of Scannell's other poems, an extra dimension of visionary strangeness, depicts with almost photographic realism how first

the ambulances came,
 Stumbling and churning past the broken farm,
 The amputated sign-post and smashed trees,
 Slow wagonloads of bandaged cries. . . .

(12-15)

Then, after a pause, the walking wounded go by, "a humble brotherhood," without splendor. And yet, says Scannell, in lines that confer mythical status on a procession remembered after eighteen years:

Imagination pauses and returns
 To see them walking still, but multiplied
 In thousands now. And when heroic corpses
 Turn slowly in their decorated sleep
 And every ambulance has disappeared
 The walking wounded still trudge down that lane,
 And when recalled they must bear arms again.

(42-48)

¹Meaning, in Royal Air Force slang, "to be shot down."

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It may appear strange that almost all the poetry written by Royal Air Force pilots and air crew, whose courage and skill were of the highest quality, should be little more than apprentice work: often conventionally romantic, sometimes displaying seeds of promise blighted by early death in action. Scannell in *Not Without Glory* (1976) argues that most pilots and air crew lacked the temperament to devote much time to the kind of solitary meditation that gives birth to poetry. They were, moreover, constantly in action or standing by for action; and for many of them, flying and aerial combat were quasi-mystical experiences that lay beyond the reach of words. He justly singles out for praise a sonnet by John Bayliss (born 4 October 1919) that may serve as an epitaph for all the members of the RAF who died in action. "Reported Missing" tells how two men in a plane with a broken wing, and with their gunner dead, knowing that all is finished, looking at the sea,

sat in this tattered scarecrow of the sky
hearing it cough, the great plane catching
now the first dark clouds upon her wing-base, —
patching the great tear in evening mockery.

So two men waited, saw the third dead face,
and wondered when the wind would let them die.

(9-14)

Tens of thousands of men spent years as prisoners of war. The overcrowding, the sense of anxiety, and the complex of emotions aroused by captivity in a foreign land tended to stifle the poetic impulse. One poet, despite such discouragement, wrote a sonnet of high quality. Having taken part in the defense of Crete in 1941 and having been mentioned in dispatches, Michael Riviere (born 5 January 1919) was captured and sent to Germany. After twice escaping from other camps, he was incarcerated in Colditz (whose epigraph is a line from Sir Philip Sidney: "The poor man's wealth, the prisoner's release") in the summer of 1943; while imprisoned in that fortress, which was especially designed to make escape impossible, he wrote "Oflag Night Piece: Colditz":

There, where the swifts flicker along the wall
And the last light catches, there in the high schloss
(How the town grows dark) all's made impregnable:
They bless each window with a double cross
Of iron; weave close banks of wire and train
Machine guns down on them; and look—at the first star
Floodlight the startled darkness back again . . .

All for three hundred prisoners of war:
Yet now past them and the watch they keep,
Unheard, invisible, in ones and pairs,
In groups, in companies—alarms are dumb,
A sentry loiters, a blind searchlight stares—
Unchallenged as their memories of home
The vanishing prisoners escape to sleep.

The level of the sonnet; the gentle irony ("They bless each window with a double cross/Of iron"); the amused reminder that the elaborate precautions are "All for three hundred prisoners of war" may give the poem its distinctive quality, but they do not account for its power to touch the reader's heart. It derives some of its potency from its affinities with two themes in English poetry that have a long history. The first is that of prison literature, beginning with the poetry written by state prisoners of the early Tudors, notably Sir Thomas Wyatt; and continuing with the poetry of Roman Catholics awaiting trial or execution under Elizabeth I. The second is that of invocations to sleep: one thinks particularly of songs and sonnets by Sidney, Samuel Daniel, John Fletcher, John Keats, and Hopkins. Although Riviere's sonnet is in no way an imitation or pastiche and contains no allusion to earlier poems, it quietly takes its place among its ancestors.

THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

IN the Western Desert and in North Africa, where the British fought the Germans and the Italians, the character of the fighting had no parallel anywhere in either of the two world wars. There was no system of trenches or of other elaborate defensive measures, for this was largely a conflict of tanks that moved rapidly on the offensive over huge tracts of desert, until they were halted and harassed by a counter-offensive. Insofar as war can ever be anything but a loathsome butchery, it was a chivalrous war, fought without rancor by soldiers who respected one another's courage, dash, and tactical skill. Neither side obliterated towns, massacred civilians, or murdered prisoners. In this old-fashioned combat, individual enterprise, unorthodoxy carried to the point of eccentricity, and a cavalier disregard for the niceties of military etiquette flourished exceedingly. The Eighth Army, a gallant fighting force, chased the Germans out of Africa. Lawrence Durrell, not renowned for his conventionality, describes in his in-

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roduction to the anthology *Return to Oasis* (1980) the apparition of the poet and critic George Fraser (8 November 1915–3 January 1980):

I recall George Fraser visiting me in the press department of the Embassy to deliver some poems of his for *Personal Landscape*. I was horrified to see that, though in uniform, he was wearing tennis shoes and a dirty scarf, while his trousers were fastened with string. I asked with concern whether he wasn't reprimanded for such wear and he said that he never had been, probably because his boss was a writer too.

Old soldiers and connoisseurs of military life will be interested to learn that Fraser eventually became a sergeant major.

During the war Alexandria and Cairo housed not only large military forces but a civilian population swollen by refugees from Europe who had sought the comparative safety of Egypt. They were highly sophisticated cities, where every pleasure could be bought and where in 1942 the prevailing frenetic gaiety was tinged with fear, as Rommel's armies marched on victoriously across the Western Desert. Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* and Olivia Manning's Levant trilogy (*The Danger Tree*, *The Battle Lost and Won*, and *The Sum of Things*) have portrayed indelibly the world of the expatriates and their circle in wartime Egypt. Less melodramatic than Durrell and more kindly than Manning, Fraser in "Egypt" evokes the sultry romanticism of the land:

The desert slays. But safe from Allah's justice
Where the broad river of His Mercy lies,
Where ground for labour, or where scope for lust is,
The crooked and tall and cunning cities rise.
The green Nile irrigates a barren region,
All the coarse palms are ankle-deep in sand;
No love roots deep, though easy loves are legion:
The heart's as hot and hungry as the hand.

(13–20)

Those who found themselves in Cairo or Alexandria included a number of English poets: some were civilians, others were members of the forces. Three of the civilians, Durrell, Bernard Spencer, and Robin Fedden, started the poetry magazine *Personal Landscape* in the late autumn of 1941. In the course of its existence it printed work by almost every good poet in the region. The best of the civilian poets, apart from the editors, were Terence Tiller and Ruth Speirs; while the most gifted of the servicemen were Norman Cameron, Fraser, Hamish Henderson, and

F. T. Prince, as well as Keith Douglas and Sidney Keyes, to whom later sections of this essay are devoted.

Hamish Henderson (born 11 November 1919) is best known for his sequence of poems *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (1948), an ambitious attempt to portray the war in the desert. Its dedication, "For our own and the others," typifies the spirit in which it was written, one of compassion and guilt toward what Henderson calls in his foreword "that eternally wronged proletariat of levelling death in which all the fallen are comrades." He does not confine himself to a realistic description of the battles, but places them in the perspective of medieval Scottish history—the depopulated Highlands—and Karnak, the subject of the Eighth Elegy. The latter is an impressionistic evocation of a vanished way of life or, rather, of death, for Henderson condemns all that Karnak stood for because it devoted its power and resources to death.

Unfortunately, the scope and high intentions of the poems outrun their linguistic vitality. Occasionally Henderson deploys a vivid image:

Herons stalk
over the blood-stained flats. Burning byres
come to my mind.

(Fifth Elegy, 18–20)

But all too often the elegies degenerate into sequences of ponderous rhetoric that lie inertly on the page; at its worst, as in Interlude ("Opening of an Offensive"), the rhetoric deteriorates into rodomontade garnished with echoes of Hopkins:

Slake
the crashing breakers-húrléd rúbble of the guns.
Dithering darkness, we'll wake you! Hélls bélls
blind you.

(20–23)

The description of the shrill war song is even more flatulent:

It mounts. Its scream
tops the valkyrie, tops the colossal
artillery.

Meaning that many
German Fascists will not be going home.

(41–44)

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The Seventh Elegy, entitled "Seven Good Germans," an allusion to the saying that "the only good German is a dead one," offers succinct biographies of seven who died at El Eleba. It is in many ways the most humane of the elegies, sardonic and unpretentious, shedding more light on the desert war than the booming disquisitions that reverberate through the others. The poem ends with an epitaph on the good Germans, who are linked in the comradeship of the fallen: their requiem is the favorite song of the contending armies in Cyrenaica:

Seven poor bastards
dead in African deadland
(tawny tousled hair under the issue blanket)
wie einst Lili
dead in African deadland

einst Lili Marleen.
(55-60)

Norman Cameron (1905-1953) served in British political intelligence and propaganda. He was a friend of Robert Graves, who greatly admired his poems. Cameron's work sometimes recalls the flavor of Graves's poetry, although he was far from being a slavish imitator. He is an accomplished poet, capable of writing fine lyrics, beautifully conceived and executed; but the mode he favors is one of formal irony laced with gaiety.

"Green, Green is El Aghir" is not so much a war poem as a celebration of an escape from war into a world of abundance and joy, symbolized by the waters splashing from a fountain with two full-throated faucets at El Aghir. The irregularity of the meter, compounded by the off-rhymes, emphasizes the sense of freedom from constraint felt by all, even by the Arabs who go off with the rest to drink wine:

And we yelped and leapt from the truck and went at the
double
To fill our bidons and bottles and drink and dabble.
Then, swollen with water, we went to an inn for wine.
The Arabs came, too, though their faith might have
stood between:
"After all," they said, "it's a boisson," without
contrition.

(13-17)

"Black Takes White" springs from a later campaign in the Apennines. A party of American blacks, attempting to desert, encounters a party of like-

minded Italians. Both groups want to surrender, the impasse being surmounted only because the Italians, being led by an officer, have the whip hand. The reluctant blacks march back with their unsought booty to a heroes' welcome:

Nobody paused to bother with such trifles
As where the captors had mislaid their rifles.
Quickly those fed-up and embarrassed Negroes
Were praised, promoted, given gongs as heroes,
And photographs of their victorious battle
Were published from Long Island to Seattle.

The subtly varied rhythm and the faintly insolent rhymes point the subversive moral of the tale, in which cowardice and mendacity shamelessly mock the pomposity of government propaganda.

John Manifold (born 21 April 1916), an Australian who completed his education at Jesus College, Cambridge, saw military service in the Middle East, West Africa, and France. A convinced Marxist, he writes polemical verse that emphasizes the usefulness of poetry and the need for all to fight unquestioningly for the victory that will bring the triumph of the proletariat one stage nearer. Scannell suggests in *Not Without Glory* that there is much in common between Manifold and Campbell, though neither would greatly relish the comparison. The verse of both men has strong elements of swagger and tough talking; both despise the coward and the sensitive soul who will not fight; Campbell sings the flowering rifle and Manifold the tommy gun, "the clean functional thing." But Campbell, with his cult of the lone wolf, does not share Manifold's admiration for those who find their self-respect only when they surrender their individuality. That is the point of the latter's well-argued sonnet "Recruit"; and in "Ration Party" he again urges the need for sacrifice, exemplified by a fatigue party that bears huge loads up a hill, day after day, a menial, dispiriting task:

Absurd to think that Liberty, the splendid
Nude of our dreams, the intercessory saint
For us to judgement, needs to be defended

By sick fatigue-men brimming with complaint
And misery, who bear till all is ended
Every imaginable pattern of constraint.

