INTRODUCTION

On 8 June 1944, two days after D-Day, Keith Douglas's regiment, the Sherwood Rangers, pushed on south of Bayeux in northern France, crossing the N13 road, and according to the historian of the Normandy landings, James Holland, they made a right hook towards the village of Audrieu and took up positions on a ridge overlooking the villages of Saint-Pierre, Tilly-sur-Seulles and Fontenay-le-Pesnel. Along the top of the ridge a track ran, lined by beech trees, with woods beyond. Beyond Tilly lay the next ridge, which gave a commanding position with clear views to the long ridge that barred the route south. Moving his tanks forward of the track, Major Stanley Christopherson, the regiment's commanding officer, ordered them into positions in the trees beyond, directly overlooking Saint-Pierre. It seemed quiet in the village but he sent Douglas, his second-in-command, and one of his troop commanders, Lieutenant John Bethell-Fox, down in their Sherman tanks to reconnoitre. In the village they discovered most of the civilians hiding in their cellars, but eventually they persuaded one old man to come out and he told them Germans were already in the village and had tanks in Tilly. Douglas and Bethell-Fox went back towards their waiting tanks only to walk straight into a German patrol. Both parties were so surprised that they each turned and fled, Douglas firing his revolver wildly as he ran.[1]

Christopherson wrote in his diary that on the following morning:

> Keith Douglas, my second-in-command, was hit in the head by a piece of mortar shell as he was running along a ditch towards his tank, and was killed instantly … When he joined the Regiment he appeared to have a grudge against the world in general and particularly his fellow Yeomanry officers, of whom there were quite a few at that time, who had been with the Regiment before the war and consisted of the wealthy landed gentry: these he regarded as complete snobs and accused of being utterly intolerant of anyone unable to 'talk horses' or who had not been educated at an English public school. He was a complete individualist, intolerant of military convention and discipline,

> which made life for him and his superior officers difficult. His artistic talents were clearly illustrated by his many drawings and the poetry that he wrote very much in the modern strain, and, had he lived, I am convinced that he would have made a name for himself in the world of art. I recall so many times at various conferences and order groups having to upbraid him for drawing on his map instead of paying attention.
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> In action he had undaunted courage and always showed initiative and complete disregard for his own personal safety. At times he appeared even to be somewhat foolhardy – maybe on account of his short-sightedness, which compelled him to wear large, thick-lensed glasses. I regret that he was not spared to know that he was mentioned-in-despatches for outstanding service.[2]

Douglas wrote a book, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, about the Regiment and the desert campaign in North Africa, which he asked Christopherson to read and write a foreword to. Douglas disguised all the regiment's personalities with fictitious names and included some unkind and unjustified allusions to certain officers who had been killed. Christopherson insisted he omit these for the sake of next-of-kin who would find such references hurtful.

Christopherson continued: 'In the original text he described my dancing as being "deplorable", to which I objected, pointing out that he had never seen my efforts on the dance floor and that I considered myself well above the average, and as a result of my protest he agreed to alter the text.' Holland comments that Douglas

> … was as good as his word, and by the time *Alamein to Zem Zem* was published, Stanley's dancing had been upgraded to 'competent' in the 'restrained English style'. It says much about Stanley, however, that what he objected to was the description of his dancing when some of the other comments Douglas made about him might, on the face of it, have seemed more hurtful … Padre Leslie Skinner claimed that Douglas had had premonitions of his death, although John Semken remembers him talking about wanting to be part of the invasion so that he could then write about it. 'He wasn't proposing to write about it hereafter, was he?' says John. Stuart Hills, a new troop commander in C Squadron who had been befriended by Douglas, thinks it was inevitable that, after several years of war, those who had survived until then would harbour fears of approaching death.'[3]

As Vernon Scannell says, 'I do not think there can be much doubt that Keith Douglas was haunted by a strong premonition of his own death

in action. It might be objected that every man in a fighting unit at that quite early stage of the war would suffer a similar feeling of his impending and violent end, but the truth is that the majority of fighting men, while rationally conscious of the chances of their being killed in action, did not really believe that they would be chosen. They feared death, were uneasily aware that his choice of victim was random, but this is a vastly different condition from Douglas's amazingly brave, clear-sighted and unhistrionic contemplation of the inevitable.'[4]

Douglas wasn't the first soldier poet to have had something like a death wish. Alan Seeger, who was killed in action in 1916, wrote:

> I have a rendezvous with Death
> At some disputed barricade,
> When Spring comes back with rustling shade
> And apple-blossoms fill the air –
> I have a rendezvous with Death
> When Spring brings back blue days and fair.'[5]

But Douglas had a strange premonition of death. In 1940 another poet, John Waller, in the second part of his essay, 'Oxford poetry and disillusionment', in *Poetry Review* wrote: 'Keith Douglas is one of the keenest, most musical, and careful poets Oxford has produced. He subjects all his work to a searching critical analysis and is rarely contented with inferior workmanship … Recently Douglas has become obsessed with the question of death.'[6]

Raymond Pennock, his friend and rugby-playing colleague at Merton, recalled that Douglas was sure that he would join a good cavalry regiment and that he would 'bloody well make my mark in this war. For I will not come back.' Pennock also remembered him saying that his name would be on the next one as they passed a First World War memorial.[7]

We think of Keith Douglas, if we think of him at all, as a war poet; perhaps the most important poet of the Second World War. But the merest glance at the complete poems show that over 75 per cent were written before Douglas had any direct experience of war.[8] Ted Hughes wrote in 1964 that 'now, twenty years after his death, it is becoming clear that he offers more than just a few poems about war, and that every poem he wrote, whether about war or not, has some special value.'[9]

Hughes reflected on the evolution of the poetry of Keith Douglas's short career:

Leaving his virtuoso juvenilia, his poetry passed through two roughly distinguishable phases, and began to clarify into a third. The literary influences on this progress seem to have been few. To begin with, perhaps he takes Auden's language over pretty whole, but he empties it of its intellectual concerns, turns it into the practical experience of life, and lets a few minor colours of the late 1930s poetry schools creep in. But his temperament is so utterly modern he seems to have no difficulty with the terrible, suffocating, maternal octopus of ancient English poetic tradition.

The first phase of his growth shows itself in the poem titled 'Forgotten the Red Leaves'. He has lost nothing since 'Encounter with a God', but gained a new range of imagination, a new ease of transition from image to image. Yet in this particular poem the fairyland images are being remembered by one still partly under their spell, indulging the dream, and this mode of immaturity is the mark of this first phase, which lasts until he leaves Oxford in 1940.

Before he leaves, a poem titled 'The Deceased' heralds the next stage. Here, the picturesque or merely decorative side of his imagery disappears; his descriptive powers sharpen to realism. The impression is of a sudden mobilizing of the poet's will, a clearing of his vision, as if from sitting considering possibilities and impossibilities he had stood up to act. Pictures of things no longer interest him much: he wants their substance, their nature, and their consequences in life. At once, and quite suddenly, his mind is whole, as if united by action, and he produces poetry that is both original and adult. Already, in … 'The Deceased', we can see what is most important of all about Douglas. He has not simply added poems to poetry, or evolved a sophistication. He is a renovator of language. It is not that he uses words in jolting combinations, or with titanic extravagance, or curious precision. His triumph lies in the way he renews the simplicity of ordinary talk, and he does this by infusing every word with a burning exploratory freshness of mind – partly impatience, partly exhilaration at speaking the forbidden thing, partly sheer casual ease of penetration. The music that goes along with this, the unresting variety of intonation and movement within his patterns, is the natural path of such confident, candid thinking.

There is nothing studied about this new language. Its air of improvisation is a vital part of its purity. It has the trenchancy of an inspired jotting, yet leaves no doubt about the completeness and subtlety of his impressions, or the thoroughness of his artistic conscience. The poem titled 'Egypt', for instance, could be a diary note, yet how could it be improved as a poem?

> The war brought his gift to maturity, or to a first maturity…[Douglas] showed in his poetry no concern for man in society. The murderous skeleton in the body of a girl, the dead men being eaten by dogs on the moonlit desert, the dead man behind the mirror, these items of circumstantial evidence are steadily out-arguing all his high spirits and hopefulness.
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> Technically, each of the poems of this second phase rests on some single objective core, a scene or event or thing. But one or two of them, and one in particular, start something different: the poems are 'On a Return from Egypt' and 'Simplify me when I'm Dead'. Their inner form is characterized not by a single object of attraction, but a constellation of statements. In the second of these poems, more liberated than the first, Douglas consummates his promise. Here he has identified a style that seems able to deal poetically with whatever it comes up against. It is not an exalted verbal activity to be attained for short periods, through abstinence, or a submerged dream treasure to be fished up when the everyday brain is half-drugged. It is a language for the whole mind, at its most wakeful, and in all situations. A utility general-purpose style, as, for instance, Shakespeare's was, that combines a colloquial prose readiness with poetic breadth, a ritual intensity and music of an exceedingly high order with clear direct feeling, and yet in the end is nothing but casual speech. This is an achievement for which we can be grateful.[10]

