The poetic achievement of Keith Douglas.

Peter R. Sturgeon

University of Windsor

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THE POETIC ACHIEVEMENT OF KEITH DOUGLAS

BY

PETER R. STURGEON

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario
1973
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the poetry of the British writer Keith Douglas (1920-1944) and to establish its particular merit. A premise of the analysis is that the relative lack of critical attention which Douglas has received is due to other factors than the quality of his verse.

The first three chapters trace Douglas' development in stylistic and thematic maturity through what are considered to be three distinct phases of his work; these follow the grouping of his Collected Poems (1966) into "Schooldays," "Oxford" and "Army: England," and "Middle East." By a discussion of a representative number of his poems, with special attention to his persistent themes of time and death, it is shown that Douglas' maturity and depth of perception were present in his earliest verse, and that the significant change in his work was the growth of realism as a measure of that depth.

The fourth chapter considers Douglas' war journal, Alamein to Zem Zem (1946), and, in brief, the poetry of his wartime contemporaries, Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes, as frameworks for his "Middle East" poems. As this grouping is commonly treated by some literary histories as war poetry, the contexts of war and the work of several fellow-poets contribute relevant insights into Douglas' place as a
representative war poet without sacrificing the perspective of his complete output.

The last chapter contains a history of the publication of Douglas' poetry, as well as a survey of the limited critical work undertaken and a cross-section of the reviews of his several editions. The publishing histories of some of his contemporaries throw some light on the lack of critical response his poetry has received. In conclusion, Douglas' best poems are briefly summarized in support of the contention that his work deserves more consideration than that presently given.

The thesis proposes that Keith Douglas was a gifted poet who, in a very brief poetic career, managed to produce a body of verse that merits greater respect and a more prominent place in the history of modern British poetry. Because he has often been considered a war poet, Douglas has not been accorded sufficient recognition partly because of the restricted range of that role. He was an accomplished modern poet, and on these grounds he is worthy of renewed critical attention.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee: Dr. Louis MacKendrick, for his extensive and detailed criticisms of the drafts; Dr. Raymond Smith, for accepting the position of second reader on such short notice; and Mr. Walter Skákoon, for his continued patience. I would also like to thank Dr. Bruce King, for his encouragement and suggestions on the initial drafts, and my wife Judith, whose typing and constant enthusiasm contributed much to the completion of this thesis.
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INTRODUCTION

Keith Castellain Douglas was a British poet, killed in action in the Second World War. He was born in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, on January 24th, 1920, and showed remarkable insight and artistic talent as a child. The earliest poem in his *Collected Poems* was written at the age of fourteen, and by the age of eighteen he was being published. In 1938 Douglas undertook studies in English literature at Merton College, Oxford, where his tutor was Edmund Blunden. A member of the Oxford O.T.C., he was called up in 1940 and sailed for the Middle East in June, 1941.

While in the Middle East, Douglas wrote *Alamein to Zem Zem*, a war journal, and contributed poems to *Personal Landscape*, a literary magazine being published in Cairo. Prior to his departure for the Middle East, he had several poems printed in *Eight Oxford Poets* (1941), and shared an anthology entitled *Selected Poems* with John Hall and Norman Nicholson in 1943.

Douglas returned to England shortly before Christmas.

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1 All biographical details are taken from the editors' preface to Keith Douglas: *Collected Poems*, eds. John Waller, G. S. Fraser, and J. C. Hall (New York, 1966), pp. 13-16.

2 Keith Douglas, Keith Douglas: *Collected Poems*, eds. John Waller, G. S. Fraser, and J. C. Hall (New York, 1966). This work will be referred to as *Collected Poems* throughout.
in 1943, and spent the spring in preparation for the Allied invasion. On June 9th, 1944, he was killed in Normandy at the age of twenty-four.

At the time of his death Douglas was planning a collection of poems and drawings entitled Bête Noire. These poems were eventually collected and edited by John Waller and G. S. Fraser in 1951 as The Collected Poems of Keith Douglas. The one major difference between this edition and the edition of 1966 is that the earlier work printed the poems in reverse chronological order. The Collected Poems published in 1966 consists of eighty-eight completed poems, four translations, and six fragments, arranged chronologically through the assistance of Douglas' notes and the aid of his mother, Mrs. Marie J. Douglas.


Criticism of Douglas' poetry and prose is scant, consisting mainly of reviews, introductions to the works, and occasional mention in literary histories and general surveys of British literature. Where the literary histories have tended to dismiss Douglas as simply a representative poet of the Second World War, G. S. Fraser and Ted Hughes have tried to establish him as a capable poet deserving attention.


4 Keith Douglas, Selected Poems: Keith Douglas, ed. Ted Hughes (London, 1964). In all subsequent references, this will be referred to as Selected Poems.
for his intrinsic merits.

Although Douglas was not a great poet, and conjecture about what he might have become is problematic at best, he left a sufficient amount of good poetry to be worthy of more consideration than it has received. If, as Douglas has said, "Poetry is to be judged not by what the poet has tried to say; only by what he has said," sufficient reason remains for a detailed consideration of his work.

In the following pages I will examine Douglas' poetry and prose to illustrate his achievement as a creative artist. In the poetry section, attention will be given to the process of development in style and technique, as well as the growth in maturity of the themes. To show this, I will compare and analyze poems from what I consider to be the three distinct phases of his verse. The extent to which a tension exists between romantic and realistic poetry in Douglas' endeavours to find a suitable mode of expression will form one of the main directions of the study. Douglas' concern with time is perhaps the most sustained and varied theme of the entire collection. How his attitude and style changes regarding this central idea will be integral to the analysis of the poems.

Douglas' war journal, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, will be studied for what insight it gives into the nature of the poetry. Stylistic and thematic aspects of the work are

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interesting in terms of the poetry written by Douglas in the Middle East. The book's own merits as an account of the North African campaign fall outside the scope of this thesis, and will be discussed only insofar as they contribute to an understanding of Douglas' attitudes and perceptions about life and poetry. Along with Douglas' prose, the war poetry of Douglas' contemporaries, especially Sidney Keyes and Alun Lewis, will be briefly considered. A look at stylistic differences and thematic preoccupations will attempt to place Douglas' war poetry in proper perspective.

In conclusion, I will discuss what little criticism exists on Douglas, as well as the past choices of his poetry that have been anthologized. Although Douglas' poetry has been available for more than twenty years, a lecture by G. S. Fraser seems to be the extent of the critical work undertaken. Some reasons will be advanced for this peculiar want of criticism. Included here will be a look at what I have come to believe are Douglas' best poems, worthy of critical attention and anthologizing.

Why Douglas' poetry is important, what he represents in modern poetry, and his rapid achievement of such virtually unheralded poetic skill will be the main emphases of this thesis. What his writing lacks in volume, it more than compensates for in depth, clarity, and honesty, a considerable accomplishment for one so young.
CHAPTER I
"SCHOOLDAYS": INNOCENCE AND EXPERIMENT

"Schooldays," the first of six sections of Keith Douglas' Collected Poems, contains sixteen poems written between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. In these Douglas reveals his innocence and his wisdom, attempting various verse forms and techniques in his search for a suitable medium of expression. From the earliest poems, his preoccupation with time, death, and the role of the poet are expressed with freshness and surprising clarity. Present are a rich lyric quality, which he sought so hard to control and refine in his later poems, and an artistic eye for intense, picturesque description.

In the first poem of the collection, "Mummers," Douglas creates a true feeling of texture and lyric fullness:

See where the deep night's blast has straddled
The ancient gargoyle, weather-addled
And striped with melted tapestry
Of snow...

The heavy stresses of the first two lines hold a solemnity and stateliness which is smoothly relieved by the lighter iambics of the subsequent lines, returning the poem gently to the earlier "winking cups" and "pearly laughter" of the first stanza. The poem does, however,

1 Collected Poems, p. 23.
exhibit Douglas' inexperience. Though "well-made," certain aspects of the style are mechanical; a drill or exercise in technique comes to mind.

The rhymes are careful and regular. The first stanza is aabcccb. Feminine, or double rhymes are used in the first, second, fourth and fifth lines: "table...sable...shuttered...fluttered," with single rhymes in the third and sixth lines: "all...fall." The rhymes in the other stanza substitute the triple rhymes, "tapestry...artistry," to sustain the movement of the passage.

The diction of the poem appears imitative of the romantic tradition. The "winking cups" and "pearly laughter" are pleasant but hardly innovative, as are "deep night's blast" and "snow crusted." The inversion of "That sable / Doff for your brighter silks" is forced and justified only by the need to rhyme. It little heightens the overall effect of the poem. That Douglas is getting the feel of words and language is evident as he experiments with "wind-fluttered," "Cell-fasting," and "snow-red," seeking the tight imagery in which he later excels.

The subject matter is of fantasy, romance and imagined experience. The portrayal of the scene veils it in the rose hues of sentimental reflection. Yet, a depth of perception occurs in the second last line of the poem to dispel the magical presence. "with snow-crusted / Cardboard steed." This intrusion of reality points out the inseparability of reality from Douglas' view of events; even at the onset of a considerably youthful career.
His awareness of death and the tenuous position man holds on life appears in "Distraction from Classics" and "Famous Men," both written in 1935. In two variations of a twelve-line poem, Douglas tries different styles in an effort to discuss the transience of man and the inexorable progress of time. The resulting impression of the past is strikingly similar in both poems, considering the disparate nature of the techniques.

"Distraction from Classics" is divided into a nine- and a three-line stanza. The lines are long, mostly pentameter, in a balance of iambic and trochaic feet. The rhyme scheme is consistently regular: abacdeedc and fbf, and the rhymes are exact: "tears...years," "grabs...glass."^2

"Famous Men" is composed of four three-line stanzas, heavily trochaic and predominantly trimeter. The shorter lines rhyme differently in two respects from "Distraction from Classics." The pattern is aba, bcd, efd, and ecd, the rhymes occurring across the poem. Off-rhyme or approximate rhyme describes "sung...sun," "remembered...deserved," "them...men" and "dactyls...skulls."^3 The brevity of the lines and the slight irregularities of rhyme reveal Douglas' attempt to create a harder, terser expression of theme than he does in "Distraction"; the language is difficult as the concluding stanza illustrates:

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^3 Ibid., p. 25.
And think, like plates lie deep
licked clean their skulls,
rest beautifully, staring.  

The words are mainly monosyllabic as he tries to increase
the tightness of the verse.

"Distraction" is more casual and slowly paced. The
long first strophe flows in its description, enhanced by
"watching clouds...fluttering pages," "beckoning scents...
wafted from summer grass," and "sound of sunlight behind
the scratching pens." The presence of life and action in a
schoolroom is carefully worked out, until the last line of
the first strophe breaks stride and sets the tone of the

conclusion:

We crouch to read the speech of the ages.

Many were here, some cursed, loved some. All these
Alike pass; after a space return,
Loud-voiced, mocking the older memories.