(9-14)

In "The Sirens," perhaps the wittiest and most effective of all Manifold's sonnets, the moral of the

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story is very largely what the reader chooses to make it. Even those who are unsympathetic to the poet's political beliefs, and to the didacticism that marks so much of his verse, can savor the freshness of the language, the ingenious refurbishing of an old legend, the relaxed wit and the stylish versification of the poem:

Odysseus heard the sirens; they were singing
 Music by Wolf and Weinberger and Morley
 About a region where the swans go winging,
 Vines are in colour, girls are growing surely

Into nubility, and pylons bringing
 Leisure and power to farms that live securely
 Without a landlord. Still, his eyes were stinging
 With salt and sea blink, and the ropes hurt sorely.

Odysseus saw the sirens; they were charming,
 Blonde, with snub breasts and little neat posteriors,
 But could not take his mind off the alarming

Weather report, his mutineers in irons,
 The radio failing; it was bloody serious.
 In twenty minutes he forgot the sirens.

F. T. Prince (born 13 September 1912), a South African who had attended the universities of Oxford and Princeton, had published before the war a volume of poems notable for their technical skill and meditative subtlety. Unlike the works of Henderson and Manifold, "Soldiers Bathing," Prince's best-known poem, does not primarily concern itself with the details of war in the Middle East or with the war's political and social implications. Even in 1941, when the poem first appeared, Prince, a Roman Catholic preoccupied with evil and with the Crucifixion, was already a scholar and a lover of Italian art. The scene is a beach in the Middle East, where Prince was serving in the Intelligence Corps, but the setting could just as well be an imaginary stretch of coast.

The poem opens quietly:

The sea at evening moves across the sand.
 Under a reddening sky I watch the freedom of a band
 Of soldiers who belong to me. Stripped bare
 For bathing in the sea, they shout and run in the
 warm air. . . .

Then follows a disquisition on the body and the sweetness of its nakedness when the sea has washed it free of fever, filth, and sweat. Every one of the soldiers

forgets

His hatred of the war, its terrible pressure that begets
 A machinery of death and slavery,
 Each being a slave and making slaves of others. . . .

(15-18)

Contemplation of the naked soldiers awakens in Prince a memory of a Michelangelo cartoon in which bathing soldiers clamber from the water at the sudden incursion of the enemy, and fight, naked as they are:

—And I think too of the theme another found
 When, shadowing men's bodies on a sinister red ground,
 Another Florentine, Pollaiuolo,
 Painted a naked battle: warriors, straddled, hacked the
 foe,
 Dug their bare toes into the ground and slew
 The brother-naked man who lay between their feet and
 drew
 His lips back from his teeth in a grimace.

They were Italians who knew war's sorrow and
 disgrace
 And showed the thing suspended, stripped: a theme
 Born out of the experience of war's horrible extreme
 Beneath a sky where even the air flows
 With lacrimae Christi. . . .

(31-42)

There follows a meditation on the relation between Pollaiuolo's painting and the Crucifixion, and on the terror of the great love that is over all we do. It may be that readers must either be attuned to Prince's Christian mysticism or suspend their disbelief, if this section of the poem is not to constitute a stumbling block. No such difficulty arises in the final section: Prince recapitulates all the main themes of the poem, and as he drinks the dusky air—perhaps the sky of Egypt flows with "lacrimae Christi" (tears of Christ)—the reddening sky of the first section is linked with the Crucifixion:

These dry themselves and dress,
 Combing their hair, forget the fear and the shame of
 nakedness.
 Because to love is frightening we prefer
 The freedom of our crimes. Yet, as I drink the dusky air,
 I feel a strange delight that fills me full,
 Strange gratitude, as if evil itself were beautiful,
 And kiss the wound in thought, while in the west
 I watch a streak of red that might have issued from
 Christ's breast.

(59-66)

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EAST AFRICA

DURING World War I East Africa was the scene of heavy fighting between the British and the Germans who, based in German East Africa (now Tanzania), remained undefeated at the armistice. In World War II, although no battles took place in the East African territories, the country was a training ground for the Africanized units of the British army, which were preparing to recover Burma from the Japanese; it was also a naval base for the Eastern Fleet, which sought the safety of Kilindini Harbour, Mombasa, Colombo, and Trincomalee. The East Africa Command was, geographically speaking, the largest in the British army, stretching from Somaliland to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and embracing such widely scattered islands as Madagascar, Mauritius, and the Seychelles.

Most travelers find East Africa overwhelming in its magnificence, whether they first encounter the coast, or the mountains, hills, and valleys up-country. Roy Campbell (2 October 1901–23 April 1957), being a native of South Africa and thus accustomed to something of the same natural splendor, was not bowled over by East Africa when he was posted there after having volunteered for military service when in his late thirties. He had migrated as a young man to England, where he had soon acquired a reputation as a rambunctious satirist, equally happy to castigate the narrow hypocrisy of Afrikaners or the epicene aesthetes of Bloomsbury. In the late 1920's and early 1930's he wrote some fine lyrics. Unhappily, his loathing of leftist intellectuals and his devotion to an aggressive variant of Roman Catholicism led him to espouse the cause of General Franco and to write *Flowering Rifle* (1939), a long poem whose crude abusiveness and pretentious anthems to the glory of the Roman Catholic Church make distasteful reading.

Having arrived in Nairobi wearing his sergeant's stripes, Campbell looked at the commissioned officers with a somewhat jaundiced eye, as he records in his brief "Snapshot of Nairobi":

With orange-peel the streets are strewn
And pips, beyond computing,
On every shoulder save my own
That's fractured with saluting.

"Heartbreak Camp," a mordant extravaganza, contains two good stanzas:

Sir Dysentery Malaria,
A famous brigadier,
Commands the whole sub-area,
And stalking in his rear,

A more ferocious colonel
Lord Tremens (of the Drunks)
To whose commands infernal
We tremble in our bunks.

(21–28)

Yet the poem is spoiled by feeble inversions, forced rhymes, and a slackness that Campbell would not have tolerated at his best.

The collection in which these poems appear, *Talking Bronco* (1946), is something of a ragbag. One can at least be thankful that it marks a return to sanity and decency (with a few lapses) after *Flowering Rifle*. But among pages of wearisome braggadoccio and dreary attacks on left-wing poets and all who fly to the safe retreat of the BBC, there are too few poems of high quality. Among them are the translation from St. John of the Cross, "En Una Noche Oscura," and the "Imitation (and Endorsement) of the Famous Sonnet of Bocage," that homage of one poet to a greater, Luís Vaz de Camoëns. Campbell's own tribute to the author of *The Lusíads* shows that he can still command a sinewy force and gravity infused with lyrical grace. In his sonnet "Luís de Camões," Campbell recognizes his kinship with the Portuguese poet, like himself a common soldier and a Catholic, who had served the cause of Spain; sailed to Mombasa and watched the gaunt mass of Fort Jesus rising above the harbor; followed where duty beckoned; and, bearing his cross, made poetry from his sufferings:

Camões, alone, of all the lyric race,
Born in the black aurora of disaster,
Can look a common soldier in the face:
I find a comrade where I sought a master;
For daily, while the stinking crocodiles
Glide from the mangoes on the swampy shore,
He shares my awning on the dhow, he smiles,
And tells me that he lived it all before.
Through fire and shipwreck, pestilence and loss,
Led by the ignis fatuus of duty
To a dog's death—yet of his sorrows king—
He shouldered high his voluntary Cross,
Wrestled his hardship into forms of beauty,
And taught his gorgon destinies to sing.

Roy Fuller (born 11 February 1912) was, like Manifold, a Marxist, but of a very different stamp.

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Where Manifold is optimistic, confident of victory, enthusiastic about the individual's sacrifice of himself for the common good, a believer in the virtues of the proletariat, Fuller is gloomy, perplexed, doubtful whether the subordination of the individual will advance the coming of the just society, and not particularly enamored of the working classes in the forces or in civilian life. After training as an ordinary seaman in Britain, Fuller was posted to East Africa in mid-1942 as a radar maintenance engineer; he attained the rank of petty officer and in November 1943 returned to Britain, where he worked in the admiralty after getting a commission.

He wrote about thirty poems in East Africa, a slightly larger output than between the outbreak of war in September 1939 and his sailing from Britain in the summer of 1942. The period November 1943 to the end of the war in May 1945 seems to have been comparatively barren, yielding only a half-dozen poems and a sequence of nine sonnets.

The early war poems reflect the hopes and fears of a humane, intelligent man, recently married and the father of a son, caught in the impersonal war machine and the no less impersonal historical process. Most of the poems are worth reading but few rank among his best. "The Middle of a War" deals with a theme that Fuller was to explore more deeply in his postwar verse: the poet gazing at himself, reflecting on what he sees, and making a wry observation:

My photograph already looks historic.
The promising youthful face, the matelot's collar. . . .
(1-2)

One phrase, "The ridiculous empires break like biscuits," reminds us, like so many of Fuller's lines, of W. H. Auden, the Auden who wrote "Desire like a police-dog is unfastened." But Fuller's images have a quality of their own, less devastatingly startling and brilliant than Auden's but more in accord with common sense and common usage.

Another good early poem, "Spring 1942," records an incident when a naval chaplain joins a group of enlisted men and sits down among them:

And under the tobacco smoke:
"Freedom," he said, and "Good" and "Duty."
We stared as though a savage spoke.
The scene took on a singular beauty.

(5-8)

Blank and uncomprehending, dumbfounded by this talk of the great abstractions, the enlisted men make no reply

And thought: O sick, insatiable
And constant lust, O death, our future;
O revolution in the whole
Of human use of man and nature!

(13-16)

Fuller's posting to East Africa seems to have liberated him from the glum, debilitating atmosphere of wartime Britain. The splendor of the hills and plains, the superb variety of the animals and birds, and the life of the tribesmen seem to have enriched his imagination and bestowed a rhythmical sensuousness on his verse. Not that he succumbed to the picturesque enchantment of the scene: what he found there was a world in which the lions, giraffes, wildebeests, the whole panoply of birds and beasts, live their own lives, unalterably alien to our own and yet symbols of that natural world to which we also belong. The tribesmen are not romantic figures uncorrupted by civilization, but men and women whom the forces of capitalism are wrenching from their homelands, crowding into shantytowns, and offering a pittance to join the armed forces. Even their villages are in pawn to the owner of the *duka* (general store), who is usually descended from one of those Indians shipped over from Bombay forty years earlier to build the railway from Mombasa to Kampala. Fuller can see before his eyes in dramatic form the working out of capitalism and colonialism in their dying phase.