I have quoted Hughes at length because he seems to have been the first well-known poet to have appreciated Douglas's work, although Robin Fedden wrote that the Cairo poets considered Douglas's 'war poems [as] near the top of the small body of presentable English poetry that the war has thrown off.'[11]

It is pointless to speculate on what Keith Douglas would have become had he not been killed in action in 1944 but, as Declan Ryan wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement*, when he died he 'had arrived at a poetic maturity and accomplishment that almost defied belief.'[12] G. S. Fraser did speculate, however, in his 1956 Chatterton Lecture to the British Academy: 'if he had been spared … he might well be, today, the dominating figure of his generation and a wholesome and inspiring influence on younger men. He had courage, passion and generosity. These are three qualities that our age generally needs.'[13]

If Douglas was a 'war poet' the obvious comparison is with the famous poets of the First World War, Owen, Sassoon, Graves, Brooke, Thomas and Rosenberg. Douglas was scathing about the quality of the poetry of the Second World War, but what was the difference? Douglas himself was sure

that it was because the poets of the Second World War had nothing new to say. In an article written in May 1943 but not published until April 1971 he wrote that 'hell cannot be let loose twice: it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. The hardships, pain and boredom; the behaviour of the living, and the appearance of the dead, were so accurately described by the poets of the Great War that everyday on the battlefields of the western desert – and no doubt on the Russian battlefields as well – their poems are illustrated. Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological.' The other reason for the difference is the one innovation of modern warfare that Douglas saw, the relative mobility of war, which 'does not give the same opportunities for writing as the long routines of trench warfare.'[14] This is more plausible than it perhaps may seem. Poets are ingenious and they will write about something else if the obvious subject is taken away. They could not be 'war' poets in the tradition of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. The sheer pointlessness of all this fighting had been captured perfectly in Owen's sonnet 'Futility', and we are perhaps less shocked by the crowd of flies around the German corpse in Douglas's 'Vergissmeinnicht' if we have encountered Rosenberg's queer, sardonic rat in 'Break of day in the trenches'. We are shocked by the laconic delivery not the subject of Douglas's poem. Its matter-of-fact tone stresses the universality of death in war. As Henri Barbusse famously wrote: 'Two armies fighting is one great army that kills itself.' We should not be surprised by the condition of any corpse, regardless of its nationality. As Lorrie Goldensohn said, 'little remained for the soldier-poets of World War II to do but reiterate, or amplify, the witness given in 1914–18.'[15]

The inhumanity and violence unleashed before and during the Second World War was so great that it seemed to be beyond poetry. It is unlikely that Theodor Adorno was alone in thinking that 'to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric'.[16] Douglas's view was later endorsed by Vernon Scannell, another poet who saw action in the north African desert: 'The authentic British poetry of the Second World War was not a poetry of protest, still less was it a poetry inspired by patriotic enthusiasm … The serviceman of 1939–45 could not be disillusioned because he held no illusions to start with.'[17] Scannell also saw the point of the relative mobility of the Second World War: 'The Second World War had no fixed habitation. It was a mobile war. Soldiers were not long enough in one place for a single warscape to establish itself in the imagination and memory. Even in the Western Desert, where one might have expected a sameness of surroundings, progress was fast

and changes of physical detail fairly frequent. It is true that a dug-out in No-Man's Land would hardly prove the ideal place for meditation and the composition of poetry, but at least there would be quite lengthy periods of inactivity when it would be possible, however difficult, to put words down on paper.'[18]