Both poems establish the importance of the past. "Distrac-
tion" is more sentimental, reminding the reader of the
humanity of the dead; "Famous Men" coolly emphasizes the
fact of their decay and disintegration.

The style has changed slightly from "Mummers." 
Douglas is less restricted by the form, and willing to allow
variations. One clear example is the way in which the in-
version of "Some cursed, loved some" adds to the tone and
impact of the final lines of "Distraction," unlike the forced

4 Collected Poems, p. 25.
5 Ibid., p. 24.
6 Ibid.
inversion in the beginning of "Mummers." It is a minor development, certainly, but it is a definite one.

".303," from the same year, treats death's intrusion into life in much more brutal imagery. Another twelve-line poem, it consists of three stanzas in abba, ccdc, efe rhyme scheme. Each stanza establishes a particular phase of the poem. The first stanza shows "the pine-trees / Cooling their sun-warmed needles" under "the moon's face white / Beautiful as the breeze." The second verse sees the same setting but now the branches "Wave like dead arms," and the moon appears "Pock-marked with death." The symmetry of the stanzas makes the change in attitude even more striking, a prelude to the violent conclusion:

Through a machine-gun's sights
I saw men curse, weep, cough, sprawl in their entrails;
You did not know the gardener in the vales,
Only efficiency delights you.

The second line of this stanza brings the pace of the poem to almost a dead stop. The hard stresses slam the details onto the page. The intrusion, though expected, is potent, the tone caustic; the reality of death in the present is harder to reflect gently than the awareness of past death in "Distraction" or "Famous Men."

The role of the poet and the gap between himself and the public are the themes of "Caravan" and "Images," also written in 1935. The inability of the poet to express himself to the public, regardless of his artistic ability per se,

7 Collected Poems, p. 31.
is the significant statement of "Caravan."  

The poem, set outside the gates of a desert town, shows that the poets cannot reach the public, despite their craft and knowledge. The poets outside the gate tell the travellers that they have "discovered the soul of music," and that during the migration of the birds, "under the always rhythmic / shutter of wingtips," the sea appears like "the slope of green and mountainous moving / Country." They "revealed the perfect sources, the lost / Wisdom," but they spoke in "the tongue of swallows." The beauty of their knowledge becomes incommunicable, as a result of the privacy of their language. The private nature of the thought and symbols serve to alienate the public:

But they not knowing the words, nor in his hand Seeing the meaning, went thence over the sands. 

The culpability is not specifically directed towards poet or public; the condition is merely described. The poet is trying to get through, but his language is too beautiful and private to allow public understanding.

"Images" possesses the same sense of antiquity in its description of men and landscape. The five three-line stanzas are more limited than those in "Caravan," which are six, six, five and two lines in length. Again, as in "Distraction" and "Famous Men," the poems reveal the tension between romantic, elaborate language and realistic, mono-

9 Ibid., p. 27.
syllabic words. Where "Images" has "The straight men are
not there now / and their dark spears lean against the sun,"
the single syllables becoming by their tightness like heavy
stresses, "Caravan" extends and embellishes language:

Then the attained sea, under the always rhythmic
Shutter of wingtips, only suggests to spent
Eyes slanting, the slope of green and mountainous moving
Country. 10

The images take on colour and depth, and the richness of
the verse with its long "o's" and sentences aids the rom-
antic feeling created.

The thematic concern of "Images" is somewhat different
from that of "Caravan." The poets are presented as
"beautiful and angular, not different," "the unacknowledged
rulers" (the last an echo of Shelley's "poets are the
unacknowledged legislators of the world," in his A Defense
of Poetry). The tolling of the bell in all but the third
stanza establishes a sense of foreboding and doom. The
poets, however, do not feel bound by the bell or worried
by its meaning because of their insight:

...understanding the bell they do not hear it,
but walk over the hilltop
into their rarer climate.

Because of the poet's understanding, he is capable of
accepting or rejecting whatever seeming truths are manifested
to him. The poet has a responsibility and a privilege to
select what he feels is important and express it in whatever
manner he wishes.

That the poet must establish his own criteria for truth becomes apparent in "Encounter with a God." The poetess Ono-No-Komache has just described the god Daikoku as "beautiful, she said, with a slight / tendency to angles," when he appears, drunk, with a "round, white paunch," ranting that he does not "wish to be wonderfully made," and "will not be in a poem." To this outburst the poetess replies:

"How intricate and peculiarly well-arranged the symmetrical belly-purses of Lord Daikoku."

Speaking of this poem in his introduction to Selected Poems, Ted Hughes calls "the language...simple, the musical inflection...honest and charming, the technique flawless," although he considers the poem "Juvenilia." The poem is the longest in the "Schooldays" section, and is uniform throughout. The internal cadences of "greenish gods of chance and fame" and "the rock pool carp in the waterfall at night," as well as the exotic setting, are similar to the poems already discussed. Douglas' interest in the exotic, mysterious, or ancient allowed him to express his themes in a more regular verse form, adding to the studied seriousness he felt at the age of sixteen. The poet's own role in creating truth has to be established by Douglas to suit himself.

Stylistically the poems of this period show many

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11 Collected Poems, p. 33.

12 Selected Poems, p. 11.
variations of form. They range in length from six to twenty-five lines; the forms encompass lyrics, sonnets and villanelles. Three stanzas of six lines each is an early favourite that retains its interest for Douglas through most of the Oxford period. What the various forms reveal is Douglas' search for a better mode of expression, often successful, occasionally not. Douglas saw nothing unusual about adapting verse forms to meet his needs.

Edmund Blunden, in introducing Collected Poems, maintains that Douglas "did not wish to startle with novelty but to fashion his work as best suited his kind of thinking, whether that was unanticipated or after all of an ancient kind." An example of this is "Sonnet" (1936), which conveys very intense images in the conventional verse form:

Curtaining this country the whispering rain 
Stipples in cold monochrome the sun's 
Alive and tinted picture, so warm once; 
The wind's voice laden like reeds with random pain

Impending with their frown the bowed trees, 
Clouds make a ceiling by the rooks' village 
At which how vainly they complain, silly 
Voices fall down, lost in the day's disease.

Like all, this storm will blunder along the hills, 
Retire muttering into a smutty corner 
Of sky, and there dying, his rant stills.

Wait. See like a tired giant the sun return 
To step into your valley and gladly fill 
Evening with moist colour, made un tarnished.

The personification of the natural elements in "the whispering rain," the "wind's voice," "the frowning clouds,"

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14 Ibid., p. 35.
and "the day's disease" is certainly traditional, but the storm, blundering "muttering into a smutty corner," "dying," and the sun, "a tired giant," create a real sense of character. The artist's eye is evident in "cold monochrome," "tinted picture," and "moist colour," painting the landscape with words. The sestet with its "Wait. See..." addressed to the reader, follows exceptionally smoothly from the octet, preserving the subdued tone of the poem.

The "Villanelle of Gorizia"15 (1937) captures the sense of the day and the sun's movements as "the street is repeated with sunlight." The simplicity of vocabulary and the extensive use of "the" and "and" to begin lines suggests the slow passing of time, echoed by the motif of the sun. The poem is exceptionally regular; Douglas was seemingly more interested in studying the form than in transmuting it. The tone is subdued, and the refrains sustain the lightness traditionally attached to the villanelle. The poem ends on a melancholic note, hinted at throughout by such words as "tire," "apathetic," and "droop," and expanded in the verse:

All this the bottle says, that I have quite poured out. The wine slides in my throat and grieves. Over and over the street is repeated with sunlight, the flutes sound In the wineshop, out of sight.

Time, which remains constant here, is seen as an inevitable force in "Kristin," "Point of View," and "On Leaving School." These, the last poems written before Oxford, present a more personally affected view of time, unlike "Distraction" and

15 Collected Poems, p. 37.
"Famous Men" which objectify it for the poet.

Both "Kristin" and "Point of View" are in the three stanza, eighteen-line form, Douglas' most frequently used structure prior to the "Army: England" poems, though "On Leaving School" is a sonnet. The rhymes are consistent, though not as identical as in the earlier poems. Exceptions like "hair...messenger,"16 "distance...pistol,"17 and "shallow...charlock"18 show Douglas' growing confidence and his skill. As themes become a deeper part of his own feelings, his concern with their expression tended to relax formal restrictions.

The days that lie before him are now pressed upon Douglas' attention. Time is becoming a personal adversary, and the future is examined with a certain degree of foreboding and trepidation. Unlike the earlier poems, where he can objectify, and the later poems, where his maturity and experience protect him, these poems show his fears and questions about what is to come.

In "Kristin,"19 Douglas adopts the classical attitude of enjoying the present:

Love like the lovely plants he wants renewed--
Take it all back after the sun has gone
Perhaps, but humour him this candle hour.

Preservation of the present is "futile" as "Black days lean

16 Collected Poems, p. 36.
17 Ibid., p. 38.
18 Ibid., p. 39.
19 Ibid., p. 36.
"over." The only hope is to accept what happiness it gives, for "these limpid days will not be constant; / They will forsake you, will not reappear."

"Point of View" explores the hopes of others in tune with Douglas' own feelings. The point of the poem is that whatever they enjoy now is no indication of the future. Those who hear in their "mind's ear the horses like a pistol / Smack on the odd stone," or the "chorus of reeds" are eventually the same as those who "Shut out the, fields and search for facts too fast." The heavily anaplectic lines lead quickly to the unavoidable question, all men must consider:

Who'll say, when nurse has had her nap and woken, Who is to tell, when she takes away our toys, Which of us will catch tears in his simple hand?

"On Leaving School," the last poem of the section, tries for the same effect in sonnet form. As in "Point of View," the first two stanzas describe the present. The quatrains are reflective and sentimental, for "it is awkward / Realizing happiness seems just to have started / And now we must leave it." The two tercets consider what the future will bring, with the same inherent uncertainty of "Point of View," especially in the last two lines:

...It will be that way, and Time on our ground Will sweep like a maid, and where we were be clean. Shall we find room to laugh, if turning round We see where we have walked, how wrong we have been?

20 Collected Poems, P. 38.
21 Ibid., p. 39.
This personal feeling in Douglas is something which he never completely controls, even in his last poems. Here it is obviously not yet under his watchful eye. The familiarity with the tools of his craft by this stage has instilled more confidence, more willingness to experiment outside of the traditional forms. His awareness of time as a force personally threatening his development has not yet evolved, but he does see its awesome ability. The diction has moved towards monosyllables, colloquial speech, and avoidance of archaisms, but the tension between romanticism and realism pursues him to what was probably his last completed poem, "On a Return from Egypt". In a letter to J. C. Hall, dated August 10th, 1943, Douglas reflected on these early poems, stating that he "wrote lyrically, as an innocent, because [he] was an innocent."²² His competence and perception are well on their way to an early maturity, however, and his enthusiasm is genuine.