This sense of the historical process, combined with a powerful and discriminating response to the particularities of the scene, enabled Fuller to write one of the finest series of poems to have come out of World War II. Some of the poems spring directly from Fuller's observation of the landscape up-country. In "The Green Hills of Africa" (how unlike Ernest Hemingway's green hills) the evocation of the village and its inhabitants is exact:

The girls run up the slope,
Their oiled and shaven heads like caramels.
Behind, the village, with its corrugated
Iron, the wicked habit of the store.
The villagers cough, the sacking blows from the naked
Skin of a child, a white scum on his lips.

(11-16)

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Having presented the village precisely as it is, Fuller asks us whether we expect to find here gods with healing powers, or subtle ways of life:

No, there is nothing but the forms and colours,
And the emotion brought from a world already
Dying of what starts to infect the hills.

(25-27)

It is instructive to compare Fuller's "The Giraffes" with a poem on a similar theme by Campbell, "Dreaming Spires"—his name for giraffes. Campbell's poem is a sequence of witty fancies about the extravagant absurdities of those animals. Sometimes the fancies move with a lyrical grace:

The City of Giraffes—a People
Who live between the earth and skies,
Each in his lone religious steeple
Keeping a light-house with his eyes.

(48-51)

Sometimes they are merely ingenious, as though designed to show how clever the poet can be when he sets his mind to it:

Some animals have all the luck,
Who hurl their breed in nature's throat—
Out of a gumtree by a buck,
Or escalator—by a goat!

(85-88)

Fuller wants to convey the essence of these strange animals who, as he drew nearer, turned,

An undulation of dappled grey and brown,
And stood in profile with those curious planes
Of neck and sloping haunches.

(19-21)

Although Fuller acknowledges that their height is grotesque he does not see them primarily as ludicrous creatures, but rather as animals with whom no communication is possible. The poem's closing lines evoke with controlled tenderness and reverence the otherness of the giraffes:

So as they put more ground between us I
Saw evidence that these were animals
With no desire for intercourse, or no
Capacity.

Above the falling sun,
Like visible winds the clouds are streaked and spun,

And cold and dark now bring the image of
Those creatures walking without pain or love.

(24-30)

Another poem, "The Plains," presents in a series of snapshots the array of wildlife before the rains: zebras, gazelles, hyenas, jackals, and, caught in the headlights, a lion:

Slowly it swung its great
Maned head, then—loose, suède, yellow—loped away.

(24-25)

As always, contemplation of the natural world leads Fuller to meditate on metaphysical themes. After observing the lion, which is followed by a pair of squint hyenas, Fuller revolves in his mind the course of human history, and archetypal myths; and when four pecking vultures fly away at his approach, he asks himself a fundamental question:

They left a purple scrap of skin.
Have I discovered all the plains can show?
The animals gallop, spring, are beautiful,
And at the end of every day is night.

(39-42)

Fuller also wrote a small group of poems that touch on the political life of East Africa in the widest sense of the word—the way in which the coming of a war fought for the benefit of white colonial rulers has finally shattered the tribal life of the Africans. In a four-line poem, "Natives Working on the Aerodrome," Fuller gives imaginative form to some ironies of the process whereby the British impose a punishment for the transgression of their law designed to assist the war effort:

Curls powdered with chalk like a black Roman bust,
This prisoner, convicted of a lust
For maize, is whipped to building a great shed
For bombers; and bears the earth upon his head.

There are a number of poems about the war and the human condition that owe little to the places where they were written. Others derive their imagery from the local scene before moving into the realm of metaphysical speculation. Thus "Autumn 1942" switches from the animals of the plains to

. . . the news at which I hesitate,
That glares authentically between the bars
Of style and lies. . . .

(29-31)

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The poem ends with a nightmarish vision of humanity, the kind of vision to which Fuller became increasingly prey as the war dragged on and the news confirmed all his forebodings:

It half convinces me that some great faculty,
Like hands, has been eternally lost and all
Our virtues now are high and horrible
Ones of a streaming wound which heals in evil.
(37-40)

Fuller wrote a handful of poems about the coastal region, one of which, "The Coast," manages to convey, in thirty-five lines, the ecology, human and natural, of the area. "Crustaceans" might be a commentary on a television nature film, so clearly and specifically does it describe the mass of crabs on the beach. The poem hints at certain affinities between the crabs and human beings; in "The Divided Life Re-Lived," an image from "Crustaceans" reappears as a simile:

While outside the demon scientists and rulers of the land
Pile the bomb like busy crabs pile balls of sand.
(23-24)

Perhaps the most poignant of all his wartime poems, "The Petty Officers' Mess," which is also set on the coast, develops Fuller's meditations on history before returning to the opening visit to some captive monkeys:

The monkeys near the mess (where we all eat
And dream) I saw tonight select with neat
And brittle fingers dirty scraps, and fight,
And then look pensive in the fading light,
And after pick their feet.

They were secured by straps about their slender
Waists, and the straps to chains. Most sad and tender,
They clasp each other and look round with eyes
Like ours at what their strange captivities
Invisibly engender.
(46-55)

The wartime poems written after Fuller's return home do not compare in originality and force with the best of his East African poems; this is true even of "Winter in Camp," an ambitious and accomplished sequence of nine sonnets about the slaughterous immensity of the war, the coarseness of the common man, the political inactivity of artists (including Fuller himself), and the contrast between the crude

but authentic emotions stirred by the cinema and the illusory world of art.

During the past forty years Fuller has continued to write a large, varied body of verse, much of it concerned with the nature of human society and with metaphysical problems. His poems have evaded the perils of aridity and emotional anemia because he has never ceased to respond with curiosity and zest to the quirks and richness of things animate and inanimate. If he is a man for whom the visible world exists, he owes this partly to the fortunes of war that sent him to Kenya, where he could observe the crustaceans, the dhows, the animals on the plains, and the life that moves to rhythms so different from our own in the green hills of Africa.

Edward Lowbury (born 6 December 1913), who had won the Newdigate prize for poetry when he was an undergraduate at University College, Oxford, was a qualified doctor when he was called up into the Royal Army Medical Corps. During his period of service in East Africa he became acquainted with certain aspects of life that remained a closed book to most of his compatriots: African medicine, the nature of witchcraft, Swahili tales and legends. One of those tales, which an *askari* (African soldier) told him, grew into the poem "The Huntsman." It preserves the laconic simplicity and force of the original, and the short phrases of which the poem is composed heighten the tension, the dramatic plot, and the anxiety that pervade the story.

One is plunged into the action with no preliminary flourishes:

Kagwa hunted the lion,
Through bush and forest went his spear.
One day he found the skull of a man
And said to it, "How did you come here?"
The skull opened its mouth and said
"Talking brought me here."

Lowbury unfolds the tale, departing just enough from the flow of normal English speech to remind the reader that this is a Swahili tale. Kagwa tells his story of the talking skull to the king, who orders two guards to search for the skull, taking with them Kagwa, who is to die if his tale is proved untrue. Eventually they find the skull; despite Kagwa's pleas it says nothing. The poem comes full circle, and it is Kagwa's turn to die:

The guards said, "Kneel down."
They killed him with sword and spear.

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Then the skull opened its mouth;
"Huntsman, how did you come here?"
And the dead man answered
"Talking brought me here."

(25-30)

Unlike Fuller, who continually reverts to the impact of Europe on the life of East Africa, Lowbury observes that life in all its strangeness, more concerned with what is and has been than with the influence that modern Europe may have on the tribesmen and the coastal inhabitants. If anything, his curiosity is aroused by what Europeans may have to learn from East Africa. Thus, in "Miracle Cure," he restores sight to a twelve-year-old Bantu boy, who cries out:

"I see! I see!"
And as I touched his brow
it seemed an unsuspected power
had passed through my bones
to him—in a blinding
but sight-restoring spark, that gave
new sight also to me.

(38-44)

Something of the same attitude informs "Total Eclipse," about a total eclipse of the sun that Lowbury witnessed in Mombasa. He asks some Africans what has come over the sun and is told:

The Sun goes out because some blow must fall.
(25)

He tries again and gets the same answer:

"Some blow will fall."
But a hint, this time, of a Dragon which devours
The Sun. . . .

(28-30)

Their explanations, ridiculous and superstitious though they may be, awaken

A twilight consciousness of lost powers,
Forgotten magic, presences
That gave no peace, haunted our sleep and drove us,
When Europe was a child, to acts of frenzy;
And still, for all our cool endeavours, haunt.

(33-37)

When the light returns, the scientific certainty of the astronomers seems irrelevant, because the eclipse has carried a warning of which they are unaware:

It seems we heard pre-echoes, saw
A warning vision of the great Eclipse
In store for the white Sun
In this black continent,
When the Dragon's turn comes, and with a shout
He snatches back the light;
His reason—simply that it's time for one,
Who shone so long unchecked, to be put out.

(42-49)

In "Mua Hills," among Lowbury's strongest and most finely wrought poems, one discovers a total contrast to Fuller's "The Green Hills of Africa." Whereas Fuller anatomizes the decay of tribal life beneath the assault of colonialism and capitalism, Lowbury, while acknowledging the decadence of the tribes—

Black eyes, black heads—Kamba, Kikuyu, Nandi
Sprout like grapes, expert at hanging round
And doing nothing; were they warriors once,
Now gone to seed?

(8-11)

—lays stress on the unbroken continuity of their traditions symbolized by the dance. In the final stanza he looks back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when explorers from Europe observed the fury of the dance and were mocked when they went home with travelers' tales of great lakes and snowcapped mountains in the heart of Africa:

I catch a glimpse of beaten shield and spear
Of the ngoma beaten all night long;
Feel something of the astonishment and fear
Of those first hunters from the North who hawked
Spirit and book, and in exchange took home
Stories which marked them liar if they talked.

(31-36)

As a tailpiece to this section one should recall the brief campaign that wrested control of Madagascar from the Vichy French. Bernard Gutteridge (born 13 March 1916) composed some poems about the episode, one of which, "Patrol: Buonomary," was written on the spot. Like all his work, it is readable and acutely observed; the tone is detached and slightly amused; the versification is elegant. This, one feels, is exactly how it was, with ten small figures "running stumbling over the hill," pursued by British bullets:

And that was all the enemy's resistance.
The pot-bellied children fondled

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Tommy-guns and Brens; brought bananas; stared.
The chalk road gashed into the distance,
The sea glared.

(6-10)

Gutteridge moved on to Burma, where he fought in the ruthless campaign against the Japanese. Although he planned nothing as ambitious or systematic as Henderson's sequence about the war in Cyrenaica, he executes from time to time an incisive vignette, notable for accuracy and restraint, in a style that springs from a resolution not to overdramatize or lay too blatant an emphasis on the hideous nature of the fighting. Even so, Gutteridge does not flinch from recording the kind of physical detail that had shocked many of those who read the poems of Sassoon in World War I. In its offhand way Gutteridge's "The Enemy Dead" reveals a great deal about the stark realities of jungle warfare and the frame of mind it engenders in the combatants:

The dead are always searched.
It's not a man, the blood-soaked
Mess of rice and flesh and bones
Whose pockets you flip open.

