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### The New Keith Douglas Collection - Review Article

*The Complete Poems of Keith Douglas*. Edited by Desmond Graham. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978. Pp. xiv, 145. \$13.95

Keith Douglas was twenty-four when killed in Normandy on June 9, 1944. Although he was preparing a collected edition of his poems before his death, there is no single collection of revised manuscripts. Many variants occur in manuscripts now scattered across the United Kingdom and in Texas. Douglas frequently revised his work, sending different versions of the same poem to his mother or to friends in letters written during moments of inaction while on active service. In some cases he revised already published poems with marginal corrections in his own copies of the printed versions. This new edition of *The Complete Poems of Keith Douglas* has been painstakingly edited by Desmond Graham. He indicates variants and seeks to preserve the final texts that Douglas had approved. As biographer of Douglas, Graham has a detailed knowledge of the poet's life unavailable to earlier editors; consequently the dating of texts in this new edition is more precise than in previous collections.

Graham's editorial principle is to give "the latest known text" for each poem, "incorporating any autograph revisions" (p. x). This practice is most obviously successful in the new versions of Douglas' early poems. The revisions he made to the works written at school and Oxford show a judicious pruning and tightening. Less obvious, however, are the benefits of always accepting the latest known text of Douglas' later poems. There the last text is at times more questionably the best. For his last four years Douglas wrote and revised in the chaotic physical and emotional conditions of army life. Since no collected volume was published while he was alive, he lacked the benefit of a final editorial judgement. And he used to seek editorial advice. In the copies of poems he sent to editors and friends he often leaves queries in the margins. Revisions to revisions can be tantalisingly indefinite. Some of his work was clearly incomplete when he died. Nevertheless this is as definitive an edition of the poems as we are likely to have and it is most welcome.

The fact that Douglas' poems are again in print is as pleasing as is the completeness of this edition. The editor's biography of Keith Douglas, which appeared in 1974, provided a marvellous insight into the background to the poetry. Shortly after its appearance Douglas' *Collected Poems* (1966) went out of print. Graham's biography and his new edition of the poems now give us an

unusually vivid sense of the context in which Douglas' poems were written and the revisions they underwent. In his notes to *The Complete Poems* Graham refers to relevant sections from his biography and the two complement each other well.

Previous collections of Douglas' poems appeared in 1951 and 1966. The first is edited by John Waller and G.S. Fraser, both of whom had known the poet. The second is edited by Waller, Fraser and J.C. Hall, with whom Douglas had corresponded at some length about his own poems, and who is one of three poets represented in *Selected Poems* (Keith Douglas, J.C. Hall and Norman Nicholson), published by Bale and Staples in 1943 as Number Three in the Modern Reading Library.

Desmond Graham's *Complete Poems* has little entirely new. The 1966 *Collected Poems*, edited by Waller, Fraser and Hall, has illustrations which the new edition lacks. This is a pity because Douglas sketched frequently. The little pieces related to his writing reproduced in the 1966 edition enhance it, just as the photographs which are reproduced in the biography give poignant life to the words themselves. The more leisured style of the notes in the previous edition is also preferable to the cryptic, space-saving format of those in the new edition, crammed as they are with so much textual information.

Lovers of the old editions will not always welcome the alterations which Desmond Graham makes. In particular, the version he gives of the old "Aristocrats", now called "Sportsmen", is less resonant than its well-known predecessor, one of the finest poems of the war. The 1966 edition indicated the existence of the "Sportsmen" version with its impersonal closing line. Graham argues that the text he chooses was written in September 1943 because of the letterhead on the manuscript, "the metrically more regular third stanza, more precise title," and the misdating—in a marginal note—of Lieutenant Colonel Player's death. Player, Douglas' superior officer, had died on April 24, 1943, yet in the note Douglas refers to his having been killed in February 1943. This evidence suggests that the "Sportsmen" manuscript is later than the previously accepted version, "Aristocrats", sent in an autograph letter to Tambimuttu on July 11, 1943.