²² Quoted in Collected Poems, p. 149.
CHAPTER II

"OXFORD" AND "ARMY: ENGLAND": GROWTH AND PREPARATION

Although the "Oxford" and "Army: England" sections are distinct in Collected Poems, their common place as pre-war poetry, the interrelation of their themes and stylistic patterns, and the brevity of "Army: England" as a separate group necessitates their consideration as one entity. There are forty-one poems in the combined sections, constituting close to half of the book. The period covered includes Douglas' admission to Oxford, his enlistment in the O.T.C., and his training before departure for the Middle East; the time involved falls between October, 1938, and June, 1941.

The period as a whole represents the interim between Douglas' initial attempts at verse and the studied coolness of his war poetry. The poems are varied in theme and form as the scope of his writing expands. The "Oxford" poems surpass the "Schooldays" section in many respects, although they are still "very 'literary' poems."¹ The poems of the "Army: England" section show Douglas' "biting deeper into experience,"² and moving towards the later depth of the


² Ibid.
"Middle East" poems, but they are related to the "Oxford" group as experiments seeking stability and poise in form. He is still struggling with himself. The effort required to achieve the characteristic tightness of his later verse does not always succeed in subduing the aesthetic, colourful style of his earliest work.

"Forgotten the Red Leaves"³ (1938), the first poem of the "Oxford" section, presents the past in rich, lyric tones reminiscent of "Hummers." In a church "amputated by high explosive," "only the sun, a solitary worshipper, / Tiptoes towards the altar and rests there." The sea is a place of fish "like footmen" and "blue corridors" where "jewelled skulls" rest in a world of haziness and unreality. These memories, "almost forgot," "return / Like princes into rooms they once owned." The speaker's memory of these scenes is becoming dim, distant and weaker. The solemn notes of the church and sea corridors change to the pleasant remembrance of past love:

Once on Monte Nero in the spring
Some peasant girl fashioned for love and work
Taught me a smile that I had forgotten,
It is so hard to speak her language now.

Despite the use of exotic and stylized diction, the sentimental tone is in a direct line from "Distraction" and "Famous Men." The remoteness achieved in these poems is not quite attainable here; the personal voice of the poet comes through. He is hurt by the passing of time and the strain to overcome.

³ Collected Poems, p. 43.
it is evident in "It is so hard to speak her language now."

The theme of longing, and the necessity of controlling it, occurs several times throughout the "Oxford" and "Army: England" periods. "Spring Sailor" (1939) shows Douglas' use of the three six-line stanza form developed in "School-days." The first two stanzas, in a similar way to the octet of a sonnet, present the setting or problem to be resolved in the third. The description moves from the sky, with its "high-decked cloud" to the presence of two lovers. The birds, "thriftless balladmongers," have caused "silly tears and smiles" in the poet's companion. The poet, endeavouring to restrain emotion, wishes "to escape the dainty touch / Of a day so heavy with the imagery / Of longing." The poem echoes the earlier "Kristin" in its awareness of the transience of life and the need to protect one's inner self, a theme pursued in "Sanctuary" (1940).

In "Sanctuary," the "barriers give in, / the world will lance at every point / my unsteady heart," as the protection of mother and home is lost. Douglas sees the only defence as "the line between, indifference / and my vulnerable mind." Behind this "desperate fence" he feels that he will be safe: "Farewell Poem," the penultimate poem of the "Oxford" section, reaffirms this need to control love and emotion. Douglas does not propose the rejection of love or

4 Collected Poems, p. 45.
5 Ibid., p. 59.
6 Ibid., p. 76.
the refusal to allow emotion; rather, he prefers to temper them with restraint and order. He entreats the girl to recall their love under "the vigorous sun...protected by sleep," but warns her to "keep prisoner pain and talk wry stuff." Their love must wait while "the great black figure" of God "is waiting with unexpended pain." The black figure looks forward to Douglas' "Bête Noire," a creature who persecutes and eludes him in his efforts to write a successful poem.

To "talk wry stuff" hearkens back to an earlier poem written at Oxford, "Invaders" (1939). 1939 saw the arrival of other, more serious matters to which Douglas gave his attention. He was concerned with the responsibility of poets to warn the public, and felt compelled to examine the threat of war, coming on "dire wings from Europe." In spite of the fact that the poet's life "will take on a hard shape," his commitment to his verse and the public must be preserved:

We with our heart
still sensitive as air will do our part,
always to think, and always to indite
of a good matter, while the black birds cry.

This desire to warn is not new to Douglas. An earlier poem closely related in diction and import is "Dejection" (1936), accepted for publication by New Verse in 1938. It consists of two verses, six and three lines long; at half the length of "Invaders," it is only slightly less powerful in its

7 Collected Poems, p. 47.
8 Ibid., p. 34.
statement. Portents again herald the approach of war:
"Tonight the sprinkled moon and ravenous sky / Say, we have reached the boundary." "Death is the season," and, "tomorrow," like the rooks of "Invaders," "Shrieks through the mist."
By 1940, these prophecies have been fulfilled, as Douglas points out in "Soissons 1940," where "something of the mind lived and died, / a mental tower restored only to fall." 9
"An Exercise Against Impatience," from the same year, sums up Douglas' feelings toward the role of the poet as prophet:

Even, we will command /and wield
good forces. And if we die? And if we die
those we have met or heard of will not be cold,
they are as suitable as you or I. 10

This obligation to warn notwithstanding, Douglas sees the gap widening between the poet and his public. From the indifference of the public in "Caravans" and "Images" from the "Schooldays" section, the attitude has developed into hostility. In "The Poets" (1940), 11 Douglas uses the desert town setting of "Caravans" and the stanza pattern of "Images" to further his discussion of this theme. On the poets' arrival, they are greeted with "obscenities or frowns." To the merchants, the poets' craft and "words are bad / currency to which they take exception." Their mission has become futile, for their superior knowledge which they cannot transmit forces them to "advance forever, always belated."

9 Collected Poems, p. 64.
10 Ibid., p. 75.
11 Ibid., p. 56.
This response on the part of the public was shaped, to a great extent, by the poets' mood in the early days of the war. Despite the continued presence of patriotic verse throughout the war, the poets "found themselves defending a social system about which they felt a great scepticism against a system...which was positively evil." As a result, the poets turned away from public poetry towards the recording of personal experience and feeling. This attitude is defended by Douglas in "On the Nature of Poetry" (1940):

Writing which is poetry must say what the writer has himself to say, not what he has observed others to say with effect, nor what he thinks will impress his hearers because it impressed him hearing it.

Douglas' bitterness toward the public which evolves in "The Poets" is cleverly concealed in "The Deceased" and "Russians." The subject of "The Deceased" is a drunken reprobate of a poet, criticized by an insensitive public. The speaker of the poem delivers an eulogy in which he points out the real reasons for its criticisms. Despite the dead poet's vices, he "appears to have felt a refined pain to which your virtue cannot attain." Douglas is not gentle in his handling of either the deceased or the audience,


14 Collected Poems, p. 66.
though he gives some praise to the sensitive artist in the concluding couplet: "Respect him. For in this / he had an excellence you miss." "Russians" (1940)\textsuperscript{15} is the only poem actually about war that Douglas wrote before experiencing combat himself.\textsuperscript{16} Although the substance of the poem is a grimly comic portrait of Russian soldiers frozen to death, he again attacks the callowness of the public. His description of the dead is incisive and biting, yet balanced with a comic tone:

That's never a corporal: even now he's frozen you could see he's only a commercial artist whom they took and put those clothes on, and told him he was one of the smartest.

Douglas' ability to draw word-pictures comes into view here, revealing his artist's eye. (A sketch of the soldiers accompanies the poem in \textit{Collected Poems}.) Edmund Blunden, quoting Douglas Grant, proposes that Douglas "'might have excelled eventually as the artist rather than as the poet.'"\textsuperscript{17} The frozen soldiers are an "innocuous parade," admired by the public who sees them as "waxworks." Douglas cautions his audience to "at least forget what happens when it thaws," The horror of the soldiers' death will be kept out of mind by those people who view the scene as merely curious or amusing.

Douglas continued to experiment with various themes

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 68.

\textsuperscript{16} This is asserted by Douglas in his letter to J. C. Hall, printed in \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 149.

\textsuperscript{17} From the Introduction to \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 18.
and forms in the "Oxford" and "Army: England" sections. One particular form used in the "Schooldays" poems became a favourite. He had worked with various rhyme schemes in a fixed form of three six-line stanzas, and, in "Point of View," had settled on an abccba pattern that appears in thirteen of the thirty-three "Oxford" poems. In choice of themes, Douglas became increasingly preoccupied with time and death, personifying them in several poems which will be discussed as a group. However, many poems of these two sections show the wide scope of his interests in content and form.

"Pas de Trois" (1939) and "Ballet" (1940) reveal different impressions of the dance, as well as Douglas' gradual move towards more realistic poetry. In the first three stanzas of "Pas de Trois," he evokes a seemingly conventional appreciation of the dancers' art. The dancers, "held by the hand of silence," moving "like plants... / their three heads like blooms," and appearing "like gods miraculously borne," are mere "shades of an old time." The fine art of which they are practitioners is associated with "intricate and frail rhyme," creating a past of grace and beauty. In the last stanza, however, Douglas undercuts the dancers' achievement, showing the changes that the present has brought about:

"Today when smartness does for grace, 
this is why they interlace 
their precious hands and dance their pace"

18 Collected Poems, p. 48.
of three before your ordinary face.

"A Ballet"19 begins with a similar sincerity, though an edge of sarcasm appears in lines like "this tastefully dressed / young person." The dance has become horrifying, however, for the girl has a "dead face and a yellow eye / and he has no limbs." Douglas reaffirms the potential of evil in beauty, a theme expressed as early as ".303" (1935) from the "Schooldays" section. Violence is an inseparable part of life, and must be accepted as an inescapable evil.

Douglas' interest in poetic form returned him to the villanelle in this period. "Villanelle of Sunlight" and "Villanelle of Spring Bells," both written in 1940, achieve contrasting effects though relying on a similar central image. In "Villanelle of Sunlight,"20 the sun is an oppressive image, filling the speaker's heart "with funerall." The movement of the sun signifies the passing of time and "the dead who were tall," leaving emptiness and despair behind. "Villanelle of Spring Bells"21 praises time for bringing the spring season, an unusual role for Douglas' constant nemesis. The poem is hopeful and optimistic, creating an idyllic setting in which "evil men intent on evil thing / falter." It presents an aura of freshness and innocence that is a change from Douglas' customary preoccupation with time and death.

19 Collected Poems, p. 72.
20 Ibid., p. 51.
21 Ibid., p. 58.
Both these poems keep time and death at an objective distance. Two more personal poems are "Leukothea" and "The Prisoner," also from 1940. Both pieces show Douglas' mastery of the realistic love poem, where the coexistence of love and death succeed more often than those poems in which he idealizes love beyond reasonable limits. An example of the latter is "Stranger" (1938), 22 in which outmoded images such as "blessed isles" and "continent of love" appear forced and contrived. "Leukothea" 23 describes the speaker's unsuccessful attempt to idealize and preserve his dead lover, believing that "the worm and the beetle would go by / and never dare batten on your beauty." The eventual realization that she is decaying destroys the myth with which he has preserved her, and forces him to confront the reality of death. The speaker is accordingly humanized and his loss becomes greater. Reluctance to accept the presence of corruption in death is replaced by a compulsive desire in "The Prisoner." 24 The necessity of understanding life and death requires a confrontation with both. The speaker, although willing "to teach love and learn," cannot escape "the urge / to break the bright flesh and emerge / of the ambitious cruel bone." Reminiscent of "A Ballet" in its juxtaposition of beauty and horror, the poem reveals Douglas' ambition to record the truths of human experience.