(1-4)

"Sniper" recounts how ten British soldiers trap one Japanese sniper:

He had killed neatly but we had set
Ten men about him to write death in jags
Cutting and spoiling on his face and broken body.

(12-14)

Gutteridge's work is unusual in that it combines the lucidity of a good military dispatch with the emotional resonance of poetry. Perhaps because of its reticence it has failed to win due recognition, but no other English poet has conveyed so truthfully and concisely the nature of the war in Burma against the Japanese.

THE WAR AT SEA

ALAN ROSS (born 6 May 1922) wrote a sequence of poems between 1942 and 1945 about naval warfare in the Arctic. Having served as an ordinary seaman and as an officer, he knew at first hand the life of the messdeck and of the wardroom as well as the roles played in combat by all ranks. His are the only

poems of either world war that portray the realities of life in a warship on patrol, the rescue of men after a shipwreck, the technical and moral implications of radar, the nature of an engagement at sea. Ross emulates the accuracy of a good prose reporter without getting bogged down in the prosaic. Instead, most of his poems employ traditional devices such as rhyme, meter, and stanzaic pattern, although he permits himself the freedom to depart from strict forms when he feels the need to do so.

"Messdeck" conveys with overpowering force the claustrophobia and stench in which sailors live:

Bare shoulders
Glisten with oil, tattoo-marks rippling their scales on
Mermaids or girls' thighs as dice are shaken, cards played.
We reach for sleep like a gas, randy for oblivion.

(5-8)

"Destroyers in the Arctic" is a study in grayness, monotony, unreality:

Landfall. Murmansk; but starboard now a lead-coloured
Island, Jan Mayen. Days identical, hoisted like sails,
blurred.

(19-20)

The earlier poems in the sequence are impressionistic, concerned with the outer world and with the trappings of war rather than with the inner reality. "Survivors" depicts the rescue of men from a burning ship and an icy sea. The poem does not merely describe the mechanics of the operation but evokes the exhaustion, the shock to mind and spirit, endured by the victims:

Taken on board as many as lived, who
Had a mind left for living and the ocean,
They open eyes running with surf,
Heavy with grey ghosts of explosion.

The meaning is not yet clear,
Where daybreak died in the smile—
And the mouth remained stiff
And grinning, stupid for a while.

(9-16)

It is not only the guns of the enemy ships that send men to flounder in the icy sea: the guns obey equipment of a subtlety and accuracy hitherto unknown in warfare. "Radar" makes the point that remote control divides the responsibility for killing between those who man the guns, release the depth charges,

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or fire the torpedoes and those who operate the radar, so all can shrug aside their guilt:

And destroying the enemy by radar
We never see what we do.

(11-12)

"J. W. 51B A Convoy," a narrative poem over five hundred lines long, describes how a British force protecting a convoy in the Arctic engaged and drove off a superior German force and brought the convoy safely into port. Ross handles with remarkable skill the various elements of which his poem is made up: the technical details of seamanship and naval warfare that give the poem the authenticity of a documentary film; the life of the lower deck; the horror of a naval battle fought by men trapped within a confined space; the courage and coolness and devotion to duty shown by all ranks during the engagement.

Throughout the poem Ross employs lines of varying length, mainly short, not conforming to any strict metrical pattern; he diversifies the sound of the verse with a scattering of full and half rhyme. This eclectic procedure gives him the flexibility he needs, enabling him to incorporate within the structure of his narrative the stark details of the combat and the familiar trivialities of the daily round.

It is impossible to convey in a brief space the quality of a longish narrative poem whose impact depends in part on the way the story is unfolded while its disparate elements are welded into a unity. Three extracts, however, may indicate Ross's power to handle widely dissimilar aspects of a naval engagement and to find the emotional tone appropriate to the occasion.

There is the dramatic moment when the captain of the *Onslow* signals his destroyers to join him:

And the destroyers, breaking
Out of line, heeled over,
Increasing revolutions, like the spokes
Of an umbrella being opened,
Spray icing the look-outs,
Forming up in line ahead.

(207-212)

The *Onslow* is hit and obliged to retire. Ross gives us a picture of what this means in human terms:

"A" and "B" Guns unable to fire,
Radar destroyed, aerials ripped,
And, forward, the sea stripping
The Mess decks, spilling over tables,

Fire and water clinching like boxers
As the ship listed, sprawling them.
Tamblin, his earphones awry, like a laurel wreath
Slipped on a drunken god, gargled to death
In water with a noise of snoring.

(307-315)

Finally, we turn to the burial at sea, in which Ross employs rhyme and meter with more formal regularity than at any other juncture in the poem:

Beneath the ice-floes sleeping,
Embalmed in salt
The sewn-up bodies slipping
Into silent vaults.
The sea of Barents received them,
Men with no faults
Of courage, for the weeping
Would be elsewhere,
Far from its keeping.

(418-426)

Ross's poems about the war at sea are an impressive achievement. He has gone on to write verse about people, places, and erotic love that is more subtle and sensuous than the poems of his early youth, but he has never surpassed in force and immediacy the poetic testament that he has left of life and death in the waste of Arctic waters.

We move worlds away when we turn from Ross to Charles Causley (born 24 August 1917), who served on the lower deck from 1939 to 1946. Instead of the terse, restrained emotion of Ross's poems we have a warmer, less muted lyricism, a canvas on which brighter colors are more thickly spread. "Chief Petty Officer" shows that Causley can portray things and people as realistically as Ross:

He is older than the naval side of British history,
And sits
More permanent than the spider in the enormous wall.

He has the face of the dinosaur
That sometimes stares from old Victorian naval
photographs:
That of some elderly lieutenant
With boots and a celluloid Crippen collar,
Brass buttons and cruel ambitious eyes of almond.

(1-3; 12-16)

Yet it becomes clear as one reads on that Causley's main concern is not to present a realistic or even satirical portrait of the old monster: what comes over is the warm affection that Causley feels for a dinosaur that has survived.

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Causley, though not an overtly learned poet, likes to lace his verse with literary and cultural allusions. The first two lines of "Chief Petty Officer" derive part of their effect from the incongruous comparison between the gross and sinister vulgarian as he squats in the Royal Naval Barracks at Devonport and Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa, who, in Walter Pater's exquisite imagination, is "older than the rocks among which she sits"; while the joke about the CPO's remote origins is sharpened by the sidelong glance at Sir Geoffrey Callender's *The Naval Side of British History* (1924). The phrase in line 15, "a celluloid Crippen collar," with its reference to the famous Edwardian murderer, gives the portrait the kind of period touch so often found in the verse of John Betjeman, a poet whom Causley much admires.

It may be thought regrettable that Causley did not draw a whole gallery of such portraits and that he failed to present a realistic picture of war. His only description of death at sea is coached in highly romantic imagery. "Song of the Dying Gunner A.A.1" begins:

Oh mother my mouth is full of stars
As cartridges in the tray
My blood is a twin-branched scarlet tree
And it runs all runs away.

It is true that by the end of the poem the dying man has lapsed into the vernacular, but the shift from one poetic convention to another does not come off and the poem is flawed:

Farewell, Aggie Weston, the Barracks at Guz,
Hang my tiddley suit on the door
I'm sewn up neat in a canvas sheet
And I shan't be home no more.

(13-16)

A note addressed to landlubbers explains that "Guz" is naval slang for Devonport and "Aggie Weston's" is "the familiar term used by sailors to describe the hostels founded in many seaports by Dame Agnes Weston."

One of Causley's favorite modes is the ballad filled with glittering images, owing more to Auden, Betjeman, and A. E. Housman than to the traditional border ballads, and sparkling with gaiety even though the subject is war. It may be objected that his presentation of war does not convince, because it is overstylized and totally disinfected of horror, pain,

filth, boredom, and discomfort. Even so, his best poems have such fizz and fire that they stay in the memory much longer than the verse of drabber poets who point out what a wretched business war is. And Causley, though he never sermonizes, reminds us constantly that war is a tragic waste of human life. In "A Ballad for Katharine of Aragon" the death of Causley's childhood friend Jumper Cross, who perished in the Italian snow, has the lyrical force of an aria of Verdi's:

The olive tree in winter
Casts her banner down
And the priest in white and scarlet
Comes up from the muddy town.
O never more will Jumper
Watch the Flying Scot go by
His funeral knell was a six-inch shell
Singing across the sky.

(17-24)

"Recruiting Drive" rehearses the story of a young soldier (a cousin of Housman's doomed lads) lured by the butcher-bird's song into joining up and finding death down in the enemy country. The imagery is almost surrealistic, and even at its most restrained it arouses an authentic shiver of terror:

You must take off your clothes for the doctor
And stand as straight as a pin,
His hand of stone on your white breast-bone
Where the bullets all go in.

(17-20)

Causley wrote a number of poems about his war-time recollections of Freetown, Gibraltar, Sydney, Trincomalee, Kandy, and Colombo. They are skillful evocations, shining with local color, soaked in nostalgic memories, at times degenerating into ecstatic, naive catalogs of remembered places and people. But Causley is not a naive poet, and it is by the poems glanced at above that he claims the admiration of those whose concern is with the truthfully observed and keenly felt poetry of war.

SIDNEY KEYES

SIDNEY KEYES was born on 27 May 1922; six weeks after his birth his mother died of peritonitis. His father, Captain Reginald Keyes, went to live with his own father, another Sidney Keyes, and the child

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grew up in his paternal grandfather's house. He was educated at Tonbridge, a well-known public school, where the form master of the History Sixth, Tom Staveley, was a poet who recognized Keyes's poetic gifts and encouraged him to develop them.

An example of his precocious talent is the elegy that Keyes composed for his grandfather in July 1938, the middle stanza of which runs:

It is a year again since they poured
The dumb ground into your mouth:
And yet we know, by some recurring word
Or look caught unawares, that you still drive
Our thoughts like the smart cobs of your youth—
When you and the world were alive.

This is not so much the work of a promising poet as of one who, at sixteen, is already a poet, able to handle with easy mastery the elements of his craft and to deploy in the service of his imagination a command of rhyme, meter, imagery, and rhythm that never failed him.

Keyes was an unusually learned and literary poet. In his introductory memoir to *The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes* (1945), one of his closest friends at Oxford, Michael Meyer, gives a list of those who most influenced Keyes:

For direction and inspiration, he turned to such visionaries as El Greco, Blake, Holderlin, Schiller, Rilke, Yeats and Sibelius. At the same time, he found his emotional problems most completely resolved in the writings of the nineteenth-century school of haunted countrymen: Wordsworth, Clare, Van Gogh, Hardy and, later, Housman and Edward Thomas.

(p. xiii)

Meyer goes on to note Keyes's love of the macabre: "Donne, Webster, Goya, Beddoes, Dickens, Picasso, Klee, Rouault, Graham Greene; and such as came his way of the early German and Russian films."

Much has been made of Keyes's admiration for Rainer Maria Rilke, whom indeed he praises unrestrainedly. Writing in January 1943 to Richard Church, he declares his belief that the greatest and most influential poets in the last hundred years are Rilke and William Butler Yeats. In a diary entry of March 1943, after tracing the burgeoning of the death wish implicit in romanticism, he continues: "That's why there had to be a 'Poet of Death' in C.20 [the twentieth century]; and why Rilke is the most important European poet since Goethe and Words-

worth." He was undoubtedly influenced by Rilke, especially by that poet's conception of death as something that we bear within us like a child awaiting birth. In the summer of 1942 he worked on a translation of passages of Rilke's prose and in the autumn of that year he translated an eight-line poem entitled "The Poet."

