

Classic Poetry Series

Keith Douglas
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Keith Douglas(January 24, 1920 – June 9, 1944)

Poetry

Douglas described his poetic style as 'extrospective'; that is, he focused on external impressions rather than inner emotions. The result is a poetry which, according to his detractors, can be callous in the midst of war's atrocities. For others, Douglas's work is powerful and unsettling because its exact descriptions eschew egotism and shift the burden of emotion from the poet to the reader. His best poetry is generally considered to rank alongside the twentieth-century's finest soldier-poetry.

In his poem, "Desert Flowers" (1943), Douglas mentions World War I poet Isaac Rosenberg claiming that he is only repeating what "Isaac" has already written.

Early Life

Douglas was born in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, the son of Capt. Keith Sholto Douglas, MC (retired) and Marie Josephine Castellain. His mother became unwell and collapsed in 1924 of encephalitis lethargica, never to fully recover. By 1926, the chicken farm set up by his father had collapsed. Douglas was sent to a preparatory school (Edgeborough School in Guildford) the same year. The family became increasingly poor, and his father had to leave home in early 1928 to seek better employment in Wales. The persistent ill-health of Marie led to the collapse of the marriage of his parents by the end of that year, and his father remarried in 1930. Douglas was deeply hurt by his father not communicating with him after 1928, and when Capt. Douglas did write at last in 1938, Keith did not agree to meet him. In one of his letters written in 1940 Douglas looked back on his childhood: "I lived alone during the most fluid and formative years of my life, and during that time I lived on my imagination, which was so powerful as to persuade me that the things I imagined would come true."

Education

Marie Douglas faced extreme financial distress, so much so that only the generosity of the Edgeborough headmaster Mr. James permitted Douglas to attend school in 1930–1931, his last year there. Douglas sat in 1931 for the entrance examination to Christ's Hospital, where education was free and there was monetary assistance to cover all other costs. He was accepted, and joined Christ's Hospital, near Horsham, in September 1931, studying there till 1938. It was at this school that his considerable poetic talent and artistic ability were

recognised. So was his cavalier attitude to authority and property, which nearly led to expulsion in 1935 over a purloined training rifle. In surprising contrast, he excelled as a member of the school's Officers Training Corps, particularly enjoying drill, although he was philosophically opposed to militarism.

University

After his bruising brush with authority in 1935, Douglas settled down to a less troubled and more productive period at school, during which he excelled both at studies and games, and at the end of which he won an Open Exhibition to Merton College, Oxford in 1938 to read History and English. The well-known poet Edmund Blunden was his tutor at Merton, and regarded his poetic talent highly. Blunden sent his poems to T. S. Eliot, the doyen of English poetry: Eliot found Douglas impressive. Douglas became the editor of *The Cherwell*, and one of the poets anthologised in the collection *Eight Oxford Poets* (1942), although by the time that volume appeared he was already in the army. He does not seem to have been acquainted with somewhat junior but contemporary Oxford poets like Sidney Keyes, Drummond Allison, John Heath-Stubbs, Philip Larkin, etc. who would make names for themselves.

At Oxford, Douglas entered a relationship with a sophisticated Chinese student named Yingcheng. Her own sentiments towards him were less intense, and she refused to marry him. Yingcheng remained the unrequited love of Douglas's life and the source of his best romantic verse, despite his involvements with other women later, most notably Milena Guterrez Penya.

Military Service

Within days of the declaration of war he reported to an army recruiting centre with the intention of joining a cavalry regiment, but like many others keen to serve he had to wait, and it was not until July 1940 that he started his training. On 1 February 1941 he passed out from Sandhurst, the British Army officer training academy, and was posted to the Second Derbyshire Yeomanry at Ripon. He was shipped to the Middle East in July 1941 and transferred to the Nottinghamshire (Sherwood Rangers) Yeomanry. Posted initially at Cairo and Palestine, he found himself stuck at Headquarters twenty miles behind El Alamein as a camouflage officer as the Second Battle of El Alamein began. At dawn on 24 October 1942, the Regiment advanced, and suffered numerous casualties from enemy anti-tank guns. Chafing at inactivity, Douglas took off against orders on 27 October, drove to the Regimental HQ in a truck, and reported to the C.O., Colonel E.O. Kellett, lying that he had been instructed to go to the front (luckily this escapade did not land him in serious trouble; in a reprise of 1935, Douglas

got off with an apology). Desperately needing officer replacements, the Colonel posted him to A Squadron, and gave him the opportunity to take part as a fighting tanker in the Eighth Army's victorious sweep through North Africa vividly recounted in his beautiful memoir *Alamein to Zem Zem*, illustrated with his own drawings.

Death

Captain Douglas returned from North Africa to England in December 1943 and took part in the D-Day invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944. He was killed by enemy mortar fire on 9 June, while the Regiment was advancing from Bayeux. The regimental chaplain buried him by a hedge near to where he died. His remains now lie in Tilly-sur-Seulles War Cemetery.