22 Collected Poems, p. 44.
23 Ibid., p. 53.
24 Ibid., p. 81.
The most significant theme of the "Oxford" and "Army: England" sections is time, appearing directly or indirectly in most of the poems. The approach and attitude taken towards time undergoes a transition from the romantic ("Forgotten the Red Leaves") to the realistic ("Simplify Me When I'm Dead"). Ranging in tone from comic to bitter, the poems show Douglas' various attempts to define time and the role it plays in his life.

"Haydn--Clock Symphony"25 (1939) is a four stanza variation of the three verse, six-line form, allowing Douglas more space in which to develop his point. Ostensibly the description of a neoclassic dance, the formal and impressionistic diction (the "timepiece standing butler in the hall" and the "polished ground of dreaming") is sustained until the end of the poem, creating a tone of mock-seriousness in the last stanza:

And so put on
Your garment of sad days and get you gone.
Against you and your raucous world they'll lock
But open up when you forsake Death's service.

To be in time implies allegiance to death; only by living in a world of dreams is eternity possible. In "A Round Number,"26 (1940) the timepiece is a "monotonous evil clock" destroying Douglas' "hope of happiness and renown." The nonchalant dismissal of time in "Haydn--Clock Symphony" is not possible here; the attitude is one of resignation and

26. Ibid., pp. 60-61.
despair. The melancholy frame of mind in which Douglas
"can't feel hope any more" allows the victory to go to time.
This despair becomes sardonic bitterness in "The Creator" (1940). Here Douglas chooses rhyming couplets in iambic
tetrameter, a hard form to master properly, but very useful
in satiric verse. The three stanzas develop the role of the
sun, stars, and God in the passing of time. The sun pro-
ceeds "from day to day / along his mathematic way" while,
at night, "the stars / stupidly linger." The futility of it
all is particularly evident to God, "gaping at the eternal
course / of sorrow." Here is the root of the absurdity, for
God Himself is "petrified and cannot see / His marvellous
inefficiency."

Douglas returns to an optimistic rejection of time in
"A Mime" (1940). The poem introduces time and death as
the personified, tangible forces they came to be for Douglas.
The comic style does not conceal the obvious danger that
these two represented for him, although it tends to disperse
some of the tension and sorrow often present in his verse.
"Time" and "Death" are rivals, "villains in the wings," and
one or the other will destroy his youth; old age or death
are the only alternatives. His enthusiasm is not lessened,
however:

Only between these dangerous two
Let me be nimble, jump and dodge
the unnatural uncles on my track;

27 Collected Poems, p. 57.
28 Ibid., p. 69.
if I don't croak and falter back
despairing in the end to cadge
careless hearts from you and you.

Again, the conversational dialogue creates a simplicity and honesty of sentiment, both amusing and intelligent.

After Douglas' departure for the army training camps, Oxford became a symbol of security and tranquillity, a haven for companionship and relaxation. A poem that illustrates the hold that Oxford had over him is entitled "Oxford" (1941). Here, "summer holds her breath" and the sun, after warming "the recollections of old men," "leans through the stained windows and falls." A place for young and old, it harbours "ideas, trials, pardonable follies." It is "legendary...venerable...dignified," and timeless in its separate state:

For them it is not a city but an existence outside which everything is a pretence: within, the leisurely immortals dream venerated and spared by the ominous hours.

If in "Oxford" time is held in abeyance, it regains power in "Time Eating," from the same year. Time "makes as he eats;" his "tongue will wash / and slow juice masticate all flesh." But time, so capable of renewing the lizard's tail, is powerless to return the poet's lost love to him:

That you gobbled in too quick, and though you brought me from a boy you can make no more of me, only destroy.

One of Douglas' clearest, simplest statements about

29 Collected Poems, p. 85.

30 Ibid., p. 86.
death is "Simplify Me When I'm Dead," 31 (1941) the last poem he wrote before his departure for the Middle East. Ted Hughes, in his introduction to Selected Poems, sees this poem as a clear beginning of a new stage in Douglas' development, combining "colloquial prose readiness with poetic breadth, a ritual intensity...with clear, direct feeling, and yet...nothing but casual speech." 32 Douglas objectifies his fate with the same ease shown in his description of death in "Famous Men" from the "Schooldays" section. The plea to be seen as "simple than at birth" calls to mind his statement on poetry, especially in terms of judging a poet "only by what he has said." To "leisurely arrive at an opinion" is proposed as the only way to determine the truth of a poet's ability.

The period as a whole shows a definite move towards restraint and tightness of verse. The earlier adherence to established forms becomes much less important to Douglas. Such stylistic details as perfect rhymes and initial capitals in each line are no longer essential, the latter disappearing by early 1940. The rhythms of the poems have become more fluid, and decoration without purpose, the archaisms and poetic inversions, have been removed. Of this new phase of Douglas' poetry, Hughes says that "Pictures of things no longer interest him much: he wants their

31 Collected Poems, p. 89.

32 Selected Poems, p. 74.
substance." The poems have taken on a control that is
becoming increasingly sustained, as Douglas matures and
restrains his emotions. His skill is on the way to an early
stability and maturity; the war augments the growth and
development already present in his poetry.

33 Selected Poems, p. 12.
CHAPTER III

"THE MIDDLE EAST": REALISM AND AWARENESS

Douglas wrote the thirty-one poems of the "Middle East" section between his arrival in the Middle East in June, 1941, and his return to England in the winter of 1943-1944. These poems form the last group of Collected Poems, with the exception of some fragments and translations. The poems reveal Douglas' maturity in both style and personal philosophy. Experience of combat further impressed upon him the significance of time and death, as well as giving him a deeper understanding of his own values and perceptions of life. With the realization that time was becoming increasingly limited, he strove to perfect a style that would communicate his message concisely and with precision. The poems, for the most part, are longer than those of the earlier sections, allowing Douglas to expand and elaborate on themes which he considered to be vital. The vocabulary has also undergone substantial change, with the frequent appearance of colloquial, conversational diction. Douglas does not abandon more 'literary' vocabulary, however, relying

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1 Douglas realized the possibility of death, although he did not fear it in the conventional sense. In a letter to M. J. Tambimuttu, written in the winter of 1943-1944, he expressed the need to work quickly "because of military engagements which may be the end of me." (Collected Poems, p, 15.)
on whatever seems appropriate for the poem.

"Negative Information" (1941), the first poem of the group, presents another aspect of Douglas' changing attitude towards death. Set against the background of the voyage to the Middle East, it reveals an indifference and lack of emotion about death:

And in general, the account of many deaths—
whose portents, which should have undone the sky,
had never come—is now received casually.
You and I are careless of these millions of wraiths

for as often as not we meet
in dreams our own dishevelled ghosts....

The awareness of his own inevitable death is presented by an air of studied coolness; he preserves his emotions behind a wall of apparent resignation. Douglas seems determined to protect his sensitive poetic nature from harm by adopting a pose, a pose that G. S. Fraser sees strained by "an element of brittleness and precariousness." Douglas' military commitment forced him to become an agent of death, a role inconsistent with his beliefs, but an unavoidable one. "Syria II" (1941), (a longer version of "Syria I,") explores the coexistence of these conflicting loyalties. Good and evil are seen as "the classical Gemini," inseparable though in opposition. The contrast between the evil and beauty of Syríá is not foreign to the soldiers, however,

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2 Collected Poems, p. 93.
4 Collected Poems, pp. 96-97.
for they are

the kindly visitors who meant
so well all winter but at last fell
unaccountably to killing in the spring.

These actions of the soldiers, regardless of their
moral nature, become insignificant in "The Offensive" 5 (1942).
"Time will cage again / the devils we let run" whether vic-
tory or defeat occurs, rendering any outcome meaningless.
The second section of the poem is similar to "The Creator,"
from the "Oxford" section, in its description of the sun
and stars. The stars are "a class dead in their seats,"
while the sun is merely "officious." The concluding stanza
expresses a sense of impotence and futility that Douglas
cannot escape:

The sun goes round and the stars go round
the nature of eternity is circular
and man must spend his life to find
all our successes and failures are similar.

This is the only poem in the section in which time appears
as a personified figure. Time reappears constantly as a
force in the poems of this period, but no longer as a separate
entity. The war and the exotic sights of the Middle East
provided many new experiences for Douglas, and many of the
poems in this section reflect his interest, describing
battlefield and leave-town with equal skill and depth. Time
personified is out of place with the desire on Douglas'
part to write "true things, significant things in words

5 Collected Poems, p. 102-103.
each of which works for its place in a line." To record the life around him becomes the main emphasis of the poems. Douglas' portraits are detailed and powerful, and reaffirm the fact that he was also a skilled painter.

In form, the "Middle East" poems' stanza patterns are adaptations of the three stanza, eighteen line form. Nearly all are in four, five or six stanzas, with four, five or six lines to the stanza. Where the average length of the "Oxford" and "Army: England" poems is approximately twenty lines, the poems of this section are generally twenty-five lines or longer. The longer forms are more fluid and allow longer treatment of themes, yet they are no less controlled and tight in their development than the earlier, shorter poems.

Two poems in the five stanza form are "I Listen to the Desert Wind" and "Song," both from 1942. They are love poems, pragmatic and realistic where the earlier "Spring Sailor" of the "Oxford" section is still hopeful. "I Listen to the Desert Wind" shows the speaker betrayed by his former lover. Although he still cares for her, "the reflection of her face" continually haunting him, she has "no sympathy / for my tactless misery." His love for her makes her infidelity even more unbearable, and his alternative is suffering:

0 turn in the dark bed again
and give to him what once was mine
and I'll turn as you turn

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6 From the letter to J. C. Hall, Collected Poems, p. 149.
7 Collected Poems, p. 104.
and kiss my swarthy mistress pain. "Song 4 also treats of infidelity, although the speaker is at fault instead of the lover. He is not unfaithful in the limited sense of the word, but a wanderer, charmed away by "the poisonous sea and a cruel star." Each of the five stanzas repeats this as a refrain, adding a wistful ballad-like quality to the poem. The heartbreak is not restricted to the lover, for the speaker admits that "I have jilted myself and you." Douglas' presence in the Middle East shapes both of these poems, emphasizing as they do the severance of ties to England and the lovers left behind. The tone of the poems is sorrowful, resigned, and emotional, perhaps deliberately piercing the facade of cool objectivity that Douglas tries to maintain.