Yet it is important not to exaggerate the part played by Rilke in the life and the poetry of Sidney Keyes. The overwhelming influence on his early poems is not Rilke but Yeats, and it is likely that Rilke's metaphysical speculations about death merely intensified and deepened the intuitions and discoveries of which Keyes was himself aware. Moreover, Keyes knew that charnel romanticism and the German obsession with the death wish were dangerous models. He referred to "a vaguely bogus atmosphere" in his poems; and in a letter written nine weeks before he was killed he regretted that he had not been born in nineteenth-century Oxfordshire or Wiltshire, "because then I might have been a good pastoral poet, instead of an uncomfortable metaphysical without roots" (Meyer, p. xiii).

It is probable that the decisive influence on his poetry was not Yeats or Rilke, or any visionary artist, but his love for a girl whom he met at Oxford in May 1941. It is also arguable that his finest achievements are not his symbolist poems, of which the two most ambitious are "The Foreign Gate" and "The Wilderness," but the short lyrics on a wide variety of themes, particularly those written from March 1942 onward.

As we have seen, he was already a poet at the age of sixteen, and the first nine poems in his *Collected Poems* were written before he went up to Queen's College, Oxford, in October 1940. He composed the first of his Oxford poems in an examination room, having finished the paper early. "Remember Your Lovers," on the theme of women bereaved in wartime, was a poem that Keyes came to dislike for its "lush sensuality." Even so, it is an effective piece of plangent rhetoric that rises to a resounding climax:

Young men drunk with death's unquenchable wisdom,
Remember your lovers who gave you more than love.
(29-30)

Between November 1940 and the end of April 1941 Keyes wrote only seven poems, the most accomplished being a skillful pastiche of Yeats, "William Yeats in Limbo," and "Advice for a Journey," which

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begins "The drums mutter for war." This was a barren period for a poet as prolific as Keyes.

During the following six months he wrote over twenty poems, including two that bring out very clearly his preoccupation with pain, "Gilles de Retz" and "Europe's Prisoners," written on 16 and 21 May, respectively. The latter is of interest mainly because it employs Dachau as a symbol of human suffering at a time when even the name was unknown in Britain to all but a handful of people. In "Gilles de Retz," which one may call variations on a theme of pain, there occurs the half-line "Pain is never personal." Events were soon to disprove that philosophical reflection.

Early in May 1941 Keyes met a girl called Milein Cosmann, who had come over to England as a refugee from Nazi Germany. Both she and Renée-Jane Scott, with whom she shared a studio in Oxford, were art students who had been evacuated from London. This is not the place to analyze the tortuous and tortured relationship between Keyes and Milein. It is enough to note that, at first sight, he fell passionately in love with her, and that although she told him she did not reciprocate his feelings he persisted in trying to keep alive a relationship with her until July 1942. He then found some kind of consolation with Renée, while acknowledging that Milein remained the most attractive person he had ever known. He wrote in his diary on 28 July: "I am a damnably self-centered, irresponsible, and often cruel man. But Renée can cure me, if she will."

Within a few days of their first meeting Keyes began to write poems to and about Milein. He continued to find themes and inspiration in literature, notably in Yeats and Rilke, but his own experience of grief now became an element in his poetry. The epitaph on the whole unhappy story is to be found in "North Sea," written in October 1942, one of his most poignant compositions:

And eastward looking, eastward wondering
I meet the eyes of Heine's ghost, who saw
His failure in the grey forsaken waves
At Rulenstein one autumn. And between
Rises the shape in more than memory
Of Düsseldorf, the ringing, river-enfolding
City that brought such sorrow on us both.

(5-11)

Düsseldorf brought Milein sorrow in that it was the place from which she was exiled; it brought sorrow

to Keyes by sending her to England, where he fell in love with her.

During the long vacation of 1941 Keyes wrote a foreword to the anthology *Eight Oxford Poets*, which included poems by himself and by two other poets who were killed in the war, Drummond Allison and Keith Douglas; among the other contributors were Michael Meyer, who later became well known as a translator of Ibsen, and John Heath-Stubbs, one of the best English poets in the twentieth century. In his foreword Keyes announced on behalf of the contributors that "we have little sympathy with the Audenian school of poetry," which was, in his view, too closely concerned with political comment, social observation, modern intellectual concepts, and the employment of colloquial language.

Between September 1941 and the end of the year Keyes wrote over twenty poems, beginning with the much-anthologized "William Wordsworth," partly inspired by Herbert Read's study of the poet. It contains a tribute to Wordsworth's elemental power:

He was a stormy day, a granite peak
Spearing the sky; and look, about its base
Words flower like crocuses in the hanging woods,
Blank though the dalehead and the bony face.
(11-14)

Of the remainder, the most accomplished are a sonnet, "Pheasant"; a lament and celebration for Glaucus, who was both drowned and glorified: "And cold Aegean voices speak his fame"; and "The Cruel Solstice," the title poem of his posthumous volume, published in 1943. In it he foresees

A cruel solstice, coming ice and cold
Thoughts and the darkening of the heart's flame.
(3-4)

In February and March 1942 he worked on an ambitious poem of almost four hundred lines, entitled "The Foreign Gate." Its epigraph comes from Rilke's Sixth Duino Elegy and the whole poem owes much to Rilke, "a pale unlearned poet," while two lines are a direct translation of the first line and a half of the *Duino Elegies*:

Were I to cry, who in that proud hierarchy
Of the illustrious would pity me?
(5.12-13)

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Although the final section of the poem contains echoes of T. S. Eliot, the predominant influence, according to Meyer, is a poem by Heath-Stubbs, an Oxford contemporary and a great friend whose poetry Keyes passionately admired. Meyer admits that "few of the many literary references have been traced to their ultimate source."

The poem celebrates warrior heroes who have conquered death by sacrificing their lives and thus passing through the foreign gate of death to eternity. Keyes ransacks many lands and epochs for examples of heroes who thus attained peace. Men who died at Dunkirk and Tannenberg blend their voices with those of soldiers who perished at Naseby or in the wars of Rome against Carthage. "Gored Adonis in the myrtle thicket" and Danae make fleeting appearances in section III, which is devoted to the theme of sexual love. Despite some fine resonant passages the poem must be accounted a failure, its diffuse, cloudy symbolism failing to give the reader any sense of poetic coherence. Keyes, however, valued it highly, getting his publisher to delay sending his first volume, *The Iron Laurel*, to the printer until "The Foreign Gate" was completed.

Even as an adolescent Keyes had been aware of the conflict between the forces of death and negation and the power of love. This awareness was proved upon his pulse ever more strongly as the war increased in scale and ferocity, his call-up came ever nearer, and the painful complexity of his feelings for Milein grew more intense. In March 1942 he wrote "War Poet," the theme of which is poets trapped by war:

I am the man who looked for peace and found
My own eyes barbed.
I am the man who groped for words and found
An arrow in my hand.

(1-4)

More than one commentator has found fault with Keyes for employing the image of an arrow rather than a Bren gun. One might as well censure William Blake for summoning a bow of burning gold, arrows of desire, a spear, chariots of fire, and a sword, on the grounds that, in Blake's day, those weapons of war were obsolete. A poet works through images that kindle his imagination, whether they are contemporary or archaic.

Keyes left Oxford on 8 April, in the middle of term, for Omagh in Northern Ireland, where he

reported to the Infantry Training Centre. While stationed there he wrote two fine poems, "Ulster Soldier," in which he expresses his apprehension of "perplexities and terrors," and "The True Heart," a lyrical meditation on sorrow and the end of sorrow:

Guarded from love and wreck and turbulence
The sad explorer finds security
From all distraction but the thin lament
Of broken shells remembering the sea.

(9-12)

On 8 May he joined the Officer Cadet Training Unit at Dunbar, Scotland. The poet Edmund Blunden, who met him at that period, remarked on his alertness and vigor; and his imaginative energy matched the force with which he mastered his military training. His first poem from Dunbar, called "Dunbar, 1650," unlike most of his work, evokes a particular historical moment in a particular place, and displays some of the characteristics of the Auden school, held in such disfavor by Keyes and his fellow poets at Oxford. Other good poems followed rapidly, displaying an assurance and a disciplined passion that he had hitherto seldom commanded. Two linked poems belong to August, "Dido's Lament for Aeneas" and "Rome Remember." Keyes wrote a number of dramatic monologues, none more rhythmically delicate and emotionally convincing than Dido's speech before her death:

The smoke blows over the breakers, the high pyre waits.
His mind was a blank wall throwing echoes,
Not half so subtle as the coiling flames.

(7-9)

"Rome Remember," whose title comes from the burden of a poem by John Lydgate, is even more impressive, a lament for Carthage and for the city that destroyed her and will in its turn be destroyed by the barbarians from the north:

O Rome, you city of soldiers, remember the singers
That cry with dead voices along the African shore.

(8-9)

The blank verse is both firm and flexible, an instrument designed to encompass the entire range of emotions awakened by the theme of imperial triumph and decay.

In late July Keyes had sent a copy of *The Iron Laurel* to Drummond Allison, inscribing on the flyleaf a couplet from George Crabbe:

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Love is like gout; for both diseases spread
A kind of gloomy pomp about the bed.

He was still enthralled by his infatuation for Milein, and although his growing affection for Renée assuaged the old torment, the few poems he wrote on the theme of love are either nostalgic or uneasy. He contemplated resignation and death more steadily than love.

The finest poems that he wrote between October 1942 and the end of the year explicitly or implicitly weave variations on those twin themes. "Four Postures of Death" confronts them directly; "Moonlight Night on the Port" both mourns those drowned at sea and accepts the likelihood that the poet and his comrades will also drown. "Actaeon's Lament" meditates on a death enshrined in classical legend, while "An Early Death" contemplates the grief of a mother for a son who has died (presumably in war) and the grief of Mary over the crucified Christ. "Poem from the North" opens with three lines that are, for Keyes, unusually firmly rooted in prosaic reality:

As I passed under the statue of Mr. Gladstone
The snow came back, dancing down slantwise, whipping
That righteous face with all the old sky's scorn.

It ends with a menacing vision of a world at war, of a city whose inhabitants are doomed:

Winter, the hunter's season, will not pity
The people afraid to be born who crowd the streets
Or those afraid of death who crouch in bed
Behind the darkened windows of this city.
I hear the hunter's horn, the long halloo,
The cold wind beating at a stone-dead statue.

(17-22)

"William Byrd" is a poem of serenity and hope, qualities not often found in the body of Keyes's work. Byrd was an Elizabethan composer who refused to renounce Roman Catholicism and whose music could not be sung in Anglican cathedrals. It is one of Keyes's most assured dramatic monologues, with a rhythmical delicacy and a verbal poise that lend the poem a rare distinction.

