

P I N A K I R O Y

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## *Poet in Khaki: Alun Lewis and his Combat Writings*

*I am the man who looked for peace and found / My own eyes barbed. / I am  
the man who groped for words and found / An arrow in my hand. / I am the  
builder whose firm walls surround / A slipping land. / When I grow sick or  
mad / Mock me not nor chain me; / When I reach for the wind / Cast me not  
down / Though my face is a burnt book / And a wasted town*

—“War Poet” by Sidney Keyes (March 1942)

**T**he Welsh litterateur, Alun Lewis (1915-1944), lived only for twenty-eight years, but he quickly went on to be recognised as, according to *The Listener*, “the most assured poet of his generation”. Within a short life span, Lewis had been a brilliant student of history, a popular teacher, a lover (of Lynette Roberts, Gweno Ellis, and Freda Aykroyd), a courageous Second World War combatant, and a deeply sensitive litterateur who finally committed suicide by shooting himself in head. In “The Suicide”, published in *The Tribune*, 23 April 1943, he had previously envisioned, “The end came suddenly for him. / He ran away until he lost his breath’ (l. 1-2). Lewis died on the same day he was found wounded—on 5 March 1944—near *Goppe Pass* in the Arakan state of Burma. As his writings were reviewed in wake of his death, a *Poetry Review* reviewer wrote that Lewis was a “true poet [...] writing of what he sees and feels with a restraint which is convincing and carries the hallmark of quality”<sup>2</sup>.

As Bernard Bergonzi writes, Lewis and Keith Douglas (1920-1944) are regarded by numerous critics and historians to be two of the better known, and, perhaps, more efficient English poets of the Second World War, the others being John Pudney (1909-1977), Stephen Spender (1909-1995), Roy Fuller (1912-1991), and Sidney Keyes (1922-1943) (994). Among the combat-experiences of the Second World War European writers mentioned above, those of Pudney, Lewis, Douglas, and Keyes are especially mentionable because these four were what Andrew Sanders identifies as 'soldier poets' *proper* (575). Among them, Lewis's are more intriguing because whereas Pudney, Douglas, and Keyes served against the Germans in Europe and Africa, Lewis was sent first to India and thereafter to Burma to take part in the *Burma Campaign* (January 1942-July 1945) and fight against the combined Japanese Army personnel and *Indian National Army* volunteers.

Publication of quality writings by these combatant-litterateurs partially replied to what Cecil day Lewis (1904-1972) bewilderedly questioned—in wake of the dearth of war writings in the initial years of the 1939-45 confrontation—in his eight-liner "Where are the War Poets?", published in *Penguin New Writing*, February 1941. As if echoing Brain Gardner's description of the situation as desperate for journalists bent on finding "some dramatic Rupert Brooke-like figure on whom to peg stories", Day Lewis reminded the writers: "They who in folly or mere greed / Enslaved religion, markets, laws, / Borrow our language now and bid / Us to speak up in freedom's cause. / It is the logic of our times, / No subject for immortal verse—/ That we who lived by honest dreams / Defend the bad against the worse'. Piette writes,

"Stephen Spender and Alun Lewis signed a manifesto published in *The Horizon* in 1941 asking the [British] government to employ war writers since writers' propaganda was deeper, more humanly appealing and more imaginative than newspaper men had space or time for" (*The Cambridge... Second World War* 13).

However, Desmond Graham, in his 'Introduction' to *Poetry of the Second World War*, refutes the idea of the dearth: "In Britain, in particular, there is a myth that the Second World War produced no 'war poetry', no battle poetry like that of the First" (*Poetry of Second* xix).

Alun Lewis knew well that he was expected to defend the 'bad' against the 'worse'. The 'worse' consisted of the three principal Axis leaders—the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini (1883-1945), the Japanese Prime Minister, Hideki Tojo

(1884-1948), and the German chancellor, Adolf Hitler (1889-1945), while the ‘bad’—the English Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (1869-1940), the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), and the French Premier, Édouard Daladier (1884-1970)—were being accused by the international media of compromising the independence of states like Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland.