Douglas explores other reactions to Egypt than the simple awareness of distance from home. Several poems deal with wartime life away from the battlefield, capturing the sense of spiritual corruption and evil that war brings without having to describe combat or death. One of the better portrayals of civilian life is "Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden," dated Cairo, October 8, 1943 (one of the few poems to be placed so precisely). In a sustained metaphor, a woman in a tea garden is described as "a white stone," attracting the men or "fish." Her fingers are "white submarine fronds" as she coyly eats her ice cream.

8 Collected Poems, p. 106.
9 Ibid., p. 112.
The men pass, "circling and pausing," preparing to "nibble or tug." The metaphor enables Douglas to present some very clever characterizations of the men. "A cotton magnate, an important fish / with great eyepouches and a golden mouth" is clearly old, overweight, and wealthy, but the description implies a certain boredom and lethargy about him. The diction of the poem preserves the tone of silence. No mention is made of sound; the action has the pantomime nature of the sea floor. (Douglas uses silence to convey many ideas, particularly in Alamein to Zem Zem, as well as in the "Oxford" poem, "Forgotten the Red Leaves.") The satire works well, remaining "urbane, detached, even gay in tone." 10

Two poems which describe life in Egyptian towns in a more realistic, bitter fashion are "Egypt" and "Christodoulos," both written in 1942. The poems are in five four-line stanzas, predominately tetrameter in length. These short verses give Douglas the opportunity to create tight, caustic descriptions of the characters. The woman in "Egypt" 11 is completely lacking in grace, "diseased and blind of an eye / and heavy with habitual dolour." She cannot distinguish characteristics of people or objects, finding them "the same colour," and she separates life from death by "the difference of moving / and the nuisance of breath." Douglas' disgust at the disease and apathy around him culminates in "My God, / the king of this country must be proud." The sarcasm is

10 Fraser, "Keith Douglas" (1956), p. 104.
11 Collected Poems, p. 108.
somewhat forced, where perhaps the poem could have done
without it and made its point, but the overall effect is
successful. Mac Hammond, whose review of the 1951 edition
of Collected Poems was far from favourable, reversed his
condemnation of Douglas in the case of this poem, referring
to it as an example of Douglas' "old and finer style." 12
"Christodoulos" 13 depicts the same disorder and dismay found
in "Egypt." Again, Douglas gives insights into Egyptian
life through the description of one character. The language
is colloquial, Christodoulos making "God knows how much a
week." Dirt and decay appear throughout, the "smoke and
smells," the "dross" and "wastage" filling the "swarthy
portals" of the alchemist's shop. The final stanza has the
same punch-line effect as "Egypt," with Douglas' own bitter-
ness and resignation evident in the revelation of Christ-
odoulos' alchemy:

...he's the original wise one
from whose experiments they told
how War can be the famous stone
for turning rubbish into gold.

A poem that places the life of the civilian and the
soldier on leave against the physical experience of combat
is "Cairo Jag." 14 The first two stanzas pursue the sights
and sorrows of Cairo. The women of the city are "a pasty
Syrian," a "Turk who says she is a princess," and Marcelle,

12 Mac Hammond, "Normandy to Christ's Hospital,"
Poetry, LXXIX (March, 1952), 358.
14 Ibid., p. 115.
constantly "preoccupied with her dull dead lover." In the
second stanza, the "stink of jasmin" is replaced by the
"stenches and sour smells" of the streets and slums. The
inhabitants are afflicted "with fatalism and hashish." The
town is based on "mundane conventions" and its decay is
corrosive and gradual. The last stanza describes aspects of
corruption, but in short bursts of images rather than the
long sentences of the previous stanzas. The listing of
details erupts violently as the poet sees, in rapid succes-
sion, the "dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery," "the
dead themselves, their boots," and, finally, "a man with no
head" whose "packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli"
make him more pitiful and human than the whores of Cairo.
Cairo and the desert are "all one," for the war spreads
corruption by its existence.

Where "Cairo Jag" presents the two sides of war's
effects, "Dead Men"\textsuperscript{15} tries to interpret the disorder and
chaos of wartime life. The poem consists of six six-line
stanzas, rhyming abccba, a doubling of Douglas' three six-
line stanza form. The first three stanzas are descriptive,
presenting the moon shining on lovers and the dead. "The
same hours have illumined" both, again revealing the dual
existence of beauty and evil. It is difficult, initially,
to reconcile the "white dresses" and the "shallow graves,"
but a dog, digging at the bodies, understands the nature of
death better than man does. The safest solution for Douglas

\textsuperscript{15} Collected Poems, pp. 116-117.
is a separate acceptance of love and death, resolving them "without the traction of reason or time's control." The reality of each is acceptable on its own terms, and the "prudent mind resolves" on the lover's or the dog's attitude forever."

The restraint inherent in "Dead Men" may be a pose to a great extent. G. S. Fraser believes that Douglas struggled continually to protect himself, and cautions that the careless reader may receive a "false impression of emotional... hardness." In fact, Douglas' emotional, artistic temperament made him very sensitive to impressions, a sensitivity that Fraser contends would have eventually led to a nervous breakdown. In "Devils" (1942), Douglas gives a reason for his calm exterior. His silence is not "that of a wood / warm and full of the sun's patience," but a "soundproof trap / whose idiot crew must not escape." The last lines of the poem explain his need for reserve:

Inside the unsubstantial wall
these idiots of the mind can't hear
the demons talking in the air
who think my mind void. That's all;
there'll be an alliance of devils if it fall.

How much this supports Fraser's theory is difficult to determine, but a hint of Douglas' fear about his sanity is evident.

Douglas, as well as searching for personal control, continued to explore diction and vocabulary in the "Middle

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"East" poems. "Words" (1943) discusses the sources from which Douglas draws his vocabulary. A "stooping man" is a "trap for words" because of the bird-like qualities in his face; a "pockmarked house bleached by the glare" also provides images and words for poems. It is interesting to note that Douglas uses several archaic, or at least unlikely, words in a period of growing realism in his poetry. The use of words like "inchoate," "fritillaries," "scarabs" and "cerements" provide, however, a delicate tone in keeping with the ethereal quality of words themselves:

But I keep words only a breath of time
turning in the lightest of cages--uncover
and let them go: sometimes they escape for ever.

For that breath of time in which Douglas held onto words, he managed to create two poems that explore different facets of his attitude towards death. Both "Gallantry" and "Vergissmeinnicht" were written in 1943 (and are placed on facing pages in all three editions of Douglas' poems). They are composed of five four-line stanzas, and have similar rhyme schemes. The content of both poems also has obvious parallels. The second, third and fourth stanzas of each respectively describe the entry of a shell into a tank, a letter or note, and the mocking of a soldier. It is Douglas' response to the dead that is decidedly different. "Gallantry" relies on colloquial, almost prosaic sentences, toughness and irony shaping the response. The boy killed

19 Collected Poems, p. 119.
20 Ibid., p. 120.
by the shell is "a fool / whose perfectly mannered flesh fell." The letter is written to greet "the suspicious spring," but the writer's intentions are "severed by a single splinter." The soldier is disparaged for his predilection for little boys, but "since George was hit / we never mention our surmise." Sound is the recurring sensation in the poem, with its "voice / spoke," "ears," "said," "deaf," "cried with laughter," and "whisper." The poem has a Sassoonish quality in its characterization of the soldiers as a "doomed race" and the joking colonel, lacking the tone of "clinical compassion"\(^{21}\) of "Vergissmeinnicht."

"Vergissmeinnicht"\(^{22}\) is more lyrical and traditionally rhythmic than "Gallantry." The setting of the poem is the aftermath of a tank battle, similar to the one in the previous poem. The battlefield is hauntingly described as the "nightmare ground," desolate with "Three weeks gone and the combatants gone." The arrival of the shell into the tank is like "the entry of a demon." The note, "Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht," written on the "dishonoured picture," is found beside a corpse in the "gunpit spoil"; this last image is particularly powerful. The dead soldier is not mocked by his comrades or the enemy; but by "his own equipment / that's hard and good when he's decayed." The corpse itself is described with "an objective precision of statement...that gives an effect of


\(^{22}\) Collected Poems, p. 121.
icy pity".  

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.

The images are forceful and vivid, though possessing a
formality that avoids a satiric portrayal of death as in
"Gallantry." The last stanza, concluding with the anti-
thesisical "And death who had the soldier singled / has done
the lover mortal hurt," evokes that combination of pity and
coolness so integral to Douglas' best poetry. Fraser sees
it as Douglas' "best poem of action," and one of the best
tomany of his pure skill in writing poetry. The poem, in
a subtle way, returns to the theme of time, showing the
effects that it has on the dead. Time as decay is the force
of the poem; it no longer needs to be portrayed as a cloaked
villain.

The extent to which the war further shaped Douglas'
perceptions is evident in "Enfidaville" (1943). The de-
scription of a bombed church recalls "Forgotten the Red
Leaves," from the "Oxford" section, but the tone is harder
and more piercing in its observation. The earlier poem is
cloaked in nostalgic impressions of past memories, the sun
presented as a "solitary worshipper."  

23 Fraser, "Keith Douglas," p. 106.
24 Ibid., p. 107.
25 Collected Poems, p. 43.
26 Ibid., p. 123.
is more realistic and cruel in its images. The bombings "tore down the ornamental plasters / shivered the hands of Christ." The people's homes have become "bare / black cages" in which the men and women "search / like ants, poking in the debris." The pity of the scene is not thrust upon the reader, but evolves out of the subdued tone and patient detail of the poem.

A subject treated at some length in Douglas' war journal, Alamein to Zem Zem, is the cavalry and huntsman mentality of many of his fellow officers in the tank corps. Although the concept of warfare had changed considerably, this horseman spirit remained. "Aristocrats" (1943) describes how this continuing attitude is out of place in the type of war in which these men were engaged. One of the soldiers is pictured as a "noble horse with courage in his eye" whose reaction to the shelling is to calmly put his "pipe back in his mouth." Another man, his leg blown off by a shell, considers his fate "most unfair," indignation apparently more natural a reaction than shock or pain. Douglas asks "how can I live among this gentle / obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?" Part of the difficulty in changing this outmoded philosophy of war is the fact that "their stupidity and chivalry / are celebrated" above their military ability. The "famous unconcern" they exhibit is based on traditional values and stupidity rather than

27 Collected Poems, p. 124.
Douglas goes beyond the usual realistic tenor of his treatment of war in "Landscape with Figures" by assuming the role of "a pilot or angel looking down / on some eccentric chart." From this imaginary height, the vehicles are seen as "squashed dead or still entire, stunned / like beetles." In vivid images, the steel "is torn into fronds / by the lunatic explosive," and the dead appear as mimes, "crawling on the boards of the stage." The sets are iron, and the makeup is "cosmetic blood." After these two stanzas have described the battlefield and the dead, the last stanza shows Douglas in an omniscient position as "the figure burning in hell / the figure of the grave priest:" Aware of all people, and representative of all, he is the unity of good and evil, power and weakness; and heaven and hell. The last lines are similar to the ending of "Devils" in their portrayal of the struggle to preserve order:

but all these angels and devils are driven into my mind like beasts. I am possessed, the house whose wall contains the dark strife the arguments of hell with heaven.