"The Wilderness," Keyes's latest surviving poem except "The Grail," was written between December 1942 and January 1943. He regarded it as one of his "nearest misses." An ambitious poem of 150 lines, it reverts to a theme that had preoccupied him

throughout his career as a poet: the journey to the desolate place. He had originally dedicated the poem to "Geoffrey Chaucer, George Darley, T. S. Eliot, the other explorers." Keyes himself believed that he had approached the style of Eliot's *Little Gidding*; and it may well be that this is precisely what is wrong with the poem. It lacks the strong individuality, the lyrical intensity, the poetic coherence that characterize the strongest and most original of his shorter poems.

Keyes embarked for Algiers with his battalion on 13 March 1943. In a letter to Heath-Stubbs dated 6 March he had reviewed his past life and found that "it was all quite worthwhile except for the sex part." But it is reassuring to know that on the voyage out he kept photographs of Milein and of Renée above his bed, "because they are both so beautiful." Although he added in his diary that he never dreamed of them, he wrote to Renée on 27 March describing what he called "a most strange and unlikely dream. I dreamt that *we* were being married and saw the actual ceremony."

Keyes enjoyed his brief stay in Algiers enormously; but all too soon his battalion moved into battle positions in Tunisia, going into action in mid-April. On 29 April Keyes led a patrol into the hills near Sidi Abdallah and, together with his orderly, Harold Smith, lost contact with the rest of the patrol. It was thought that they had been taken prisoner, but on 21 June a unit of the Army Graves Service came upon four graves, two of which bore crosses marked with the names of Sidney Keyes and Harold Smith. The bodies could not be identified, nor has the mystery of Keyes's death ever been solved. Even his personal possessions, which he had left in his billet, disappeared completely in the confusion of the war. It is highly probable that they included the manuscripts of poems.

Keyes saluted Rilke as a "Poet of Death," but he was not a decadent romantic dominated by the death wish. In a letter to Church in January 1943 he remarked that he didn't "even (consciously) follow the present trend towards a new and over-wrought Romanticism" (Meyer, p. xvii). Deeply aware as he was of the significance of death in romantic and postromantic poetry, he viewed with some disdain the persistent presence of the death wish in German poetry, and the predisposition of Germans to make an art of death: "It remains for someone to make an art of love, a much harder task . . ." (Meyer, p. xx). He passionately wanted to live, even into old age,

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and in a letter to Renée written just before he was killed he announced his determination to "get back *sometime* if it's humanly possible" (Meyer, p. xx).

Very few of Keyes's poems touch directly on the war. Even "Timoshenko," written in September 1942, is a portrait of a remote, historical, almost mythological, figure, only slightly more contemporary than Dido and barely more human than Adonis. Blunden put his finger on an important truth when he wrote of Keyes that "the cruel solstice was to him not war, so much as the larger commotion and dissonance of which war is a partial embodiment." Bearing in mind that qualification, we may recognize in Keyes a war poet of prodigious gifts and lasting achievement, who died in battle a month before his twenty-first birthday.

KEITH DOUGLAS

KEITH DOUGLAS was born on 24 January 1920; when he was eight years old his parents were separated. He remained with his mother, who secured a place for him when he was eleven at Christ's Hospital, a school reserved for poor boys of high academic intelligence. In October 1938 he went up to Merton College, Oxford, where his tutor was Blunden, himself a former pupil at Christ's Hospital.

Douglas had always been a difficult character, and even the kindly Blunden spoke of "an impulsive and obstinate streak which was sometimes the despair of his friends." Less charitable acquaintances found him aggressive and ruthless, unimpeded by conventional good manners or consideration for the susceptibilities of others. His biographer recounts an anecdote of April 1944, when Douglas informed

a "truculent civilian" that if his four-year-old daughter's drawings really were as good as Graham Sutherland's, he should try and retard the child's growth, "she was obviously at her best age and might grow like Daddy."

(D. Graham, *Keith Douglas*, p. 248)

Those unlikeable qualities were the obverse of his characteristic virtues: a directness of approach, a dislike of humbug, a determination to perform the task in hand, and a zest for every kind of adventure. Allied with a determined courage, they fitted him to be a good, pugnacious soldier.

Douglas was fond of women, and his tastes both in Oxford and later in Egypt were catholic and cosmopolitan. Yet although he was neither fickle nor shallow he found it hard to maintain a stable or lasting relationship with women, mainly because they could not meet the exacting emotional demands that he made upon them. He was continually shipwrecked on the wilder shores of love.

The earliest of his poems printed in *Complete Poems*, and entitled "Mummers," bears the date 1934. Like Keyes, Douglas was a precocious poet, writing verse of remarkable maturity even as a schoolboy. His style is more curt than that of Keyes, harder and more aggressive. Perhaps the finest of his early poems is "The Deceased," printed in the Oxford undergraduate periodical *Cherwell* on 15 June 1940:

He was a reprobate I grant
and always liquored till his money went.

His hair depended in a noose from
his pale brow. His eyes were dumb

...

You who God bless you never sunk so low
censure and pray for him that he was so.

(1-4; 7-8)

This slightly mannered, ironical tone recurs throughout Douglas' later poems, although it became less playful and considerably harsher.

Between July 1940 and June 1941, when he was serving in the army in England, Douglas wrote ten poems, most of which confirm his growing maturity. One in particular, "Simplify me when I'm dead," marks his farewell to England. It is an astonishing poem, especially for a man of twenty-one, a poem that contemplates with ironical detachment the poet's imminent mortality. The language is bare and intense, infusing the poem with an energy that is all the more terrifying for being so completely under control:

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

As the processes of earth
strip off the colour and the skin:
take the brown hair and blue eye

and leave me simpler than at birth,
when hairless I came howling in
as the moon entered the cold sky.

(1-8)

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The technical brilliance of the versification and the unobtrusive cunning that links the stanzas with rhymes serve to reinforce the poem's emotional balance and power.

By 25 June 1941 Douglas was on board the ship that was to land him at Suez two months later. After a few weeks in Cairo and a spell in the hospital in Palestine, he joined his regiment, the Sherwood Rangers. This former cavalry regiment was not likely to be congenial to a young man of Douglas' temperament. Their senior officers were mostly rich members of the landed gentry who tended to look down on cocksure young officers like Douglas who had not hunted in prewar England. Indeed, his relations with the commanding officer and other superiors remained at best uneasy and at worst mutually hostile.

This is not the place to describe Douglas' visits to Palestine, Syria, Alexandria, and Cairo, or to follow the intricacies of his relationships with Olga, Renée, Milena, Fortunée, Reman, Marcelle, Pilar, and the girl whom he called the Turkish Delight. It is enough to observe that although some of these were passing fancies, Douglas felt genuine affection for Olga and Milena. His dealings with women, like his widening acquaintance with the life of the Middle East, gave him a greater understanding of the world and of human nature.

Like every British soldier, Douglas observed the contrast between the wretchedness of the poor and the ostentatious wealth of the great landowners. "Egypt," probably written in September 1942, describes a girl "diseased and blind of an eye":

her beauty, succumbing in a cloud
of disease, disease, apathy. My God,
the king of this country must be proud.

(18-20)

Douglas loathed King Farouk, about whom British troops sang ribald songs, and a year later, in a letter to his mother, referred to him in scatological terms, accusing him of exploiting more *fellahin* (peasants or agricultural laborers) than any of his "great fat oily subjects."

There was, however, an even more dramatic contrast that fascinated Keith Douglas: the one between the glittering, tawdry, pleasure-seeking world of Cairo and the austerity of the desert, where men were locked in mortal combat. Until October 1942 he knew the desert only by repute. When his regi-

ment moved forward in preparation for what was rumored to be a major battle, Douglas was left behind at divisional headquarters in charge of a two-ton Ford truck.

Greedily as he had enjoyed the sensual pleasures of Cairo, Douglas was not the man to skulk in safety while his regiment went into battle. On 23 October he heard the artillery barrage that preceded the El Alamein offensive; four days later he committed a serious breach of military discipline by driving his truck into the battle zone, discovering the whereabouts of the Sherwood Rangers, and presenting himself to Colonel Kellett. The officer greeted his unexpected arrival with admirable suavity: "We're most glad to see you—er—as always." Kellett had lost so many officers that his words of welcome were not wholly ironical.

In the days ahead Douglas proved his bravery. Kellett may have disliked him, but he admired Douglas' toughness and courage; he arranged for his unauthorized departure from headquarters to be overlooked and for him to stay with the regiment as it advanced toward North Africa. Douglas fought with such gallantry that he was recommended for a Military Cross, though he did not get one; and on 15 January 1943 he was wounded in action at Zem Zem.

On 25 January he reached No. 1 General Hospital, El Ballah, Palestine, where he spent six fruitful weeks. It was probably there that he began his narrative of the desert fighting published in 1946 under the title *Alamein to Zem Zem*, a vigorous and at times extremely vivid account of the campaign, which contains the germ of some of his war poems. He also wrote a few of his most powerful and accomplished poems at El Ballah.

In February 1943 *Selected Poems of Keith Douglas*, J. C. Hall and Norman Nicholson appeared. Douglas and Hall, who was in England, corresponded between June and August, mainly about Douglas' recent poems, which Hall found unsatisfying compared with his earlier work. Douglas replied in a letter of 10 August, which serves as the best introduction to his war poems that we can hope to have:

. . . my object (and I don't give a damn about my duty as a poet) is to write true things, significant things in words each of which works for its place in a line. My rhythms, which you find enervated, are carefully chosen to enable the poems to be *read* as significant speech: I see no reason to be either musical or sonorous about things at present. . . . To trust

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anyone or to admit any hope of a better world is criminally foolish, as foolish as it is to stop working for it. It sounds silly to say work without hope, but it can be done; it's only a form of insurance; it doesn't mean work hopelessly.

(*Complete Poems*, p. 124)

The first-fruit of Douglas' experience of battle was "Dead Men," which appeared in the March 1943 issue of *Citadel*, a periodical printed in Cairo:

Tonight the moon inveigles them
to love: they infer from her gaze
her tacit encouragement.
Tonight the white dresses and the jasmine scent
in the streets. I in another place
see the white dresses glimmer like moths. Come

to the west, out of that trance, my heart—
(1-7)

It is just possible to read those lines as a romantic invocation of women known and loved in Cairo or in Alexandria, inhabiting the world of Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*; but the dry vocabulary—"inveigles," "infer," "tacit encouragement"—and the curt rhythm suggest that Douglas is deliberately eschewing romantic lyricism because, as he put it in his letter to Hall, "to write on the themes which have been concerning me lately in lyrical and abstract forms, would be immense bullshitting." And it is difficult to take the operatic invocation, "Come/to the west," as anything but a sardonic gesture, an invitation to a hideous rendezvous, where we shall find

the dead men, whom the wind
powders till they are like dolls.
(11-12)

Their bodies may rest undiscovered or a wild dog
may have eaten them:

Then leave the dead in the earth, an organism
not capable of resurrection, like mines,
less durable than the metal of a gun,
a casual meal for a dog, nothing but the bone
so soon, But tonight no lovers see the lines
of the moon's face as the lines of cynicism.
(25-30)

"Cairo Jag," like "Dead Men" probably written at El Ballah in February 1943, resumes the themes of that poem more savagely. It opens with a satirical glance at some of the women in Cairo who were the

companions of British officers. Douglas appears to despise himself as well as the women in question:

Shall I get drunk or cut myself a piece of cake,
a pasty Syrian with a few words of English
or the Turk who says she is a princess—she dances
apparently by levitation?

