

KEITH DOUGLAS

(24 January 1920–9 June 1944)

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English poet Keith Douglas, who was killed in action during the invasion of Normandy, is noted for his war poetry during the Second World War and his wry memoir of the North African Desert campaign, *Alamein to Zem Zem* (posthumously published in 1966). His best poetry is generally considered to rank alongside the 20th century's finest soldier-poetry.

Douglas was born in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, the son of Captain Keith Sholto Douglas, a retired regular army officer who had won the Military Cross in WWI, and Marie Josephine Castellain. His mother collapsed in 1924 of encephalitis lethargica and never fully recovered. By 1926, when Douglas was sent to a preparatory school (Edgeborough School in Guildford), the family chicken farm had collapsed, and his father left home in early 1928 to seek better employment in Wales. Marie's persistent ill-health led to the collapse of the marriage by the end of that year, and his father, who did not communicate with Douglas after 1928, remarried in 1930. When his father finally did write in 1938, Douglas did not agree to meet him.



Keith Douglas c.1941

Marie Douglas faced such extreme financial distress that only the generosity of the Edgeborough headmaster allowed Douglas to attend school in 1930–1931, his last year there. Douglas sat in 1931 for the entrance examination and was accepted to Christ's Hospital in Horsham, near London, where education was free and there was monetary assistance to cover all other costs. Although philosophically opposed to militarism, Douglas developed an almost obsessive interest in warfare; when not studying and working on his considerable poetic and artistic ability, he divided his time among riding, playing rugby, and participating enthusiastically in the Cadet Officers Training Corps. At the end of his time at Edgeborough, he won an open exhibition to Merton College, Oxford, in 1938 to read History and English, being tutored there by Edmund Blunden, a distinguished well-known and distinguished soldier-poet of WWI. Blunden sent Douglas's poems to T. S. Eliot, who found his verses "impressive." Douglas became the editor of *Cherwell*, and was one of the poets anthologized in the collection *Eight Oxford Poets* (1941), which appeared after he was already in the army. At Oxford, Douglas entered a relationship with a sophisticated fellow student and Chinese diplomat's daughter named Yingcheng, or Betty Sze, who refused to marry him and remained the unrequited love of his life, the source of his best romantic verse.

Within days of the declaration of war he enlisted in the army with the intention of joining a cavalry regiment, but like many others keen to serve he had to wait, and it was not until July 1940 that he started his training at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, the British Army training academy for officers, and was commissioned into the 2nd Derbyshire Yeomanry at Ripon, a tank regiment. He was posted to the Middle East, initially in Cairo and Palestine, in July 1941. Transferred to the Nottinghamshire (Sherwood Rangers) Yeomanry, in August 1942 he went into battle against legendary

German Field Marshall Rommel's Africa Corp. But on 24 October 1942, with the Second Battle of El Alamein in progress, he found himself stuck at Headquarters 20 miles behind El Alamein as a camouflage officer, as his regiment advanced only to suffer numerous casualties from enemy anti-tank guns. Three days later, chafing at inactivity, Douglas commandeered a truck and took off against orders, lying that he had been instructed to go to the front. Desperately needing officer replacements, the commanding officer overlooked the transgression and posted him to A Squadron, giving him the opportunity to take part as a fighting tanker in the Eighth Army's victorious sweep through North Africa, which was vividly recounted in his memoir *Alamein to Zem Zem*, illustrated with his own drawings. In December 1943 Douglas returned from North Africa to England, then took part in the D-Day invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944. He was killed by enemy mortar fire on 9 June, while his regiment was advancing from Bayeux. The regimental chaplain buried him by a hedge, close to where he had died. Shortly after the war his remains were reburied at Tilly-sur-Seulles War Cemetery (14 km south of Bayeux) in plot 1, row E, grave number 2.

Douglas described his poetic style as "extrospective"—that is, focused on external impressions rather than inner emotions. The result is a poetry which, according to one's sensibilities, either callous in the midst of war's atrocities, or powerful and unsettling because its precise descriptiveness puts the burden of emotion on the reader.