The poem, on the whole, is not one of Douglas' most successful efforts, tending to the oratorical and lofty figures of

28 A note by Douglas concerning this poem appears in Collected Poems: "Lt.-Col. J. O. Player, killed in Tunisia, Enfidaville, February, 1943, left £3,000 to the Beaufort Hunt, and directed that the incumbent of the living should be a "man who approves of hunting, shooting, and all manly sports, which are the backbone of the nation."

29 Collected Poems, p. 128.
speech so out of character with the growing realism of his verse.

Another poem in which Douglas experiments with little success is "I Experiment"\textsuperscript{30} (1943). The lack of punctuation creates complications above those caused by the random sequences of images. The third stanza is particularly difficult:

\begin{verbatim}
I play dancers choreographers critics role
I see myself dance happiness and pain
(each as illusory as rain)
in silence Silence Break it with the small
isolated tinkle the apathetic buzz buzz...
\end{verbatim}

Douglas is still searching for different modes of expression, but fails to achieve anything near his customary success in this poem. The facility with which he works in conventional forms, and the skill he uses in portraying the aspects of life that interest him in images of brilliance and power, are the truly innovative and important aspects of his verse.

The last poem of the "Middle East" section, and probably the last poem ever completed by Douglas, is entitled "On A Return from Egypt"\textsuperscript{31} and was written in Egypt and England in the winter of 1943-1944. It encompasses the themes of time, poetic commitment, and desperate perseverance that appear in most of his later poems. Written in a relatively peaceful time in Douglas' wartime life, between the Middle East campaign and the invasion of Europe, the

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Collected Poems}, p. 125.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 130.
poem sums up his feelings and reflections on his poetry. It is worthwhile quoting in its entirety, as it culminates his brief poetic career in style and thematic depth:

To stand here in the wings of Europe disheartened, I have come away from the sick land where in the sun lay the gentle sloe-eyed murderers of themselves, exquisites under a curse; here to exercise my depleted fury.

For the heart is a coal, growing colder when jewelled cerulean seas change into grey rocks, grey water-fringe, sea and sky altering like a cloth till colours and sheen are gone both: cold is an opiate of the soldier.

And all my endeavours are unlucky explorers come back, abandoning the expedition; the specimens, the lilies of ambition still spring in their climate, still unpicked: but time, time is all I lacked to find them, as the great collectors before me.

The next month, then, is a window and with a crash I'll split the glass. Behind it stands one I must kiss, person of love or death a person or a wraith, I fear what I shall find.

The tone is subdued and reflective throughout the first three stanzas; the long sentences and initial stresses create a solemnity and elegiac grace. The second stanza is particularly deliberate and formal, with its long "o" and its continual reinforcing alliteration. Douglas' steadfast insistence on "work without hope" enters in the last stanza, where, despite the fear he cannot hide, he takes the definite step to "split the glass." To do, to act, is

32 From the letter to J. C. Hail, Collected Poems, p. 150.
the only possibility for him.

Douglas was working on Bête Noire at the time of his death in June, 1944. The significance of the title for the proposed collection is best expressed in Douglas' own words:

Bête Noire is the name of the poem I can't write, a protracted failure, which is also a protracted success I suppose. Because it is the poem I begin to write in a lot of other poems: this is what justifies my use of that title for the book.\[33\]

The beast was Douglas' own personal demon, a creature of infinite power and ill-will. Douglas sought to defeat it, capture it, and understand it; its force drove him on to write in an effort to make sense of this peculiar creature. What the creature may have meant to Douglas is the continual challenge poetry posed for him. His dissatisfaction in "On A Return from Egypt" is due to his inability to write the perfect poem, a task beyond all poets, but still a goal which Douglas felt was his to attempt. In his efforts to conquer the beast on one occasion, Douglas wrote "I have sensations of physical combat, and after five hours of writing...all my muscles are tired."[34] Douglas' refusal to concede an impossible fight gave him the opportunity to create poetry at a high level of maturity and thematic power.

The "Middle East" poems as a group, show the progress in form and theme that Douglas made, despite his involvement

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33 Quoted in Collected Poems, p. 158.
34 Ibid.
in a war at the time. The next chapter will look at the context of the war through *Alamein to Zem Zem* and the poetry of Douglas' contemporary soldier-poets. After this examination of the framework in which the poems written in the Middle East belong, attention will be paid to Douglas' present status in British poetry, and the status he more properly merits.
CHAPTER IV

CONTEXTS OF WAR AND POETRY

This chapter will discuss two areas that serve as a framework for Keith Douglas' "Middle East" poems as war poetry. The first section will involve a consideration of the war journal, Alamein to Zem Zem, as a reference for his poetry. The second field of discussion, itself highly selective, will be Douglas' contemporary war-poets. Particular attention will be devoted to Sidney Keyes and Alun Lewis, as they customarily appear in conjunction with Douglas in literary histories.

Keith Douglas' Prose: Alamein to Zem Zem

Alamein to Zem Zem, together with Collected Poems, forms the "definitive edition of the works of Keith Douglas."1 The basis for the text is a notebook written by Douglas in 1943, and first published in 1946 by Editions Poetry London. It was republished in 1966 with Collected Poems. The book recounts Douglas' part as a tank officer in the North African campaign, centering on the battle of Alamein. It is not an autobiography, like Robert Graves' Good-Bye to All That (1929), nor the fact-filled memoir so common during wars.

1 Editor's Preface, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 10.
such as Alan Moorehead's *The March to Tunis* (1943) about the North African campaign. The book attempts to capture the sense of the war rather than the historical process. Douglas uses the persona of "Peter Cameron" to distance himself from the work, and personal details of his life are few. What he wishes to record is the "flurry of violent impressions" left by the experience of combat.

The book presents as engaging a picture of Douglas the soldier as his other work has of Douglas the poet. He has been called "a brave and experienced officer of the line, a severe loss to a crack unit." His enthusiasm made him as committed to his temporary profession of soldier as he was to his poetry, and "he enjoyed both as fully as he was able." He felt that the experience of battle was "something I must have," seeing the possibilities of learning from everything he encountered. Edmund Blunden remembers Douglas' character as a blending of "generosity and zest for life...[with] an impulsive and obstinate streak," qualities which inform both his poetry and his prose.

_Alamein to Zem Zem_, informative and entertaining in its own right, gives useful insights into Douglas' thoughts.

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2 Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 15.

3 Lawrence Durrell, Introduction, _Alamein to Zem Zem_, p. 11.

4 Ibid.

5 Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 15.

and feelings. It also reveals a very polished style, despite the fact that he had very little time in which to rework it. (He may have revised it in England before going to Normandy.) The prose is as lively and flowing as his conversation, which was reportedly "all effervescence, discursive, warm and gay." Nowhere in the book is Douglas polemical or vehement in support or rejection of the war. He complains in typical soldier fashion about the heat and discomfort of the desert, and recoils at the horror of death, but these responses are natural and expected. Occasionally he criticizes the strategists, "sitting safely behind a cavalry moustache and a desk in G.H.Q.," or the commanding officer who greets him with "good morning, good morning as civilly as Siegfried Sassoon's General," but comic effect rather than malice is the object here.

One of the main reasons for the relative light-heartedness of Alamein to Zem Zem, compared to the often depressing Good-Bye to All That, was the nature of the desert campaign. The fighting was always mobile, "never stagnating into fixed lines of defence" like the battles of the First World War. Alan Moorehead emphasizes the nomadic nature of desert combat and equates the tank squadrons to

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7 Introduction, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 12.
8 Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 49.
9 Ibid., p. 16.
10 Introduction, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 12.
naval fleets, for it was impossible to "occupy the desert any more than one occupied the sea." Graves, on the other hand, was continually confronted by the corpses of his own troops, unable to be retrieved from "No Man's Land" while the Germans continued to fight. Graves attempts to relieve the morbid tone by inserting short humorous anecdotes, a forced remedy that breaks the continuity of the prose. Although Douglas makes some use of anecdotes, they are few in number and so integrated into the narrative as to be imperceptible as separate units of the work. The disjointed quality of Good-Bye to All That is partially due to Graves' neurasthenia, induced by the trauma of the war. However, he had eleven years from the end of the war in which to revise his writing, compared to Douglas' year, in combat and on scattered leaves, in which to complete and correct Alamein to Zem Zem.

In the introductory section of the book, Douglas provides some insight into both his poetry and his prose:

> When I could order my thoughts I looked for more significant things than appearances; I still looked--I cannot avoid it--for something decorative, poetic or dramatic.\(^{12}\)

The change that has taken place since the beginning of Douglas' writing career is the elimination of decoration without purpose. Douglas "hated decoration without anything

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12 Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 15.
behind it," the artificial imposition of unnecessary trimmings. What he sought was the poetic image that would crystallize his thematic point. One of the first instances of this search for the appropriate image is the description of the soldiers' eyes looking "like a clown's eyes" in the dust storms. Added to the picture of the troops' obvious discomfort is a comic touch that lightens the mood of the passage. An infantry patrol, "moving like guilty characters in a melodrama," possesses a furtiveness resulting from the necessary stealth of the soldiers, but especially from the feigned humility with which they ask Douglas' tank crew for assistance.

The image of silence recurs frequently in the book, seemingly incongruous in an account of tank battles. The noise of a tank, however, drowns out all other sound, transforming combat into a surrealistic "silent film." Beyond this literal role, silence becomes a vital symbol for Douglas. He relates it to his constant concern with time and death, stating that the "most impressive thing about the dead is their triumphant silence, proof against anything in the world." Later in the book, he proposes that it is

14 Alamein to Zéém Zéém, p. 17.
15 Ibid., p. 36.
16 Ibid., p. 28.
17 Ibid.
through their silence that "the dead compel our reverence." Douglas, a painter as well as a poet, used this relation between death and silence in a mural he painted on the wall of a hut in the Middle East. The central figure is the cloaked personage of death, whose cloak envelops the weak, naked figures around him, yet the word "mime" appears as the proposed title (reminiscent of "A Mime," in the "Oxford" section of Collected Poems).

Occasionally the images used in Alamein to Zem Zem are more striking than representative, as in the case of a burning Sherman tank, where the smoke appears "like the goddess Sin springing from the left shoulder of Satan." The demonic role assigned to the tanks is used to good effect in capturing the horror and evil of combat, but it seems strangely inappropriate here, although it may have been included to reflect Douglas' awareness of myth and culture.

Two recurring descriptions of simple physical activity are the "brew up," where food becomes akin to mother and home, and the search for loot. It is not strange that tangible possessions should become such dominant forces. The necessary mobility of desert warfare and the absence of many physical comforts in a tank did not allow much opportunity for a sense of security and stability to develop. Perhaps

18 Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 66.
19 The description of the mural is based on a photograph of it which appears in Alamein and the Desert War, ed. Derek Jewell (New York, 1968), p. 201.
20 Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 117.
Douglas' growing use of detail and realistic images in the "Middle East" poems arose from the need to preserve concrete attachments.