Aristocrats: 'I Think I Am Becoming A God'

The noble horse with courage in his eye,
clean in the bone, looks up at a shellburst:
away fly the images of the shires
but he puts the pipe back in his mouth.
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?
Unicorns, almost,
for they are fading into two legends
in which their stupidity and chivalry
are celebrated. Each, fool and hero, will be an immortal.
These 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.

Keith Douglas

Cairo Jag

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? Or Marcelle, Parisienne
always preoccupied with her dull dead lover:
she has all the photographs and his letters
tied in a bundle and stamped Decede in mauve ink.
All this takes place in a stink of jasmin.

But there are the streets dedicated to sleep
stenches and the sour smells, the sour cries
do not disturb their application to slumber
all day, scattered on the pavement like rags
afflicted with fatalism and hashish. The women
offering their children brown-paper breasts
dry and twisted, elongated like the skull,
Holbein's signature. But his stained white town
is something in accordance with mundane conventions-
Marcelle drops her Gallic airs and tragedy
suddenly shrieks in Arabic about the fare
with the cabman, links herself so
with the somnambulists and legless beggars:
it is all one, all as you have heard.

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, clothes and possessions
clinging to the ground, a man with no head
has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.

Keith Douglas

Desert Flowers

Living in a wide landscape are the flowers -
Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying -
the shell and the hawk every hour
are slaying men and jerboas, slaying

the mind: but the body can fill
the hungry flowers and the dogs who cry words
at nights, the most hostile things of all.
But that is not news. Each time the night discards

draperies on the eyes and leaves the mind awake
I look each side of the door of sleep
for the little coin it will take
to buy the secret I shall not keep.

I see men as trees suffering
or confound the detail and the horizon.
Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing
of what the others never set eyes on.

Keith Douglas

How To Kill

Under the parabola of a ball,
a child turning into a man,
I looked into the air too long.
The ball fell in my hand, it sang
in the closed fist: Open Open
Behold a gift designed to kill.

Now in my dial of glass appears
the soldier who is going to die.
He smiles, and moves about in ways
his mother knows, habits of his.
The wires touch his face: 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 wave 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

Keith Douglas

Simplify Me When I'm Dead

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

As the processes of earth
strip off the colour of 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.

Of my skeleton perhaps,
so stripped, a learned man will say
"He was of such a type and intelligence," no more.

Thus when in a year collapse
particular memories, you may
deduce, from the long pain I bore

the opinions I held, who was my foe
and what I left, even my appearance
but incidents will be no guide.

Time's wrong-way telescope will show
a minute man ten years hence
and by distance simplified.

Through that lens see if I seem
substance or nothing: of the world
deserving mention or charitable oblivion,

not by momentary spleen
or love into decision hurled,
leisurely arrive at an opinion.

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

The Knife

Can I explain this to you? Your eyes
are entrances the mouths of caves
I issue from wonderful interiors
upon a blessed sea and a fine day,
from inside these caves I look and dream.

Your hair explicable as a waterfall
in some black liquid cooled by legend
fell across my thought in a moment
became a garment I am naked without
lines drawn across through morning and evening.

And in your body each minute I died
moving your thigh could disinter me
from a grave in a distant city:
your breasts deserted by cloth, clothed in twilight
filled me with tears, sweet cups of flesh.

Yes, to touch two fingers made us worlds
stars, waters, promontories, chaos
swooning in elements without form or time
come down through long seas among sea marvels
embracing like survivors in our islands.

This I think happened to us together
though now no shadow of it flickers in your hands
your eyes look down on ordinary streets
If I talk to you I might be a bird
with a message, a dead man, a photograph.

Keith Douglas

Vergissmeinnicht

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone
returning over the nightmare ground
we found the place again, and found
the soldier sprawling in the sun.

The frowning barrel of his gun
overshadowing. As we came on
that day, he hit my tank with one
like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil
the dishonoured picture of his girl
who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht.
in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content,
abased, and seeming to have paid
and mocked at by his own equipment
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

But she would weep to see today
how on his skin the swart flies move;
the dust upon the paper eye
and the burst stomach like a cave.

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.

Keith Douglas

Villanelle Of Spring Bells

Bells in the town alight with spring
converse, with a concordance of new airs
make clear the fresh and ancient sound they sing.

People emerge from winter to hear them ring,
children glitter with mischief and the blind man hears
bells in the town alight with spring.

Even he on his eyes feels the caressing
finger of Persephone, and her voice escaped from tears
make clear the fresh and ancient sound they sing.

Bird feels the enchantment of his wing
and in ten fine notes dispels twenty cares.
Bells in the town alight with spring

warble the praise of Time, for he can bring
this season: chimes the merry heaven bears
make clear the fresh and ancient sound they sing.

All evil men intent on evil thing
falter, for in their cold unready ears
bells in the town alight with spring
make clear the fresh and ancient sound they sing.

Submitted by Andrew Todd

Keith Douglas