In such a turbulent socio-political situation, Lewis went to war almost nonchalantly, and as Archard writes, initially joined the *Royal Engineers* in London “anxious to avoid killing a man” (Lewis 11). He was a pacifist who published in *The Aberdare Leader* in September 1938 the article, “If War comes—will I fight?” In its pacifistic tone, terseness and poignancy, “If War comes...” parallels Siegfried Sassoon’s “*Finished with the War: A Soldier’s Declaration*”, which he wrote in July 1917 as a fatigued and disillusioned 3<sup>rd</sup> *Battalion* lieutenant of the *Royal Welsh Fusiliers*. It is of little wonder that the Welsh writer would dedicate two of his poems—“All Day it has Rained” (published in *The Horizon* of January 1941) and “To Edward Thomas” to the Anglo-Welsh writer (1878-1917) who revels more in countryside than on battlefields, and one, “To Rilke”, to the Bohemian-Austrian pacifist-poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). B.J.Morse comments,

“[...] Alun Lewis, who hated war in every fibre of his being, composed a moving tribute to [...] [Rilke] a few weeks before his own death in Burma. [...] [T]he [Second World] War did make a difference; since it made the younger poets who were whirled into the maelstrom of war more susceptible to Rilke’s ideas of Death [...]” (272).

Having had visited Thomas’s grave at Steep, Hampshire, in October 1940, Lewis writes, as a tribute to the great First World War poet, as if he is conscious of only the natural beauties all around the cemetery and not the war ravaging Europe: “[...] Went slanting sea- and skywards to the limits/ Where sight surrenders and the mind alone / Can find the sheeps’ tracks and the grazing. / And for that moment Life appeared, / As gentle as the view I gazed upon” (l. 26-30). Even on the verge of being inexorably sucked into the medley of confrontation, it is amazing how the Welsh poet could enjoy life and appreciate his surroundings. William Scammell writes,

“Two of the strongest influences on his poetry are [John] Keats and Edward Thomas. [...] Both mentors were death-haunted, in their different ways, and both clearly spoke to Lewis’s own troubled nature. His early

work is marred by over-reliance on capitalised abstractions such as Death, Love, Time, Beauty, and by sub-Yeatsian plangency, but shows also a remarkable lyric strain, which deepened throughout his short life<sup>24</sup>.

Pitted firmly against the ‘worse’ but scarcely inclined to defend the ‘bad’, Lewis produced two brilliant collections of poetry—*Raiders’ Dawn and Other Poems* (1942) and *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets: Poems in Transit* (1945), and two collections of short stories, *The Last Inspection and Other Stories* (1942) and (the posthumously-published) *In the Green Tree* (1948). His personal letters, especially to his wife, Gweno Ellis, and his beloved, Freda Aykroyd, were published, other than partially in *In the Green Tree*, (the Gweno Ellis and Gwyn Jones-edited) *Letters from India* (1946), *Letters to my Wife* (1989) and *A Cypress Walk: Letters to Frieda* (2007). John Pikoulis, who edited the 1982 *Alun Lewis: A Miscellany of his Writings*, published his biography, *Alun Lewis: A Life*, in 1991. In 1966 and 1981, respectively, Ian Hamilton and Jeremy Hooker (alongwith Gweno Ellis) edited *Alun Lewis: Selected Poetry and Prose* and *Selected Poems of Alun Lewis*. Lewis’s oeuvre is considerably limited—though more sizeable than Douglas’s, which comprises of *Selected Poems* (alongwith the poems by J.C.Hall and Norman Nicholson) (1943), *Alamein to Zem Zem* (1946), and *Collected Poems* (1951). Within such a limited number of pages and in such extreme conditions—for worldwide belligerences do not usually prove conducive for artists—Lewis has demonstrated enough innovativeness and a surprising choice of numerous aspects of life to be classified as a talented postmodernist. Archard comments,

“Of [...] [Alun Lewis’s poems compiled in *Collected Poems*], the earliest is ‘The Slug’ (1935-6) and one of the most remarkable is ‘The Tiger of Camden Town’ (1938). Poems such as these seem very modern now (post-war rather than pre-war) and suggest very different directions Lewis’s poetry might have taken had the war not intervened” (Lewis 16-7).