Douglas chooses prose as his vehicle of expression in Alamein to Zem Zem, not poetry, and the two cannot "be compared any more than pictures and pencils: the one is instrument and the other art."\(^{21}\) Yet the instrument is in the hands of an artist. The book has a wholeness, an intensity and continuity of expression, that surpasses mere recording of battles. Douglas' attitude to the war was admittedly that of "useless pity,"\(^ {22}\) for he lacked "the true ferocity of Battle School Instructors and armchair critics."\(^ {23}\) He writes of the war as he writes poetry, with coolness, pity, and an honesty of detail. As a point of reference to Douglas, and as an interesting revelation of his prose ability and attitudes towards the war, it is first-hand and undeniably vital.

Other British Poetry of the Second World War

The fact clearest to the poets of 1939 was the inevitability of war. Wilfred Owen's attempt to prevent its recurrence by writing about the "horror and futility"\(^ {24}\) of


\(^{22}\) Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 51.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 64.

the First World War had met with little success, although, to the poets, his was "still the significant statement about war." Along with Douglas, two poets who have been considered "worthy successors to Owen" are Sidney Keyes and Alun Lewis. These three were all soldier-poets like Owen and Sassoon, confronting the war at the beginning of their careers. Unlike the First World War, in which the bulk of the poetry was written by soldier-poets, the poetry of the Second World War was the product of soldier and civilian alike. It was the poetry of the poets who actually experienced war, however, that remains the important achievement.

Despite their awareness of Owen's poetic statements on war, the first verses of many Second World War poets were still along the patriotic, idealistic lines of 1914. Dorothy L. Sayers, for example, in "The English War," entreated the public to "Praise God, now, for an English war," echoing Rupert Brooke's war sonnets. A collection entitled Poems from the Desert, based on a poetry contest in North Africa in 1943, is one of the better examples of war verse by soldiers who had little or no poetic skill. The poems in this anthology exhibit the same patriotic and sentimental traits as "The English War," despite the fact that the authors of these poems had had combat experience.

25 Currey, p. 12.

26 Ibid., p. 7.

where they undoubtedly saw the horror of war. "The Enduring People," which placed fifth out of 403 entries, lauds the English soldiers, "the best of all their blood to lay the shadow of their law / athwart the world," and "stem the ceaseless flood of evil practice." England itself is praised in "White Cliffs," which concludes with:

Majestically you gaze far out to sea;  
A glorious emblem of a glorious land.  
An England that will never fail to be— 
Just England.

The civilian poets lacked experience of war, the continual presence of fighting, and death; many of the soldiers lacked the poetic ability to write honestly and realistically about war and its consequences. Even among the soldier-poets, Douglas was "the only one who wrote poems, as the poets of the First World War did, dealing with the actual experience of combat." What Keyes in particular did come to terms with was the nature of war, and the framework in which war formed a small part.

Sidney Keyes was twenty when he died in North Africa in April, 1943. Before his death, he had published one volume of poetry, The Iron Laurel (1942), and a second, The Cruel Solstice, appeared in the fall of 1943. The youngest of himself, Douglas, and Lewis, he wrote few poems "specifically about war, and only a handful were written on active

29 Ibid., p. 38.
service." 31 Perception of death in Keyes' poetry lacks the objectivity of Douglas' verse, Keyes relying on "myth and history to refer to it obliquely." 32 Keyes was an avid reader of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Rilke, and considered himself and Douglas to be "Romantic writers," though by that I mean little more than that our greatest fault is a tendency to floridity." 33 This tendency is evident in "Advice for a Journey," 34 written early in the war:

The drums mutter for war and soon we must begin To seek the country where they say that joy Springs flowerlike among the rocks, to win The fabulous golden mountain of our peace.

From this beginning, Keyes changes to a clarity and precision reminiscent of Douglas, stating that only "the blind and stubborn hope to track / This wilderness...." The "literary" nature of the verse weakens the impact of his sentiment, particularly in the concluding stanza:

Go forth, my friends, the raven is no sibyl; Break the clouds' anger with your unchanged faces. You'll find, maybe, the dream under the hill-- But never Canaan, nor any golden mountain.

The realization of the evil of war is present, but the language is, perhaps, too "florid" to be successful.

Keyes' earliest poetry is shaped by the image of pain. R. N. Currey, in an analysis of "The Foreign Gate," stresses the significance of such pain-associated images as "'hard',

31 Currey, p. 13.
34 Gardner, p. 29.
"stone", 'rock', and 'iron'." 35 After the procession of the
dead souls of previous wars, the poet makes his own obser-
vations, asserting that the "uniform of pain with pain put
on is straiter / Than any lover's garment..." 36 The fear
expressed is, to a certain extent, that of pain itself and
of inexperience. Part of the evolution in Keyes' poetry,
in a very brief career, is a change from pain as the central
image to the idea of ordeal. "The Wilderness," 37 written
three months before his death, proposes that acceptance of
physical danger is but the first step in the facing of a
necessary ordeal. 38 The wilderness involved is a spiritual
place "that inevitably employs symbols for its expression." 39
A much more objective and mature philosophy emerges:

Knowing I am no lover, but destroyer,
I am content to face the destroying sun.
There shall be no more journeys, nor the anguish
Of meeting and parting, after the last great parting
From the images of dancing and the gardens
Where the brown bird chokes in its song:
Until that last great meeting in the mountains
Where the metal bird sings madly from the fire.

Still a romantic, Keyes avoids the colloquial diction of his
contemporaries, presenting his personal reactions to the war
in mythic symbols. The images of the birds and the anapestic
rhythm combine for an incantatory effect similar to T. S.

35 Currey, p. 17.
36 Ibid., p. 15.
37 Gardner, p. 112.
38 Currey, p. 18.
39 Mildren Davidson, The Poetry is in the Pity
Eliot's "Little Gidding," creating a solemnity and heightened response almost out of place in war. Keyes is not content to record experience, but prefers to refine it until he captures its spiritual essence, removing whatever detail he considers unnecessary.

Time, Douglas' constant adversary, kept Keyes from developing more fully; Alun Lewis, seven years older than Keyes, had the advantage over both of them. A history teacher before the war, Lewis grew to share Keyes' vision of war "not as an isolated act of wickedness but as the outcome of history." raising in the mining valleys of South Wales, he saw around him the same inequality and despair that he later described in his poems written in India. The need to expose these injustices became "one of the main general efforts of his writing," as the war forced him to see the international nature of evil. The bulk of his later poetry describes the village life of the Indian civilians and the desolate existence imposed upon the soldier by war. Because his poetry was "more uneven in technique" than that of Keyes and Douglas, he avoided the restrictions of sophisticated style, and maintained an objectivity and control that Douglas struggled continually to preserve.

40 Currey, p. 12.
In "All Day it has Rained," included in Lewis' first book of poetry, *Raiders' Dawn* (1942), he accurately describes the situation of those men referred to by R. N. Currey as "civilian soldiers," the lower-class recruits who had already been adults in civilian life:

All day it has rained, and we on the edge of the moors
Have sprawled in our bell-tents, moody and dull as boors
Groundsheets and blankets spread on the muddy ground

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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,

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Tomorrow maybe love; but now it is the rain
Possesses us entirely, the twilight and the rain.

It is just those details neglected by Keyes that Lewis uses to create an accurate picture of wartime existence. The incisiveness with which he describes Indian life is especially powerful in "Karanje Village":

The crumbling hovels like a discredited fortress,
The old hags muttering by the well,
The young girls in purple always avoiding us,
The monkeys loping obscenely around our smell...

This journalistic concern with apparently inconsequential detail differs from the mythic images of Keyes, although it is similar to Douglas' use of realistic images. Lewis' and Keyes' attitudes towards the poet's responsibility are, however, basically the same. Keyes, in a letter written

43 Alun Lewis: *Selected Poetry and Prose*, p. 68.
44 Currey, p. 22.
shortly before his enlistment, insisted that he was "not a man but a voice. My only justification is my power of speaking clearly." 46 Lewis, who along with Douglas "valued above all things fidelity to the truth," 47 believed in "fundamental sincerity and wholeness" 48 as the only qualities of importance that he could accept during the war.

The three poets, Keyes, Douglas, and Lewis, believed in recording the truth of experience, a personal commitment they felt, not to a public, but to themselves, as the only way to make sense out of an often senseless war. Alamein to Zem Zem shares this honesty of observation, presenting a personal account of the war that attempts neither to convince or to warn, but to simply record. Douglas was less public a poet than Keyes or Lewis, and this, combined with their earlier publishing history, contributes to some of the reasons for Douglas' present lack of recognition. In the concluding chapter, I will give attention to this problem, as well as suggesting the kind of critical reputation Douglas should have.

46 Gardner, p. 211
48 Ibid.
CHAPTER V

THE CRITICAL REPUTATION OF KEITH DOUGLAS

Keith Douglas has received little critical attention other than short references in literary histories and one lecture, delivered by G. S. Fraser, one of the editors of Collected Poems and Alamein to Zem Zem, to the British Academy in 1956. The prime reason for this lack of work on Douglas is the time of the publication of his writings. During the Second World War, many poets were publishing small volumes which were readily bought by an enthusiastic public. Included among these are G. S. Fraser's The Fatal Landscape (1941) and Home Town Elegy (1944), Roy Fuller's The Middle of a War (1942) and A Lost Season (1944), Roy Campbell's Talking Bronco (1946), and Henry Reed's A Map of Verona (1946). Sidney Keyes published The Iron Laurel in 1942, shortly before his departure for active service, and The Cruel Solstice appeared after his death in the fall of 1943. In addition, Collected Poems came out in 1945, followed in 1948 by Minos of Crete, a collection of plays and stories. Alun Lewis had the advantage of preparing three volumes for publication, the third, Ha! Ha! among the Trumpets, appearing posthumously in 1945 through the assistance of Robert Graves. The earlier volumes are Raider's Dawn (1942), also a verse collection, and The Last
Inspection (1943), a book of short stories.

Douglas had started publishing poetry as early as 1938, when "Dejection" was accepted by New Verse. Along with Keyes, he contributed to Eight Oxford Poets in 1941, and shared an anthology with John Hall and Norman Nicholson in 1943. Of the nineteen poems in this second work, only one, "Negative Information," was written in the Middle East. While on active service there, he sent poems to Poetry London, as well as submitting work to Personal Landscape, printed in Cairo by Bernard Spencer and Lawrence Durrell. The Cairo magazines were mainly run by civilians, as in the case of Salamander, edited by Keith Bullen, and, although Douglas, along with John Waller and G. S. Fraser, contributed to them, "the togetherness of the largely civilian group of exiles was exclusive."¹ Douglas apparently did little to encourage closer relationships with other writers, concerned as he was with his poetic endeavours and military responsibilities. In the spring of 1944, plans were being made for Bête Noire, a collection of verse and drawings, but Douglas' death on June 9 prevented publication.