All very well. But the alterations in the later version (and the arguments are convincing that it is a later manuscript) smooth away some of the poignancy of "Aristocrats". Graham himself chose to follow the earlier text when discussing the poem in his biography: "I have followed CP [*Collected Poems*], preferring July text to later variants made without reference to it."<sup>1</sup> It is, surely, not merely familiarity which gives greater impact to the less "regular" closing of "Aristocrats"? Here are the final two stanzas from the text of July 1943. Douglas is describing his fellow officers in an ex-cavalry regiment, the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, now fighting in tanks:

How can I live among this gentle  
obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?  
Unicorns, almost,

for they are falling into two legends  
in which their stupidity and chivalry  
are celebrated. Each, fool and hero, will be an immortal.

The plains were their cricket pitch  
and in the mountains the tremendous drop fences  
brought down some of the runners. Here then  
under the stones and earth they dispose themselves,  
I think with their famous unconcern.  
It is not gunfire I hear but a hunting horn.<sup>2</sup>

It is the presence of the observing poet, the "I" of the poem, which guarantees its wonderful blend of detachment and sympathy. Each judgement is preserved by his baffled genuineness of response. The "aristocrats" are heroes, are obsolescent, are fools, are lovable *and* are alienating. The reader shares the poet's mixture of pain, admiration and exasperation. He, like the poet, is among them but not of them. The marvellous, truncated line, "Unicorns, almost," embodies the understated style of that peculiarly English "unconcern" evoked in the last stanza. There too Douglas adopts the good form of his environment. "I think", like "almost", has just the right element of tentative irony. The superbly ponderous disposing of themselves by the chivalric fool/ heroes is framed by the urbane tact of "I think".

In "Sportsmen" Douglas has removed the "I" entirely from the final stanza. And he has made "regular" those twists of rhythm and diction which give the bite to "Aristocrats":

How then can I live among this gentle  
obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?  
Unicorns, almost. For they are fading into two legends  
in which their stupidity and chivalry are celebrated;  
the fool and the hero will be immortals.

These plains were a cricket pitch  
and in the hills the tremendous drop fences  
brought down some of the runners, who  
under these stones and earth lounge still  
in famous attitudes of unconcern. Listen  
against the bullet cries the simple horn. (*Complete Poems*, p. 110)

With regularisation of the lines has come a literalness. Ambivalence, which is so intimately part of the total effect in "Aristocrats", has been softened out. In place of the final, poised "I think", "I hear" we now have the weak and superimposed injunction to "Listen". The unconcern of the aristocrats relates to their actual disposing of themselves in the earlier text whereas in the later it is tied to the infinitely less vivid concept of the "attitudes" with which they "lounge". And the superb final line of "Aristocrats" is emasculated in the more timid later version. The wistful echo of Roncesvalles in the original epitomised that blending of awe, compassion and alienation which is muted in "Sportsmen".

A fragment written just earlier than "Aristocrats"/ "Sportsmen", dwelling on the same theme, is published for the first time in *Complete Poems*. It is a moving dirge on a topic that obsessed Douglas and a surprise bonus in the new volume. Ten incomplete drafts of the poem exist. The 1966 edition published two versions as parts I and II of "I watch with interest, for they are ghosts". Graham prints both the old II and the new fragment, judging them to have been written at Tel Aviv in April 1943. The dating in *Collected Poems* is "London 1944".

"Fragment A" is a neat companion piece to "Sportsmen"/ "Aristocrats". The poet contemplates "As at a final dance" the "noble lunatics whose fancy is/ that they are living still." He concludes the fragment:

... Lord what a grace  
 their nonsense has. their pitiful delusion  
 that they like gentlemen agreed with Time.  
 Time who behind their backs turned them to smoke.  
 Listen, it is just possible to hear  
 the frail leaves of conversation falling  
 from the lips of a dead nobleman or king  
 while we remember what nobles and kings were. (p. 108)

Literalness in these lines does not leave a sense of let down, although they lack the poise of "Aristocrats". Again it is the ruminative note, "Lord what a grace/ their nonsense has", that creates such an intimacy in the lines; a sense of shared perception. Given this easy relationship between poet and reader, there is no strain in the romantic sweep of lines like "Time who behind their backs turned them to smoke". And the elegiac note is sustained in the closing, with that dissonance in the half-rhyme "hear"/ "were" embodying the strain or dislocation which is the subject of the fragment. "Were" as a final word, when one expects "are", is the clinching discord: "while we remember what nobles and kings were."