Also, between November 1941 and June 1942, he collaborated with Welsh artists Brenda Chamberlain (1912-1971) and John Petts (1914-1991) on the *Caseg Broadsheets* containing poems and illustrations—another mark of his interest in postmodernist trends in art.

Critics like Adam Piette (*The Cambridge...Second World War* 13-8), Simon Featherstone (180), John Pikoulis (145-66), and especially Mark Rawlinson (146-51) have either frequently referred to or asserted the superiority of Lewis’s prose

works—particularly his stories—to his poems. A.L.Rowse considers the stories in *The Last Inspection and Other Stories* “the finest to come out of the war”, while in *The New Statesman*, Walter Allen remarks that they represent “an altogether higher level than any other English writing inspired by the war”<sup>5</sup>. Truly, Lewis is as remembered for his short stories as for his anti-war verses. Rawlinson comments, “In Lewis’s stories, frustration at the unconnectedness of military service with either anti-Nazi or pro-democratic ideals is registered in the protest of volunteers at useless regimentation” (146). He cites some of Lewis’s superior stories to delineate their trend: in “It’s a Long Way to Go”, for example, he shows how a schoolteacher’s constant active fight for a better world is defeated by endless waiting (*ibid.* 148). Other examples include “Lance Jack”, collected in *The Last Inspection* (which identifies “the soldier as a universal scourge” (*ibid.*151)), “Flick” (about the escape of an Allied soldier from occupied France), “Private Jones” (centring on the experiences of a *Spanish Civil War* veteran), “The Orange Grove” (resulting out of Lewis’s India travels), “The Raid” (about the colonial arrest of an Indian revolutionary), “The Earth is a Syllable” (about soldiers’ failures), and “Ward O” (a meditation on death, adventure, and betrayal). Six of his oft-read stories have been compiled in *In the Green Tree*, whose ‘foreword’ is written by Owen Sheers, where he describes “how he has recently come to appreciate [...] Lewis’s letters and stories, and follows the development of [...] [his] skills and how the effects of his experiences in war and his separation from home influenced his poetry, letters and stories”<sup>6</sup>, and about the compilation, Beryl Thomas writes,

“The book itself, published exactly as in the first edition, is a collection of excerpts of letters, mostly written to Gweno Lewis, as Alun Lewis was on his way to India in 1942 and from India and finally from Burma. They are a touching intimate portrait of a sensitive person exposed to unimaginable experiences in strange countries. He grapples with his feelings and beliefs and describes how he struggles to express his thoughts in poetry and prose. Those parts of the letters give an intriguing insight into the workings of the mind of a gifted poet. The six short stories are all related to his life in the army in India and Burma except for the first, ‘Night Journey’, which tells of an incident on a train from Paddington. All are compelling, often shocking and difficult to forget”<sup>7</sup>.

Many of Lewis’s stories like “It’s a Long Way to Go” and “The Orange Grove” are autobiographical in nature. Collected together, they depict the gradual maturation

and ultimate epiphany of a pacifist schoolteacher drafted in the *British Armed Forces*. The Welsh writer's poems are also testimonies to his own convictions and idealism. Sanders comments,

“[...] [Lewis] rarely poses in his poetry as a specifically Welsh poet-at-war (the peacetime lyrics ‘The Mountain over Aberdare’ and ‘The Rhondda’, and the wartime ‘Destruction’ and ‘A Welsh Night’ are exceptional). Of all the distinctive soldier writers of the Second World War, Lewis is the most assertively civilian. Despite its military title, his often reprinted first volume, *Raiders’ Dawn* (1942), pays tribute to another unwilling soldier, Edward Thomas, and the English landscapes most associated with him” (577).