During the last years of the war and the remainder of the decade, the published poets such as Keyes and Lewis, who had presented individual volumes of war poetry, held the interest of public and critics. Edith Sitwell and Dylan Thomas were being published regularly, as were Edwin Muir and Robert Graves, and the poets who had survived the war,

such as Roy Fuller, were developing and improving their style. The appearance of *The Collected Poems of Keith Douglas* in 1951 met with some success, but it came out "too late to cash in on the vogue for war poetry and too early to appeal ...as history."² The public desire for war poetry, "which had made possible three editions of Keyes,"³ had waned, and the interest had turned to the "slick formalism of [William] Empson's followers."⁴ The reviews of the first edition seem, by their generally good response, to bear out the opinion that the failure of the collection was its timing, not its content. Kathleen Raine called Douglas "the finest of the war poets,"⁵ while Philip John Stead saw him as "consummately honest, curiously free from literary attitudes."⁶ Mac Hammond, who treated Douglas quite harshly, admitted reluctantly that "Douglas' detachment as a child was extraordinary, even exquisite,"⁷ and called "Egypt" an example of Douglas' "old and finer style."⁸ The


⁴ Ibid.


⁷ Mac Hammond, "Normandy to Christ's Hospital," p. 357.

⁸ Ibid., p. 358.
1951 collection was printed in reverse chronological order, leading Ronald Bottrall to observe that it "compels a second reading from back to front." 9 The editors of the 1966 edition presented the poems in proper order, thereby more appropriately showing Douglas' development in poetic maturity.

G. S. Fraser delivered a lecture on Douglas in 1956, the only individual work undertaken on him. After presentation, it was printed in pamphlet form by the British Academy in the same year, and has been mentioned only once in more general criticisms of modern literature. 10 Fraser gives a very good introduction to Douglas, both in biographical and in literary observations. As a friend of Douglas, and as a literary critic of repute, he is admirably suited to the task. He is objective in his criticisms of Douglas' weaknesses, occasionally lavish in his praise of his strengths, and, in less than twenty pages, endeavours to give a clear, concise insight into the nature of Douglas' work. Again, the timing of Fraser's presentation weakened the impact the lecture might have had. Appearing five years after the first edition, and eight years before Ted Hughes' edition of Selected Poems, the lecture had little discernible effect on Douglas' critical reputation. Fraser, however, has been responsible for both editions of Douglas' Collected Poems, and has shared with Ted Hughes in bringing Douglas' works


10 It has been mentioned in Charles Tomlinson, "Poetry Today," p. 474.
to a more prominent position. Fraser has also mentioned Douglas in *The Modern Writer and his World* (1953) and *Vision and Rhetoric* (1959), the latter containing a comparison between the war poetry of Douglas and Robert Graves.\(^{11}\)

Ted Hughes reawakened interest in Douglas in the early sixties, presenting a radio broadcast, an article and his edition of *Selected Poems* in 1962, 1963, and 1964 respectively. The radio lecture was published in *The Listener*, and contains much of the same material later used in the article, which appeared in *Critical Quarterly*, and in the introduction to *Selected Poems*. In the broadcast, Hughes quotes several poems, showing the progress in Douglas' style and themes in a brief though useful survey. Hughes is less objective than Fraser, but avoids unfounded praise. He agrees with Fraser's assessment of "Vergissmeinicht," calling it "one of the most perfect and unforgettable war poems to come out of our history as a military nation."\(^{12}\) The article in *Critical Quarterly* became the introduction for *Selected Poems*, and as such was the only major criticism of the selection made by any of the reviewers. The poetry was greeted with cautious praise by Christopher Ricks, for, although he believed that Douglas was a good poet, he felt that Hughes was "claiming too much."\(^{13}\)

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The *Times Literary Supplement* expressed the need for a reissuing of the *Collected Poems*, which by 1964 had become "impossibly elusive," but supported Hughes' selection as "intelligent" and "sound." 14

In 1966, John Waller, G. S. Fraser, and J. C. Hall edited *Keith Douglas: Collected Poems and Alamein to Zem Zem* jointly as the definitive edition of the works of Keith Douglas. The reviews were positive, although John Carey felt, as does Fraser, that Douglas' calmness and sang-froid show the strain he endured in preserving his coolness. 15 Despite the favourable reviews, seven years have elapsed since the publication of the works without any significant criticism being done. The time between editions has certainly influenced this, as has the appearance of criticism at times when the editions are unavailable or out of fashion.

Along with reviews, another form of criticism has had some effect on Douglas' reputation, namely, anthologies of verse. Douglas has been anthologized fairly often, the number of poems in collections ranging from one to eleven. The volumes in which most poems have been included are anthologies of war poetry, 16 although *The New Poets of*


England and America (New York, 1960) has nine poems by Douglas, a surprising number considering his relatively unknown status. "Simplify Me When I'm Dead," "Vergiss-meinicht," and "On a Return from Egypt" are often selected, although a wide range of his poems have been chosen by various editors. The presence of Douglas' poems in anthologies assures his continued recognition though the volume of collected poems is not particularly well known.

The critical mention which Douglas has received in literary histories and works of general criticism is usually brief, restricted by the scope of the work and the lack of material on him. Unlike Keyes and Lewis, whose early publications appeared at a propitious time, and about whom critical works have been written, Douglas has had difficulties in gaining attention. This is not to say that the untimely publication of the editions has been responsible for a lack of work on an outstanding or great poet. No such view of Douglas can be substantiated. Certain reasons for his neglect stem from his early death. Only twenty-four when he died, he left less than ninety poems, a third of which were written during his teens.

Douglas' poems represent the initial efforts of a very good poet. His mastery of conventional forms and rhythms came early, allowing him to control and modify them to his

own purposes. Although influences of other poets are present in his poetry, Douglas' interest in Rosenberg and Owen, as well as the romantic tendencies he shared with Keyes, did not prevent him from "responding to the immediate experience of his wartime life."\(^{18}\) He was sensitive to impressions, combining an artist's eye for detail with a poet's sense for words. This sensitivity lends a lyric touch and a lightness of tone to much of the early poetry. A satiric vein runs in his poetry, although it does not emerge until the war poetry, where he felt the need to hide his feelings. In a letter to J. C. Hall, from August, 1943, Douglas explained the need for calmness and restraint:

> 'To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others. To trust 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.'\(^{19}\)

This control can appear as callousness, although Douglas often lets in a note of pity and compassion that undercuts his own objectivity. He strove, in his later poems, to record experience as he saw it around him; the pity of war was a part of those observations, and worthy of his consideration. His poetry is interesting as war verse, especially in comparison to Lewis and Keyes. These three form a group of Second World War poets in the tradition of:


\(^{19}\) Quoted in *Collected Poems*, p. 150.
Wilfred Owen. His war journal, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, is the outstanding account of the war by a poet, ranking in skill with Graves' *Good-Bye to All That*.

The significance of Douglas' writing goes beyond his role as a poet in and of war. His poems show a young, mature writer whose style and themes are clear, powerful, and honest. "Vergissmeinnicht" is not successful simply as a war poem, but as an example of a fine and gifted poet's comprehension of death. "Simplify Me When I'm Dead" re-iterates poetically what Douglas asserts in his prose: the poet is to be judged only on achievements, as objectively and honestly as possible. Poetry, of course, does not lend itself to purely objective criticism, as it relies on personal response for its impact, but Douglas can be appreciated for his craft and skill. Prophecies about his future role as a poet are meaningless exercises, and often appear apologetic in tone, to the effect of "If only...he showed such promise...." Douglas does not need sympathy or excuses. The skill evident in his poetry reveals insights into a superior mind, a mind that reflects attitudes not always in tune with his time.

Douglas was not part of a specific school of thought or movement. He drew on whatever resources he found available, and shaped them to suit his needs. The innovative aspect of his work lies in the way in which he took the commonplace, whether in diction or physical description, and filled it with a freshness and power that succeeds where elaborate poetic structures and mythic symbols, like those
of Keyes, strain to achieve their goal. Douglas continually and steadily developed throughout his career, never fully satisfied with his style. Experimentation led him forward, occasionally unsuccessfully, to a point such as in "On a Return from Egypt" at which his poetic ability becomes very powerful. This, Douglas' last completed poem, finds him dissatisfied, "disheartened," and tired. He realized that his death was very likely, and it is at that time that he worked so feverishly on Bête Noire. In a letter written that winter, he talked of "military engagements which may be the end of me." Time, which had initially been simply another theme for Douglas, developed into an enemy he could almost see and feel. It was time that kept Douglas from reaching the poetic level and depth of perception that he so earnestly sought. Despite his struggle, Douglas' death saw "the lilies of ambition / still spring in their climate, still unpicked...." 

The effort with which Keith Douglas strove has yielded some significant results which should be acknowledged. In the "Schooldays" section of the Collected Poems, "Encounter with a God" and "Point of View" stand out as well-written poems. The first of these shows a keen perception of the poet's role, expressed in an exotic form that gives the poem an air of tradition and myth. "Point of View" illustrates Douglas' growing awareness of time and the transience of

20 Introduction, Collected Poems, p. 15.
21 "On a Return from Egypt," Collected Poems, p. 130.
life in a simple, deceptively romantic manner. "Simplify Me When I'm Dead" from the "Army: England" section is one of Douglas' best poems. Frequently anthologized, it has been one of the most popular war poems, although much broader than that in concept. "Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden" from the "Middle East" section is one of Douglas' most successful satiric works, avoiding the sarcastic bite that creeps into "Egypt" and "Galantry."

"Cairo Jag" has a power in its imagery that reveals the despair and horror of war for soldier and civilian. Douglas' best poems are "Vergissmeinicht" and "On a Return from Egypt."

"Vergissmeinicht" is certainly Douglas' best war poem, bringing to mind the poetry of Wilfred Owen in its creation of pity through simple description. "On a Return from Egypt" presents a poet who insists on perseverance in searching for the truth, in spite of the possibility of failure or death. As a poem and as a poetic statement, it surpasses his other verse and remains an exceptional work from a skillful poet.

Keith Douglas is one of the best poets of the Second World War. "War Poet" is a phrase more of use to literary historians than critics, as it neatly draws in poets of differing interests and ability who write during a war. Douglas is not specifically a war poet, although the war was the framework in which he wrote most of his better poems. He was a poet, mature for his age, who managed in a very short career to write a group of poems that have depth, clarity, and power. His present reputation is an indication of a continual tendency on the part of many critics to
examine major figures to the exclusion of the minor. As a minor poet, he is as much a part of a literary tradition as any writer, for it is the vast number of lesser writers who make up the tradition from which the major figures evolve. Keith Douglas is a competent, intelligent poet whose concern with writing poesy as well as possible is sufficient reason for continued and renewed interest.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA AUCTORIS.

1971 Bachelor of Arts Degree from the University of Windsor.
1973 Master of Arts Degree from the University of Windsor.