The second stanza modulates from that garish world into the wretched quarters of the Egyptian poor, with the "stenches and the sour smells," which may well be the true habitat of the women of the first stanza, beneath their stink of jasmine. The poem ends with a grim description of the battlefield:

But by a day's travelling you reach a new world
the vegetation is of iron
dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery
the metal brambles have no flowers or berries
and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine
the dead themselves, their boots, and possessions
clinging to the ground, a man with no head
has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.
(23-30)

Although Douglas wrote other poems at El Ballah in February and March, none has the weight of "Dead Men" and "Cairo Jag"; and the same is true of poems on which he worked during his leave in Tel Aviv after his discharge from the hospital at the end of March. In May and June, after he had rejoined his regiment in Tunisia, he completed two poems, "Aristocrats"² and "Vergissmeinnicht," and began work on "How to Kill," which he completed two or three months later.

"Aristocrats" bears as an epigraph the saying attributed by Suetonius to the emperor Vespasian on his deathbed: "I think I am becoming a God." The epigraph sets the tone of the whole poem, helping us to fathom the complex, even contradictory, emotions that were fluctuating in Douglas' imagination as he worked on the poem. During his absence from the regiment, three of its senior officers had fallen in action. Although Douglas had felt no liking for the men and had despised their limitations, their deaths moved him more deeply than he would have thought possible. Mingled with irritation at their stupidity,

²*Complete Poems* (London, 1978) prints what seems to be a later version of this poem entitled "Sportsmen." The text of "Aristocrats" quoted here is from D. Graham, *Keith Douglas 1920-1944: A Biography* (London, 1974).

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other emotions contended for mastery: a sense of comradeship in battle, admiration for their courage and unconcern, amusement at their foibles, compassion at their deaths. "Aristocrats," like all good poems, is more than an expression of emotions, and it has a wider application than any lament for fellow officers. It contains an impersonal recognition that a social order is passing away, the death of three officers of the Sherwood Rangers being a symbol that the old regime was vanishing. Out of these disparate elements Douglas made a poem:

Peter was unfortunately killed by an 88:
it took his leg away, he died in the ambulance.
I saw him crawling on the sand; he said
It's most unfair, they've shot my foot off.

How can I live among this gentle
obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?
(1-6)

The Sherwood Rangers employed in their radio code a set of sporting terms; the practice exasperated Douglas so much that on one occasion, in the middle of a battle, he communicated a message in a parody of the code and consequently incurred a reprimand for his mild insolence. Now, in the poem's last stanza, Douglas incorporates even this private terminology into the structure of myth and enlists the dead officers of his regiment, with their anachronistic gallantry, into the company of those who fell at Roncesvalles:

The plains were their cricket pitch
and in the mountains the tremendous drop fences
brought down some of the runners. Here then
under the stones and earth they dispose themselves,
I think with their famous unconcern.
It is not gunfire I hear but a hunting horn.

(15-20)

"Vergissmeinnicht," perhaps the most famous of his poems, demonstrates Douglas' mastery of his art: the hard, clear narrative line of the poem, the accuracy of the epithets he uses to describe the German soldier's corpse, the skill of the versification, shifts in the rhyme scheme, and his control of what might have been a welter of disruptive emotions are factors that ensure the poem's success. Douglas comes upon the body of a German in a gunpit; among the dead man's rubbish lies a photograph of his girl on which she has written "Vergissmeinnicht"—forget me

not. Douglas and his companions "see him almost with content," but without denying his satisfaction at the destruction of an enemy, the poet imagines how the girl will weep at the sight of her lover and observes with a measure of compassion how love and death are commingled:

For here the lover and killer are mingled
who had one body and one heart.
And death who had the soldier singled
has done the lover mortal hurt.

"How to Kill" may owe something to an early poem, "303," probably written when he was fifteen. He looks through a machine gun's sights and sees men "weep, cough, sprawl in their entrails." Eight years later, in the most subtle and introspective of his poems, Douglas imagines the appearance of a soldier in the crosswires of his dial of glass:

I cry
NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears
and look, has made a man of dust
of a man of flesh. This sorcery
I do. Being damned, I am amused
to see the centre of love diffused
and the waves of love travel into vacancy.
How easy it is to make a ghost.

The weightless mosquito touches
her tiny shadow on the stone,
and with how like, how infinite
a lightness, man and shadow meet.
They fuse. A shadow is a man
when the mosquito death approaches.

(12-25)

No poem of Douglas' is more disquieting and chill in its apprehension of death and in its metaphysical awareness of damnation.

In September 1943 Douglas was back in Cairo, where he was overcome by various kinds of frustration. In one incident his frustration may have been partially relieved by an altercation with a taxi driver who demanded an exorbitant fare; Douglas broke the taxi's distributor. He enjoyed meeting some of the leading contributors to *Personal Landscape*, Bernard Spencer, Terence Tiller, Lawrence Durrell, and G. S. Fraser, regaling them with tales of burning tanks and roasting bodies. But Douglas was soon to bid farewell to Egypt and to his friends: his regiment embarked for Britain on 17 November. He left copies

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of most of his war poems with the editors of *Personal Landscape*, among them his last poem on Cairo life, "Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden." The fish are men with predatory intent toward the white stone who, with red lips and carmine fingernails, sits in the sea floor of the afternoon, slyly eating ice cream. Douglas sustains the underwater image and its attendant metaphors throughout all seven stanzas of his gently satirical and relaxed poem.

~~The Sherwood Rangers discovered on their return~~ home that they were to train for the invasion of Europe. During his six months in England Douglas met his last love, Betty Jesse, an intelligent, attractive young woman who worked for Nicholson and Watson, the firm that had agreed to publish a collection of Douglas' poems. Piqued by his arrogance and cynicism, she told him, half-seriously, that he was her "bête noire." This prompted him to begin a poem entitled "Bête Noire," of which we have fragments; and to write a note on a drawing for the jacket of "Bête Noire," the title for his projected volume of poems. The "Bête Noire" fragments resume the themes of certain earlier poems and, had Douglas been able to complete it, he might have achieved a masterly summing up of his life and art. But he knew it was a poem he couldn't realize.

What he could write was "To Kristin Yingcheng Olga Milena," a masterly valediction to those "Women of four countries" whom he had loved, even though he labels them "four poisons for the subtle senses." His last poem, "On a Return from Egypt," regrets that he has had to leave unpicked the lilies of ambition:

but time, time is all I lacked
to find them, as the great collectors before me.
(17-18)

Envisaging what awaited him in Europe, Douglas ends his poem with a confession:

I fear what I shall find.

Like Keyes fifteen months before, Douglas was about to embark on a journey from which he was certain he would not return. There are other parallels between the two poets: both accepted Rilke's notion that a man carries his death within him; and although Keyes was more completely under the influence of Rilke than was Douglas, the latter had read a number of Rilke's poems in German as well as in an

English translation by Ruth Speirs. Dissimilar as they were in their approach to women, Douglas and Keyes had both endured the stresses of love and exploited the conflict of love and death.

At the end of May 1944 Douglas took communion at an altar set up beside his tank by Leslie Skinner, the regimental padre, and attended evensong in the small village church at Sway in the New Forest. The regiment sailed for France on 5 June at midnight; on 6 June Douglas commanded a tank troop in the assault on the Normandy beaches, and on 8 June he was with his regiment when it entered Bayeux. The next day, in a skirmish near the village of St. Pierre, he was killed by mortar fire.

ALUN LEWIS

ALUN LEWIS, who was born on 1 July 1915 at Aberdare in Glamorgan, Wales, differed sharply from Keyes and Douglas in his upbringing, education, and emotional life. The members of his family had followed a variety of callings: his grandfather worked as a miner for fifty years; his father, at one time a schoolmaster, became the director of education for Aberdare; one uncle was professor of Celtic studies at Aberystwyth and another was a Congregational minister. Although Lewis committed himself to no political or social cause, he was aware of belonging to a community, and his sense of detachment as a poet was always balanced by a feeling of sympathy with his fellowmen, whether they were British private soldiers or Indian peasants.

Whereas Douglas and Keyes moved on from English public schools to Oxford, Lewis, after winning a scholarship locally at Cowbridge Grammar School, became a student at the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth, where he gained first-class honors in history before obtaining an M.A. at Manchester.

In 1941 he married Gweno Ellis, a teacher of German, thus securing the kind of loving and stable relationship denied to Douglas and to Keyes; but his constant postings in Britain and his embarkation for India made any settled life together impossible. He celebrated their love in "Postscript: for Gweno":

If I should go away,
Beloved, do not say
"He has forgotten me."

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For you abide,
A singing rib within my dreaming side;
You always stay,
And in the mad tormented valley
Where blood and hunger rally
and Death the wild beast is uncaught, untamed,
Our soul withstands the terror
And has its quiet honour
Among the glittering stars your voices named.

There is nothing so directly passionate as this lyric in the poetry of Douglas or of Keyes or, indeed, in the poetry of any other war poet.

Despite his early pacifism Lewis volunteered for military service in 1940, becoming a postal clerk with the Royal Engineers and gaining a commission as an infantry officer the following year. In 1942 his regiment was converted to tanks, and in 1943 Lewis embarked for India. His early poems appeared in March 1942 under the title *Raiders' Dawn*, and included work that went back to his days as a private. Some of his poems convey with remarkable fidelity the mood of the British army after all British forces had been driven out of Europe in June 1940, not to return until June 1944. Several hundred thousand troops stationed in camps or in barracks underwent training designed to make them ready to resist a German invasion and, eventually, to land in Europe as a liberating army. Units moved from place to place within Britain for no apparent reason, enduring the wretchedness that is always the lot of those serving in the ranks: boredom, discomfort, petty restrictions, the crushing weight of the military machine that is indifferent or hostile to individuality. Many soldiers knew that their wives and children were exposed to the dangers of air raids and to the wearisome routine of blackouts and rationing.

Lewis found in those conditions material for poetry that was both honest and imaginative. His best-known poem of army life, "All Day It Has Rained," presents with rare sympathy the sense of weariness and resignation, tinged with nostalgic longing, that afflicts men under canvas on a Sunday in England. The varying lengths of the lines, combined with the unemphatic rhymes, give the poem an air of relaxed formality, just as the monotony of the rain combines with the twilight to anesthetize any bitterness or pain that might arouse the soldiers from their lassitude:

And we stretched out, unbuttoning our braces,
Smoking a Woodbine, darning dirty socks,

Reading the Sunday papers—I saw a fox
And mentioned it in the note I scribbled home;—
And we talked of girls, and dropping bombs on Rome,
And thought of the quiet dead and the loud celebrities
Exhorting us to slaughter, and the herded refugees;
—Yet thought softly, morosely of them, and as indifferently
As of ourselves or those whom we
For years loved, and will again
Tomorrow maybe love; but now it is the rain
Possesses us entirely, the twilight and the rain.