Douglas celebrates aristocratic style at the same time as he laments its inefficacy and obsolescence in poems like "Aristocrats" or "Fragment". This is the feature which gives such poems their extraordinarily haunting quality. When it is lacking Douglas' tone is brittle. In "Gallantry", written at roughly the same time as the poems I have been discussing, he deals once more with his colonel's stylised nonchalance:

The Colonel in a casual voice  
 spoke into the microphone a joke  
 which through a hundred earphones broke  
 into the ears of a doomed race.

Into the ears of the doomed boy, the fool  
 whose perfectly mannered flesh fell  
 in opening the door for a shell  
 as he had learnt to do at school. (p. 99)

Later in the poem Douglas asserts that "It was a brave thing the Colonel said", but apart from the obvious element of bravery in the officer's joking under fire, there is no warmth in the lines. Rhythm and rhyme reinforce the public manner dealing with surface alone. There is nothing inward about the poet's grim record of a farcical coterie world. The superbly Brechtian public schoolboy "opening the door for a shell" falls as mere "flesh". Even when Douglas uses a question and the pronoun "we", there is still no real sharing of response or feeling; decorum and taboo are impenetrable. Real questioning is impossible:

Was George fond of little boys?  
 We always suspected it,  
 but who will say: since George was hit  
 we never mention our surmise. (p. 99)

Bitterness at absurdity is the predominant emotion in *Gallantry* which, although effective, has none of the haunting sympathy to be found in Douglas' best war poems.

In his well-known anthology pieces about the war in the desert, there is almost always a baffled questioning or bemused articulation of the poet's own reflexes and reactions. In "Cairo Jag", for example, "you can imagine/ the dead themselves, their boots, clothes and possessions/ clinging to the ground". A similar technique informs "Landscape with Figures 2", which opens with the startlingly direct lines:

On scrub and sand the dead men wriggle  
 in their dowdy clothes. They are mimes  
 who express silence and futile aims  
 enacting this prone and motionless struggle  
 at a queer angle to the scenery. (p. 103)

After pursuing the grotesque stage metaphor further ("The eye and mouth of each figure/ bear the cosmetic blood") Douglas concludes by switching directly to the personal:

A yard more, and my little finger  
 could trace the maquillage of these stony actors  
 I am the figure writhing on the backcloth. (p. 103)

He is himself the ruminative (almost bewildered) subject again in the closing lines of "Desert Flowers":

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

I see men as trees suffering  
 or confound the detail and the horizon.  
 Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing  
 of what the others never set eyes on. (p. 102)

Douglas is seldom so explicit about his role as poet of death, but his most intense moments in the battlefield poems are revelatory.

Those revelations are always personal, almost private. In "*Vergissmeinnicht*" the stiff, schoolgirl writing and commonplace endearment on the dead gunner's memento are revealed with an emotion approaching awe; the awesome contrast of a real relationship relived—in spite of its banality—in the middle of carnage:

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil  
 the dishonoured picture of his girl  
 who has put: *Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht*  
 in a copybook gothic script. (p. 111)

From this closeness with the dead gunner it is an easy step to one of Douglas' most celebrated evocations of 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. (p. 111)

Closeness of visual focus and of feeling go hand in hand with his ruminations in the poems of 1943. Broad emotions like love, pity or horror flood the lines so convincingly because of the naturalness of the thinking voice and the precision of the seeing eye. In "Enfidaville" the first three stanzas vividly describe the shattered and deserted battlefield town. Then the final stanza is overwhelmingly personal with the return of the inhabitants and the poet himself:

But already they are coming back; to search  
 like ants, poking in the débris, finding in it  
 a bed or a piano and carrying it out.  
 Who would not love them at this minute?  
 I seem again to meet  
 the blue eyes of the images in the church. (p. 109)

"How to Kill" reverses the process seen in "Enfidaville". It moves from the intimate description of the poet's coordination and precision as a sniper in the act of killing to a general reflection on mortal fragility. In the second stanza the closeness of the poet/ sniper and his victim is agonising. The telescopic sight is at the centre of the physical experience, and the protagonist's imaginative penetration is at the heart of his sympathy for the "soldier who is going to die":

Now in my dial of glass appears  
 the soldier who is going to die.