There is also the assumption that the first war was particularly meaningless, essentially about the exploitation of overseas territories by European countries, whereas there was a necessary outcome of the second war, the eradication of totalitarianism. Douglas himself was sure that Hitler had to be stopped (as he made clear to his old Merton College tutor, the First World War poet Edmund Blunden, in his letter of April/May 1944[19]). Basil Bunting, one of the greatest British poets of the twentieth century, made the same point. Bunting had been a conscientious objector in the first war. 'During the First World War,' he said, 'it was possible to believe, I did believe, that it was a totally unnecessary war fought for purely selfish ends, to get hold of markets and things like that. You couldn't believe that, in the second one at all. It was perfectly obvious for years beforehand that nothing short of war and violence would ever stop Hitler and his appalling career.'[20] As Robert Graves said: 'it is extremely unlikely that [the poet of the Second World War] will feel any qualms about the justice of the British cause or about the necessity of the war's continuance; so that, even if he has experienced the terrors of an air raid, he will not feel obliged to write horrifically about it, to draw attention to the evils of war.'[21]

We now think of the poetry of the First World War as overwhelmingly critical of political and military leaders' strategy and tactics, articulating a sense of hopeless valour in the teeth of insuperable horror, but this is largely because the poetry that has survived (because it is the best) was written by poets who subscribed to the view that it was the futility and horror that needed to be in a perverse sense celebrated. In fact, of the 2,225 poets who published during the years of the war hardly any expressed the views that have for generations of students defined its poetry.[22] Jon Stallworthy wrote that 'the poems of the Second World War have had less impact – not because they were less good, but because the reading public has become increasingly attuned to prose, and because the Word (prose as well as verse) has increasingly lost ground to the Image.'[23] As Worth Howard, the acting Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science at the American University at Cairo, put it in his preface to *Oasis*, the original anthology of Middle East forces, in 1943: 'Newsreels and daily broadcasts have kept the public far

better informed of the progress of the forces than has been possible in any previous war. An untold number of photographs have been taken, showing men in action and recording the aftermath of battle. Cartoonists and artists have employed their skill to portray scenes on the battlefield and life away from the front.'[24] Howard went on to praise the cultural life of the forces: 'thousands of men have searched for beauty in a variety of forms. With what evident joy have they flocked to concert halls to hear a Beethoven sonata, a Brahms concerto, a Schubert symphony. Men have crowded the cathedral courtyard to listen to a Handel oratorio. They have sought hungrily for the privilege of good books. Men and officers have gathered to share their love of poetry – others have read and acted plays together … Let no man say that all those in uniform have become simply cogs in a machine – that military discipline has made of them mere automatons.'[25] The poets of the Second World War were not silenced by their lack of culture. Lawrence Durrell recalled that in desperation at the lack of reading material one officer had erected a plyboard panel with a few hastily assembled poems and satires and asked for more contributions. Within a day the board was covered with poems and the officer was obliged to increase the size of the notice board.[26]

But if the war's futility and horror had been taken from the Second World War poets as a subject what did they write about? The answer is that they wrote about the war, but in a different way. Scannell again: 'If the poet in uniform was going to register in his work the changes that occurred in the *Zeitgeist* since 1914, and he could scarcely do otherwise, it ought to have been obvious that, in 1939 or 1940, he would not be writing the same sort of poetry as the young soldier-poets were producing at the outbreak of the First World War.'[27] As John Cromer put it in his essay, 'Poetry To-Day', in *Oasis*: 'The emotions produced by war are subjects for poetry and in all wars poets have been quick to appreciate this and capture their stress in their words.'[28] The poets of the Second World War were no different.

Douglas's mother wrote of her son: 'He was happy by nature, but the futile suffering of the world and the inability of such a large proportion to appreciate beauty in any form depressed him heavily at times. He did not have a conventional artistic temperament because he understood and appreciated the ordinary man too well. But he had the extreme sensitivity of the artist and I think there was no sensation of fear, pity, misery, hate, pain, love, and exhilaration which he had not felt to the full. He seemed able to achieve a complete absorption in his full pursuit of any given moment to the exclusion of all else; and he had the faculty of looking on himself from

a distance, as it were – seeing his faults and assets as though he were judging another person.'[29] G. S. Fraser, the poet and critic who knew Douglas in Cairo, assessed Douglas's character in his Chatterton Lecture:

> Douglas's attitude to war was, though humane and deeply compassionate, a heroic attitude. It had nothing in common with the humanitarian, pacifist attitudes of contemporaries of his like Nicholas Moore or Alex Comfort or Douglas's friend, John Hall. He was a good soldier, and in a sense he enjoyed his war. He enjoyed, at least, the exercise of the will in action. He was an officer, and an efficient officer, who enjoyed the company of his fellow officers, and accepted and enjoyed the responsibility that went with his rank … he was a very intelligent man, as these aphorisms ['On the Nature of Poetry' in *Augury*] on poetry prove, but not a man, I think, who had much use for intellectual chatter. The two or three times I personally met him, I do not remember our exchanging a word on any abstract topic. Whatever else he may have pined for during the war years, it will not have been evening parties in Chelsea … He was an aloof, gay, and passionate man. He loved risk. The state of the world, and perhaps the nature of man, and perhaps his own nature in its depths, filled him with profound sadness; nevertheless, for him the sadness of human existence was a kind of destiny that had to be bravely and lovingly embraced. He was as far as can be from a nagging or carping attitude to life.'[30]

After Douglas's death his mother wrote to Maurice Wollman: 'His last completed poem ('On a Return from Egypt') reflects, I think, his doubts and urges – his longing to carry out the things he once planned and looked forward to – all the writings, illustrations, back-cloths … all the travel. And through all, the sense that if he did not face and share in every experience that came his way neither could he write any more. So for him there was no other choice despite his fear. So he went. He might have stayed in a safer spot. But I understand he couldn't. He always loathed the "safety first" idea, holding that one might as well be dead as afraid to move. He believed in venturing and having – or losing if need be. If he had lived to be a thousand I think he would still have gone on trying to weave his gathered experiences and knowledge into some comprehensible pattern of words and shapes – or sounds.'[31]

Unmaternal commentators weren't so generous. R. J. Sapsford wrote an essay in *The Blue* (the official magazine of Christ's Hospital school) of January 1966 comparing Douglas and Blunden. He describes Douglas at school, saying 'this strange mixture of the aesthete and the athlete, as a

contemporary called him, was always something of an enigma, respected but not liked by his contemporaries, treasured by a handful of masters, condemned by the majority for his insolence. "He was very loyal to his friends," Mr. Hornsby [his housemaster at Christ's] writes, "but a great hater of injustice and of those whom he did not like"; apparently the latter were in the majority. A contemporary at Oxford describes him as an unattractive person, unimpressive at first meeting, with small eyes hidden behind glasses set high on a large, fleshy nose. He also claims to have detected in him a marked tendency to latch on to people, to demand their company without giving much in return; this judgement may well be a fair one, for he knew what he wanted and was not slow to ask for it …'[32]

One of Douglas's contemporaries, C. T. Hatten, reacted angrily to this characterization of Douglas in *The Blue*, pointing out that he was 'a member of the Blackberries, a school concert party that flourished in the thirties. You were elected to it by the other members … and you had to be amiable and amusing and prepared to make a fool of yourself. If you look at the photograph if the 1st XV, 1937–38, you will see Douglas with a great grin on his face which was as often there as not.'[33]

Sapsford rejected Hatten's criticism in the same issue[34] but Hatten was supported by the Director General of the National Book League, J. E. Morpugo, who, though he wasn't a particular friend of Douglas, was in the unusual position of knowing him both at school and in the army. Morpugo told a story about rugby when he and Douglas had been on a training course in Sarafand in Palestine: 'We … found ourselves playing rugger for a very scratch side against an even more scratch side. We were ordered to play centre-threequarter, something that neither of us had ever done before. Keith let it be known to our opponents that I was wearing a Richmond jersey (it was in fact my old House jersey) because my modesty would not allow me to wear my England colours. He emphasized the subterfuge without words by himself wearing a plain blue jersey and white shorts and insisting that Douglas was a good Scots name, and once on the field we did nothing fast except talk, to the entire confusion of the opposition who were lured into belief in our skill to the tune of some 30 or 40 points.'[35]

Blunden himself probably had it right in his 1966 introduction to Douglas's *Collected Poems*: 'Keith's character was … complex in the manner of many artists. Against his generosity and zest for life must be placed, if the portrait is to be (as he would have wished it to be) true to life, certain less

endearing qualities – an impulsive and obstinate streak which was sometimes the despair of even his closest friends.'[36]

The rest of this book explores the enigmatic character of Keith Douglas and the dispassionate poetry he produced. As with Henry James's Roderick Hudson it appears that Douglas's friends and family had to tolerate a great deal of erratic behaviour in the process of enjoying his genius. Douglas was not always easy to like but he had a boarding school upbringing from the age of 6, before he went up to Oxford (then a largely male domain) and then joined the army, not an ideal preparation for social success.