(13-24)

The poem veers away from its theme when Lewis reflects on Edward Thomas, a poet whom he greatly admired, and who fell in action in 1917 at Arras. The trite observation that Thomas brooded on death and poetry does nothing for the poem or for our understanding of Thomas.

On the other hand, "To Edward Thomas" is a finely conceived and executed tribute to the poet of World War I. It contains a rich and expertly controlled passage about the view that greeted Lewis when he visited the Edward Thomas memorial stone above Steep in Hampshire:

I sat and watched the dusky berried ridge
Of yew-trees, deepened by oblique dark shafts,
Throw back the flame of red and gold and russet
That leapt from beech and ash to birch and chestnut
Along the downward arc of the hill's shoulder. . . .
(17-21)

In the last section of the poem, Lewis meditates on Thomas and on the voice, "soft and neutral as the sky," and growing ever clearer

Till suddenly, at Arras, you possessed that hinted land.
(54)

Lewis portrays the realities of army life without hysteria or evasion in "After Dunkirk":

. . . the rough immediate life of camp
And barracks where the phallic bugle rules
The regimented orchestra of love;
The subterfuges of democracy, the stench
Of breath in crowded tents, the grousing queues,
And bawdy songs incessantly resung
And dull relaxing in the dirty bar.
(30-36)

He was aware that he could not passively accept the dehumanizing effect of such an existence; nor could

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he accustom himself to the debased standards of his fellows, as he declares in "The Soldier":

But leisurely my fellow soldiers stroll among the trees.
The cheapest dance-song utters all they feel.

(13-14)

Lewis is not preening himself on his superiority, but expressing his sadness at the emotional poverty of so many lives.

When Lewis was posted to India he was both unhappy at the prospect of leaving his wife and their unborn child and resolved to come to grips with whatever he found overseas. His approaching departure, embarkation, and voyage form the subject of various poems. "Goodbye" is a sadder, less ecstatic poem than "Postscript: for Gweno," but it is more complex and mature in that it faces the cares of everyday life and the fears that are inseparable from it. It is a poem capable of dealing with both the emerald that the soldier gives his wife and the patches she has sewn on his battle dress:

Yet when all's done you'll keep the emerald
I placed upon your finger in the street;
And I will keep the patches that you sewed
On my old battledress tonight, my sweet.

(29-32)

The voyage to India moved Lewis to write several good poems: "The Departure"; "On Embarkation"; "A Troopship in the Tropics"; "Port of Call: Brazil"; "Song." "A Troopship in the Tropics" gives a vivid picture of life aboard the ship where five thousand people are crammed into squalid quarters:

The smell of oranges and excrement
Moves among those who write uneasy letters. . . .

(13-14)

The sharp precision of those two lines may serve as a reminder that Lewis was a short-story writer as well as a poet. His first collection of short stories appeared in 1943, and more stories were published after his death. Indeed some critics have maintained that he was basically a prose writer rather than a poet, and it is true that certain of his poems read like rather heavy descriptions in prose tricked out with conventional poeticisms. But it is more convincing to argue that he was essentially a poet who was strengthened by certain valuable prosaic elements in

his writing. Lewis' besetting temptation as a poet was an over-fluent lyricism decked with hand-me-down romantic properties, and he needed sobriety of language, unsentimental observation, and the steady rhythm of prosaic speech as a corrective. His poems required the patches on the battle dress as well as the emerald and the mad tormented valley.

Occasionally he wrote hauntingly intense lyrics, such as "Song," subtitled "On seeing dead bodies floating off the Cape":

The flying fish like kingfishers
Skim the sea's bewildered crests,
The whales blow steaming fountains,
The seagulls have no nests
Where my lover sways and rests.

(21-25)

He began "To Rilke" on the troopship just before it reached Bombay; he was ill with food poisoning and had dreamed about returning home to find that he had died and his wife had been transformed into a bejeweled blonde. The poem is not one of his best, but it is of considerable psychological interest, since it records Lewis' recognition of India's darkness, his envy for Rilke, who had been granted the gift of silence, and his own need for the simplicity that he had once discovered with his wife in distant Wales.

Lewis was overwhelmed by the immensity of India, by the grinding poverty of its people, and by the way in which patches of brilliant vegetation and the colorful Hindu festivals lend a garish contrast to the monotony of daily existence. He wrote a number of poems that evoke the landscapes he traversed in India and, later, in Burma; in these poems he is seldom content to describe the physical properties of what he saw, but relates the landscapes to the inhabitants or finds in them symbols of the spiritual life that had evolved there. Thus "The Mahratta Ghats" opens with a fierce portrayal of the land burned by drought, where a god has granted the peasants an exiguous dole:

High on the ghat the new turned soil is red,
The sun has ground it to the finest red,
It lies like gold within each horny hand.
Siva has spilt his seed upon this land.

But before the end of the poem it is the figures in the landscape that have come to occupy the center of the stage; the beggar and the soldier, each of them op-

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pressed and economically enslaved, move hopelessly across the ghat:

Who is it climbs the summit of the road?
Only the beggar bumming his dark load.
Who was it cried to see the falling star?
Only the landless soldier lost in war.

(22-25)

Lewis is a skillful reporter of the Indian scene, of a village or a Hindu festival, or a funeral, but in spite of his sympathy for the peasants in their wretchedness and squalor he remained a detached observer. He could even view the sufferings of the people in a long perspective, wherein the war is merely a shadow that will pass, while the peasants, exploited by the economic system and at the mercy of nature, represent man's instinct to survive. Such is the moral of "The Peasants":

Across scorched hills and trampled crops
The soldiers straggle by.
History staggers in their wake.
The peasants watch them die.

(9-12)

In the closing months of his life, Lewis' thoughts turned continually toward death. This may well have been because he broke his jaw playing football and spent some time in the hospital at Poona; there he wrote two poems, about his separation from his wife and about the somber reflections engendered by a spell in hospital. "Burma Casualty," a darker poem, concerns a soldier who, after being wounded in action, has to have his leg amputated and learns to comprehend the realm of darkness.

Yet it would be false to suppose that Lewis was deliberately surrendering himself to death. He believed that his most serious work would be done after he had returned home and that he must come to grips with the details of Welsh life and Welsh thought. His preoccupation with death is understandable: he was tired; he hated the process of war and the separation it brought from everything he loved; like most Europeans he was weighed down by the oppressiveness of India, the passive suffering of its people, the omnipresent stench and panoply of death. It is not surprising that he had a presentiment of his own death, nor that it may sometimes have offered a welcome escape from a world of unease.

In the poems written toward the end of his life

Lewis explored one of the themes that run through the work of Keyes and of Douglas: the conflict between life and death, negation and love. He is explicit about this in a letter to his wife:

And although I am more and more engrossed with the single poetic theme of Life and Death, for there doesn't seem to be any question more directly relevant than this one of what survives of all the beloved, I find myself quite unable to express at once the passion of Love, the coldness of Death (Death is cold) and the fire that beats against resignation, acceptance. Acceptance seems so spiritless, protest so vain. In between the two I live.

(*In the Green Tree*, p. 16)

The most richly imagined poem to spring from that conflict is "The Jungle." He wrote about it to Robert Graves, who was helping him to prepare a second collection of poems, which was published in 1945 under the title *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*. Part of Lewis' letter is printed in Graves's foreword:

I've felt a number of things deeply out here; perhaps the jungle has moved me more deeply than anything else. . . . but when I wrote a poem about the jungle I found it had become a criticism of the Western world which in a measure I understand, but of the jungle I had said nothing.

It is true that Lewis criticizes the Western world both directly and by stressing the idyllic beauty of the jungle, beside which our urban civilization is mean and drab:

The patient queues, headlines and slogans flung
Across a frightened continent, the town
Sullen and out of work, the little home
Semi-detached, suburban. . . .

(31-34)

Yet he has said a great deal about the jungle in passages that are among the most vivid and evocative he ever wrote:

The crocodile slides from the ochre sand
And drives the great translucent fish
Under the boughs across the running gravel.

But we who dream beside this jungle pool
Prefer the instinctive rightness of the poised
Pied kingfisher deep darting for a fish
To all the banal rectitudes of states,
The dew-bright diamonds on a viper's back

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To the slow poison of a meaning lost
And the vituperations of the just.

The banyan's branching clerestories close
The noon's harsh splendour to a head of light.
(5-7; 37-43; 44-45)

The two final sections of the poem move between meditations on love, death, human responsibility, and the immediacy of the jungle. There is a superb moment when the poet moves away from his concern with elemental love and celebrates the individual's need for human love:

Oh you who want us for ourselves,
Whose love can start the snow-rush in the woods
And melt the glacier in the dark coulisse,
Forgive this strange inconstancy of soul,
The face distorted in a jungle pool
That drowns its image in a mort of leaves.
(64-69)

Lewis seldom uses language so daringly and unerringly. The initial shock of encountering in a poem about the jungle images derived from snowfall and glaciers gives way to a recognition of their rightness. Moreover the employment of uncommon words seems equally well justified. The word "coulisse," besides being the precise geological term required by the context, echoes the sound of "snow" and "glacier" and anticipates the sibilants of the next line. And the phrase "mort of leaves" is an even greater triumph of poetic suggestiveness, for the very rare word "mort," which means a large number, carries with it associations belonging to the French word for death. Lewis seldom equaled the strength and lyrical flow of those few lines.

His own death remains as blurred as the image in the jungle pool. On 5 March 1944 at Goppe Pass in Arakan, Burma, where his regiment had advanced to face the Japanese, Lewis was wounded by a pistol shot and died in the Casualty Clearing Station at Bawli. The vagueness of that account in the official regimental history has led to rumors that he killed himself or was murdered for political reasons (he was the battalion intelligence officer). Nobody has brought forward any evidence to support either of those theories.

Lewis' poetry seldom displays the intellectual force or the hard pulsating clarity that mark the best work of Douglas; and it seldom moves with the lyrical grace and assurance that so often give distinction

to Keyes's poems. But his concern for mankind, especially the poor of Wales and of India, his patient exploration of love and death, and his ability, in a handful of poems, to shape his feelings of loneliness and fear into the formal pattern of verse are likely to ensure the survival of the best work that he left behind in *Raiders' Dawn* and *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets*.

EPILOGUE

SOME ten years after the war was over Charles Causley wrote "At the British War Cemetery, Bayeux." It is a less solemn, liturgical poem than Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen," which ever since its publication in September 1914 has been an almost official requiem for those who die in battle. Causley's poem is more lyrical, at times even a refusal to mourn:

On your geometry of sleep
The chestnut and the fir-tree fly,
And lavender and marguerite
Forge with their flowers an English sky.
(9-12)

Yet one notes, in this idyllic stanza, the harsh double meaning of "forge," and in the poem's last two stanzas, Causley's brief dialogue with the dead, he acknowledges the pity of war and the sacrifice of those who died so that the living might be free:

About your easy head my prayers
I said with syllables of clay.
What gift, I asked, shall I bring now
Before I weep and walk away?

Take, they replied, the oak and laurel.
Take our fortune of tears and live
Like a spendthrift lover. All we ask
Is the one gift you cannot give.
(17-24)

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