

# Sidney Arthur Kilworth Keyes

## “A poet of great promise”



Sidney Keyes is one of those whose death in war represents such a tragic loss for British life and culture. He was born on 27th May, 1922, and he died in action on 19th, April 1943, in Tunisia.

Sources describe Sidney Keyes as an English poet of the Second World War. No doubt those who knew and loved him would be dissatisfied with that description! His life and the promise of his life held more than those few words could possibly describe.

Sidney Keyes

This is a short biography written by Iain McFarlane (Find a grave Memorial)

“Sydney was the only child of a Captain in the Indian Army, his mother was a vicar's daughter from Manchester; she died of peritonitis a few weeks after Sidney was born. Consequently, he was raised by his grandparents, and did not go to school until he was nine. He was then educated at Dartford Grammar School and at Tonbridge School and, in October 1940, went to Queen's College, Oxford, where he read History. By the end of 1941, he had written enough poems to publish a book, "The Iron Laurel."

In April 1942, he joined the British Army at Omagh in County Tyrone; and, in September that year, he received a Commission in the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment. The following March, he left for North Africa, but was to see only a fortnight's active service.

On the night of the April 28 and 29, Lieutenant Keyes and C Company launched an attack upon ground to the North of Peter's Corner, on the road between Oued Zarga and Tunis. They advanced up the slope of a hill and were ordered to dig trenches and await the counter-attack. This came just after first light. Until recently, it was thought that Keyes had been wounded and taken prisoner and then died whilst in captivity, but it now appears that he was last seen firing a Tommy Gun at the approaching Germans and had fallen in action.

The foot of his gravestone in the Massicault cemetery, Borj-el-Amri, Tunis, bears the inscription: "A poet of great promise. Won Hawthornden Prize in 1943." This is the oldest of the major British literary awards, and is presented annually for "the best work of imaginative literature." Lieutenant Keyes's Collected Poems were published in 1945 and were re-issued in 2002, along with a memoir by James Lucas, who had served as a Private in the same platoon. This concludes:

"During my Army service, I had a number of platoon commanders. Keyes was the best of them. His manners were impeccable and he did not talk down to us, nor was he condescending. He was a gallant, Christian gentleman who sacrificed himself for the men under his command."



His published works include the following:-

- \* Eight Oxford Poets (1941) edited with Michael Meyer
- \* The Iron Laurel (1942)
- \* The Cruel Solstice (1943)
- \* Collected Poems (1945)

The reason I am writing about his is that I recently came across one of his poems in an anthology and it triggered a stream of memories and a flood of feelings.

I remembered that one of his poems thrilled me as a young student. I was at Secondary school, and I can imagine myself now in the very classroom, set off the main hall, as I slowly started the process of understanding the world and its music and literature, a process which continues unabated today!

My English teacher was called Helen Russell. She was a young and attractive teacher who could make sentence analysis and parsing positively fascinating. Of course, when it came to poetry, she was a natural and her teaching was fluent and engaged her pupils from start to finish. My awareness of this vital art form stems from dear Helen Russell and I have always been thankful to her for what she did in the classroom, day by day, year by year. I managed to stay in touch until about 1970, but then seemed to lose contact, and I am so sad about that.

The poem in question was a valedictory for William Wordsworth and the poet could only have been dead for 10 or so years as I read his verse in the classroom in the 1950s. I came across it again recently and it brought back warm memories of my young days and that lovely teacher. It also provided a sharp reminder of just how tragic life was for my parents' generation, who suffered through two horrendous world wars and the great depression, and then felt left behind by all the new things of the 1960s.

Here it is, a poem which recalls the great poet William Wordsworth, the poet Laureate from 1843 until his death in 1850 and it is, in a special way, a memorial tribute to them both- one who realised his genius and one who died too soon to make his full contribution.

No room for mourning; he's gone out  
Into the noisy glen, or stands between the stones  
Of the gaunt ridge, or you'll hear his shout  
Rolling among the screes, he being a boy again.  
He'll never fail nor die  
And if they laid his bones  
In the wet vaults or iron sarcophagi  
Of fame, he'd rise at the first summer rain  
And stride across the hills to seek  
His rest among the broken lands and clouds.  
He has a stormy day, a granite peak  
Spearing the sky; and look, about its base  
Words flower like crocuses in the hanging woods,  
Blank through the dalehead and the bony face.

Sidney Keyes 1922-1943



William Wordsworth

**Neil Richardson**