However, this is specifically the area where Alun Lewis's and Keith Douglas's poems differ. While Lewis's verses, writes Archard, portray their writer's anti-war attitude and “a young man's earnest struggle to make sense of all that was happening to him” (Lewis 15), Desmond Graham focuses on the assertive militarism of the Kent-born soldier-poet's writings (Douglas v). Philippa Lyon comments,

“Whilst Douglas identified the experience of battle as central to war, thus fulfilling one of the most fundamental existing requirements of the war poet, he was at the same time resolved to avoid some of the most famous moral and emotional responses of the poets of the Western Front [during the First World War]. In particular, [...] Douglas did not wish to repeat the famous compassionate tone of Owen” (13).

However, Rawlinson notes rather sarcastically,

“Alun Lewis, who was never to see combat (a telling idiom), had described the choreographed tank manoeuvres (a rationalisation of the tactical space of battle) as the ‘most thrilling and convincing and sobering film I have seen of war’” (127).

Taking in view the anxieties of influence of both Lewis and Douglas, it may be logical to quote Kenneth Baker to show the different milieus in which they and the First World War poets like Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), Julian Grenfell (1888-1915), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), or Robert Graves (1895-

1985; who was also Lewis's confidant and wrote the 'Foreword' to *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets: Poems in Transit*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1945) fought.

"The poetry of the Second World War is different again from that of the First, because the nature and scale of the war was different too. The 1939-45 conflict was fought, not on any single front, but in a wide variety of theatres—Europe, North Africa, Burma, and the Pacific, among others—and sea and air battles were as significant as those on land. The geographical spread and fluidity of the various campaigns did not bring about the intensity of experience felt by those soldiers who had been confined to the mud of Flanders. Nor did Second World War poets turn against their generals as Sassoon, Kipling, and Chesterton had done" (*The Faber Book* xxiii-iv).

To understand the connexion between Alun Lewis's war, or rather, anti-war, poems and his life and beliefs, it is necessary to reread his poems against the biographical information available in works like John Pikoulis's *Alun Lewis: A Life, Cyclopaedia of World Authors: Alun Lewis* (<http://www.enotes.com/alun-lewis-salem/alun-lewis>), and *Channel 4-Biography: Alun Lewis* ([http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/S/soldier\\_poets/biog\\_lewis.html](http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/S/soldier_poets/biog_lewis.html)). Alun Lewis, it may be recalled, was born on 1 July 1915 as the eldest child to Thomas J. Lewis, a teacher and later an educational administrator, and Gwladys Evans, the teacher-daughter of a Congregationalist minister, at 16, Llanwynno Road, Cwmaman, near Aberdare, southern Wales. The Lewises' other three children—Glyn, Huw, and Mair—were born respectively in 1917, 1919, and 1921. From the beginning of his life, Alun Lewis experienced reactionism, as his parents were vociferous suffragists and his father, who spoke Welsh, was almost anxious that his children, like their mother, spoke English—irrespective of the history of the colonisation of the country by the English in the first half of sixteenth century. Thomas Lewis enlisted in 1917 for participating in the First World War but was discharged from army in the following year, grievously wounded in the leg. V. Sundaram adds in his 13 June 2009 *News Today Net* article:

"The family of Lewises was a middle-class family living amidst a working-class population. This socio-economic milieu had a profound effect on Alun Lewis—as did the fact that his forebears had been farm labourers and miners—and he developed a strong socialist conscience"<sup>8</sup>.

It must be remembered that in his childhood, Alun easily forged bonds of sympathy with the impoverished coalminers of Galmorganshire.

From 1926 onwards, Lewis began contributing widely-appreciated short stories to *The Bovian*, the magazine of *Cowbridge Grammar School* to which he won a scholarship. The stories provided an outlet for him, as he often felt homesick, unhappy, and isolated as a school student. About the early stories and also his later, the following observation is worth quoting:

“While his stories generally are categorised as either war stories or non-war stories, many contain common themes, such as the isolation of the individual in a world hostile to human aspirations. Many of Lewis’s early stories, such as ‘The Tale of a Dwarf’, ‘The End of the Hunt’, and ‘They Say There’s a Boat on the River’, contain elements of neo-Gothic fables and explorations of nature and ideal beauty. In others—notably ‘If Such Be Nature’s Holy Plan’ and ‘The Whirligig of Fate’—Lewis probed the dark side of nature’s powers. Lewis’s early stories also frequently reflect his training as a medievalist and his Welsh heritage, and have been compared favourably with the fiction of D. H. Lawrence. Around the time Lewis enlisted in the service, his subject matter shifted to issues surrounding the Second World War. Most of the stories in *The Last Inspection* evidence Lewis’s ambivalent feelings about war. Some, such as the title story ‘The Last Inspection’ and ‘It’s a Long Way to Go’, are satirical depictions of what Lewis saw as the military’s cold and uncaring attitude toward civilian suffering during wartime. Others are often tragic and ironic examinations of the confusing and alienating effects of war on both soldiers and civilians, including one of Lewis’s best-known stories, ‘Almost a Gentleman’”.

In *Keith Douglas, 1920-1944: A Biography*, Graham notes the influence of the First World War soldier-poet and Oxford professor, Edmund Blunden (1896-1973), in shaping up of Douglas’s poetic career (66). As Archard informs, the *Cowbridge Grammar School* English teacher, Eric Reid, similarly moulded the maturing psyche of Lewis: he was deeply “influenced by Reid’s liberal ideas, and by his pacifist and anti-imperialistic attitudes” (Lewis 9). These ideas were later weaved into his superior war verses.

Between 1932 and 1935, Lewis attended the *University College of Wales*, Aberystwyth, and began writing for college revues and *The Dragon*, the college magazine, in whose Summer 1934-edition he published one of his earlier writings—"The Ladybird Wakes: A Sonnet". On 31 August 1935, *The Western Mail* published another sonnet, "On the Death of Queen Astrid". "A Lover's Musing", "The Luckless Lover", "Penbryn in August", "The Queen Mary and the Girl Pat", "The Return", "September", "The Shepherd's Cloak", "The Slug", "The Watcher", and "The Wind is captive in the City Streets" too belong to these years. At the *University College of Wales*, Lewis also met Gweno Ellis, who was almost of his age and to later become his wife in July 1941<sup>10</sup>. In September 1935, having had graduated in history, he entered the *University of Manchester* as a postgraduate student of history. Archard mentions that during his university days, Lewis lived "in Chorlton, a gloomy part of what he sees as a gloomy city", which led to his depression (Lewis 10). He was always nostalgic for the Welsh hills and hated postgraduate researching: in "Attitude", a story published in *The Dragon* (Summer 1938), he described the researchers at London's *Public Record Office* as "all dead, the circle of bowed heads petrified into a musty silence". To the *University of Manchester* magazine, *The Serpent*, he contributed stories and poems, including "The Monk's Tale" (November 1936), "Chestnuts" (December 1936), and "The Wedding Breakfast" (December 1936), and "The Pattern" (June 1937). While Beryl Thomas opines that from his infancy, he had the urge to become a poet<sup>11</sup>, and the college and university magazines were his launching platforms, K. Devine, in "Alun Lewis: *The Manchester Stories*", collected in *New Welsh Review* 13, Summer 1991-issue, argues that Lewis's *Serpent* contributions already contained the concerns that were to characterise his later works. By that time, he had become a leftist, particularly in response to the *Great Depression in the United Kingdom* in the 1930s. Cwmaman has hit hard by the economic crisis and there remained little difference between the former capitalists and members of the proletariat—a situation ideal for the spreading of communist ideas.

Whereas Desmond Graham, in his biography of Douglas, does not record any foreign tour of a young and impoverished poet, Lewis, who perceptively enjoyed a happy childhood, visited France for a period of two months and a week in May 1937. At Pontigny in Burgundy, he met the Catholic philosopher Paul Desjardines (who also influenced Marcel Proust) at a students' conference on European politics, and with him, he was able to discuss his ideas about the British politics and culture. Interestingly, when Lewis returned to Aberystwyth in September 1937, he decided to join a teachers' training course. In the same year and in 1938,

some of his early verses were published in *The Dragon*, *The Observer* (for example, “Song” and “Vanité”, on 17 and 31 October 1937) and *Time and Tide*. Some of the unpublished or unpopular poems of 1936-7 include “The Watcher”, “Belief”, “Grace”, “Green Thoughts”, “Impotence”, “Laughter”, “October”, and “Unrequited”. In “Belief”, especially, the litterateur is at his satiric best, noticing how individuals are mindlessly destroying their surroundings and works of art through politics and militarism: ‘I think humanity will also in that same manner keep/ Its innate beauty though the big guns mangle/ The delicate limbs of lovers. Somehow, deep / Below the gore and sweat, the bloody tangle / Of passions, entrails, nerves, that the politicians leave, / Beauty survives immaculate, though all her lovers grieve’ (l. 7-12) Scammell thus describes Lewis at this period of his life:

“Meanwhile [...] [Lewis] wrote stories, poems, plays, bits and pieces of journalism, agonised over his uselessness, had unsatisfactory relationships with girls, failed to get jobs (much to his father’s annoyance), trained as a teacher, quarried the rich seams of Rilke and D.H.Lawrence, and finally landed a job at a grammar school. So the late Thirties slipped away, while he dreamed himself into and out of Great Books and took himself up ‘The Mountain over Aberdare’ to be tempted by all the *-isms* and abstractions of the age. In the poems and stories of the period his yearning is palpable, and there are fine moments in both, but they seldom go far without grandiose gestures and soulful personifications”<sup>12</sup>.

The future war-litterateur applied unsuccessfully for teaching and journalism posts in 1938, simultaneously enjoying the appearance of brilliant narratives like “Émigré” and “Attitude” in *The Dragon*. One of his earlier poems, “Poems from the Chinese”—comprising of five short sections—‘Mine Host’, ‘The Civil Servant’, ‘The Country Gentleman’, ‘The Merchant’s Wife’, and ‘The Poet’—was published in *Time and Tide* in 1938, with the poet using its first three lines as a form of introducing his poetic credo: ‘Linger not in my library/If you seek in it wisdom, not pleasure. /Before you turn to my bookshelves, listen’. One may detect a sort of Khayyámesque tilt to hedonism in this early poem, other than an Orientalist preference. Interestingly, like Douglas, who was deeply in love with the Chinese student, Yingcheng, Lewis loved China, and translated “The Merchant’s Wife” and “The Country Gentleman” from Chinese for February and July 1938-issues of *Time and Tide*.

With Richard Mills, an acquaintance from the *University College of Wales*, Lewis paid a two-week tour to Normandy in August 1938—a month before he started working unofficially for *The Aberdare Leader*, and three months before he took a temporary teaching post at *Lewis Boys' School*, Pengam, where he was permanently absorbed in November 1939. By that time, he had gained considerable literary prominence by reading some of his poems from the *B.B.C. Studio* in Cardiff.

The most tumultuous year in Eurasian history preceding the Second World War appears to have been one of the more literarily productive ones for Alun Lewis. William L. Shirer records it as the period of the German annexation of Austria (March 1938), and the treacherous *Munich Agreement* (of 30 September 1938 in which Italy, England and France consented to the German annexation of the Sudetenland in western Czechoslovakia) (471-3, 559-69). Meanwhile, in March 1938, the *Imperial Japanese Army* initiated the *Yellow River Campaign* against the Chinese armed forces, and two months later, they captured many important Chinese towns, including Xuzhou, Kaifeng, and Ankang. As the shadows of an impending worldwide belligerence loomed large over the confused English politicians, Lewis was publishing in *The Observer*, *The Western Mail*, *Time and Tide*, and *The Dragon* critically-acclaimed compositions like “The Vigil”, “A Latvian Folksong: The Parting”, “The Poet”, “The Fisher Girl”, “From the Tower”, “Fishing”, “Mortuns”, “The Quest”, “Greasy Joan”, “Hubris”, and “Song of Sleep”. Many of these poems were romantic in nature and pantheistic in outlook. To exemplify, in “The Quest”, published in *The Observer* on 13 November 1938, the poet writes, rather wondrously, ‘I cannot see objectively/ Those things that are a part of me - / Mudcaked wains, ramshackle sheds, / Grey rain dripping from the leads, / Black ash buds, and sticky leaves, / The slender web the spider weaves [...] (l. 1-6). In 1938, the Argentina-born Welsh poet Evelyn Beatrice Roberts (popularly known as ‘Lynette Roberts’) (1909-1995), who addressed her famous “Poem from Llanybri” (first published in *Poetry London*, 1941; beginning ‘If you come my way that is ... / Between now and then, I will offer you / A fist full of rock cress fresh from the bank / The valley tips of garlic red with dew / Cooler than shallots, a breath you can swank [...]’) to Lewis and to whom Robert Graves dedicated his *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), felt attracted to Lewis, six years her junior. It is not known whether Lewis addressed any of his poems to this beautiful writer, but in May 1939, four months away from the beginning of Germany’s military operations against Poland, he had met his earlier acquaintance, Gweno Ellis, then teaching German at *Mountain Ash Grammar School* in the south of Aberdare, and fell deeply in love with her. His attempts to have a collection of short stories published remained non-