He smiles, and moves about in ways  
 his mother knows, habits of his.  
 The wires touch his face: I cry  
 NOW. Death, like a familiar hears

and look, has made a man of dust  
 of a man of flesh. (p. 112)

These fine poems written in 1943 after Douglas had been involved in the desert fighting from Alamein to Tunisia are justifiably his best known and most celebrated works. When reading *The Complete Poems* through, however, one is continually aware of his dazzling talent at all stages of his short career. Graham preserves the traditional divisions of Douglas' work: School (Christ's Hospital); Oxford; Army: England (training); Army: Middle East; England 1944. One is tempted to lament the comparative neglect of his early and middle work until reaching the final stage with its poise and emotional control which show so clearly the maturing effect of battle. In these poems we have a significant war poet. In the earlier poems we see a captivating and vital poetic talent.

"Dejection", the poem written when Douglas was sixteen and published in *New Verse* in 1938, typifies his early promise. It embodies the mood of longing which informs most of his work. Although "Dejection" is almost a pastiche of Audenesque mannerisms its bleakness of tone is both genuine and saddening:

Yesterday travellers in summer's country,  
 Tonight the sprinkled moon and ravenous sky  
 Say, we have reached the boundary. The autumn clothes  
 Are on. Death is the season and we the living  
 Are hailed by the solitary to join their regiment,  
 To leave the sea and the horses and march away  
 Endlessly. The spheres speak with persuasive voices.

Only tomorrow like a seagull hovers and cries:  
*The windows will be open and hearts behind them.*<sup>3</sup> (p. 13)

Douglas's life as an only child deserted by his father, brought up by his impoverished mother, and living almost all his days in institutions of fierce decorum (Christ's, Oxford, the army) is reflected in the loneliness of the lines (written before Oxford and the army). It is not only the control of rhythm which gives the edge to the verse. Its poignancy comes from the reality in its evocation of endless partings. "Only tomorrow" offers the promise of domesticity and warmth. But the final two lines containing hope are much weaker than those creating the Auden landscape of doubt and deprivation in an aura of vague duty.

His ear was always remarkable. The opening lines of many of his earliest poems are quite dazzling in their attack. From his school period there are: "Ono-no-komache the poetess/ sat on the ground among her flowers" ("Encounter with a God"); "Curtaining this country the whispering rain/ Stipples in

cold monochrome the sun's/ Alive and tinted picture, so warm once" ("A Storm"); "Over and over the street is repeated with sunlight:/ The oxen tire even of the leaves" ("Vilanelle of Gorizia"); "This season like a child on airy points/ Has crept behind you in an evening time" ("Kristin"). In his Oxford period his note is more often cynical or sardonic but the opening lines still startle: "What in the pattern of your face/ Was writing to my eye, that journeyed once/ Like an explorer in your beauty's land" ("Stranger"); "Intelligences like black birds/ come on their dire wings from Europe" ("Invaders"); "The monotonous evil clock/ is creeper climbing on my heart" ("A Round Number"); "Turn your back on Monte Nero, that mountain/to the west. Turn your back on the white town" ("A God is Buried").

Douglas responded quickly to mood in new environments and situations. He can preserve both the distinguishing feature of scenes or places and the nuance of an established custom, social attitude or even an era. In the well-known Middle East poems there are several examples of this gift. "Aristocrats"/ "Sportsmen" is one; "Cairo Jag", "Mersa", "Enfidaville", "l'Autobus" are others. In his earlier work this talent is as vivid as in 1943. A poem published for the first time by Desmond Graham and dated by him "?1935" is an extraordinary tour de force for a fifteen-year-old. "Love and Gorizia" is in three stanzas. Earlier collections had a slightly different version of the first stanza alone under the title "Bexhill". Douglas contrasts a warm and coloured Italian milieu with grey English sensibility. The South is exotic: "the white-dusted avenues, and where the ruined palace faces the green/ river, and barbers chatter, the sky is clean". In opposition to this scene, dry English proportions dominate the next brilliant stanza:

Mr. Kennedy, speaking in Painswick among slate,  
insisted on shadows' value, thought  
colour of merely secondary import;  
characteristically, being himself incomplete,  
wound-drained, among these places, where thus late  
the unsatisfied put out their heads, take pleasure  
in reproducing rooftops on rough paper. (p. 7)

In addition to the conversational exactness of the rhythms, the whole aura of a wound-drained culture floods the lines.

Just as "Love and Gorizia" recreates a between-war English view of the exotic South, so "Soissons" evokes an Englishman's view of Europe in the last year before the holocaust. First published in *Cherwell* on June 15, 1940, the poem grows out of a visit to Soissons in Easter 1939. In the first stanza the excitement of the foreign town is caused partly by its foreignness and partly by its vitality; the cathedral, damaged in the previous war, is restored at least to its outward self:



M. l'Épicier in his white hat  
 in an outhouse by the cathedral, makes  
 devils from the selfsame stone  
 men used in the religious century. (p. 47)

But in the final stanza the travelogue closes with a superb darkening of scene and mood in that ominous spring of 1939. The route from Laon to Rheims, of course, runs parallel to both the old western front and the new Maginot Line:

'A Laon, belle cathédrale', making  
 a wave of his white hat, explains  
 the maker of gargoyles. So we take  
 a route for Laon and Rheims leaving you  
 Soissons, a simplified medieval view  
 taken from a Book of Hours. How dark  
 seems the whole country we enter. Now it rains,  
 the trees like ominous old men are shaking. (p. 47)

Douglas was not only recreating the atmosphere of threatened France in "Soissons". The ominous, shaking darkness of "the whole country" was frequently part of his own mood. In his *Bête Noire* fragments written in 1944 he describes the "beast on my back" in terms reminiscent of "Soissons": "A medieval animal with a dog's face/ Notre Dame or Chartres is his proper place". The "particular monster/ a toad or worm curled in the belly" which he admits to in the *Bête Noire* fragments is an affliction the possession of which cannot be revealed to everyone: "Never to those who are happy, whose easy language/ I speak well, though with a stranger's accent". It is the intermittent presence of this alienating melancholia which gives Douglas' poems of observation their pathos. At its most explicit his sense of non-belonging is unredeemed, as in the closing stanza of "Saturday Evening in Jerusalem":

But among these Jews I am the Jew  
 outcast, wandering down the steep road  
 into the hostile dark square:  
 and standing in the unlit corner here  
 know I am alone and cursed by God  
 like the boy lost on his first morning at school. (p. 105)

His own certainty that he would be killed in action, coupled with his yearning to belong (often to a woman), or at least to experience some hint of permanence, give a cumulative darkness to Douglas' collected poems. In spite of (or because of) all their vitality they create—in toto—an awesome sense of loss and waste. In this way, too, Douglas is a great war poet. Can anyone read the closing stanzas of his last poem without pain? Written in the early spring of 1944, it deals with his reactions to the imminent invasion of Europe in which he was to be killed:

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. (p. 122)

Douglas has been well served by all his editors, but Desmond Graham's *Complete Poems* is unlikely to be bettered. We are fortunate to have had so dedicated a scholar to produce a record of the work of the pre-eminent British poet of the second world war.

#### Notes

1. Desmond Graham, *Keith Douglas 1920-1944* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 279.
2. Keith Douglas, *Collected Poems*, edited by John Waller, G. S. Fraser and J. C. Hall (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 124. There is no evidence for substituting the word "falling" (as here) for "fading", which is used in both July and later manuscript.
3. In this revised version Douglas moved the penultimate line published in *New Verse*: "Shrieks through the mist and scatters the pools of stars". Roy Fuller's review in *T.L.S.* has incisive comments on Douglas' revisions to early poems. "The Definitive Douglas," *T.L.S.*, April 21, 1978, p. 439.