resultant, and he worked briefly on his unfinished novel, *Morlais*, about the son of a miner maturing in Cwmaman, just as in 1940 he unsuccessfully tried completing *Adam* concerning his own student life at Aberystwyth. He published “Songs of Sleep” in *Time and Tide* on 15 April 1939, and in the Summer 1939-issue of *The Ludovician*, “The Rooks” and “The Flower”. Other poems from this year include “Celtic Twilight”, “The Down-cast”, “Dusk”, “A Girl of Gwynedd”, “Harvest”, “Lament”, “Out of Today”, “Pax Vobiscum”, “The Reply”, “Song of Innocence”, “The Swimmer”, and “To the Neutral”. As Europe was being rapidly dragged towards the quagmire of belligerence, Lewis felt that it was a censurable callousness to revel and remain oblivious to dangers: ‘with joy my heart/ Is singing/ Silently; / Fearful to start/ Again my soul/ To weeping. / For by my joy I know/ My soul/ Is sleeping’ (“Songs of Sleep”, l. 1-9). Such a chastisement is also noticeable in Wystan Hugh Auden’s “September 1, 1939”. In “Lament”, the world is already at war, and the poet’s language is gradually becoming martial. In spite of the destructions all around, the sensitive Lewis appears lonely and is nostalgic about the innocent childhood and adolescent days: ‘Once in the old days we cherished our anguish, / Defying our foes and daring to travel/ Through the heart’s ambush. / But now that the world is shattered and the villages ruined/ And all the beauty of the people is slandered and split, / When blood and ashes are the relic of power/ and the pines have no music though the night be cold; / When events are bitter and truth is anguish’ (l. 24-31). In his essay “The Second world War: British Writing”, Mark Rawlinson refers to the continual isolation of the soldier from different societal aspects, and it becomes apparent in “Lament” too (*The Cambridge...War Writing* 203).

Just as in Grave’s war poems—for example, in “Last Day of Leave”—nature and combat coalesce, so do they in Lewis’s “The Swimmer”—almost a distant echo of Frank Templeton Prince’s “Soldiers Bathing” (1942). The narrator-soldier in Lewis’s 1939 poem has had a bath, and “[...] satisfied I pick my soft-foot way/ Up the crustacean rocks towards my clothes. / And in the rough green contact of the grass / Find my continuum and think of friends/ Who died in deserts where I also go, / shivering and sure of what runs on and on’ (l. 21-6). It may be mentioned that natural description also characterises “The Mountain over Aberdare” and “The Rhondda”, its vorticist opposite. These, as Sanders has mentioned, are ‘peacetime lyrics’ (577). The former, identified by M. Wynn Thomas as a ‘precursor of Movement Poetry’<sup>33</sup>, is almost Wordsworthian—reminiscent of “Lines written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798)—in its first ten lines: ‘From this high quarried ledge I see/ The place for which the Quakers once / Collected clothes, my fathers’ home, / Our stubborn bankrupt village sprawled / In jaded dusk beneath

its nameless hills; / The drab streets strung across the cwm, / Derelict workings, tips of slag / The gossellers and gamblers use / And children scuttling for the coal / That winter dole cannot purvey [...]. In contrast, in “The Rhondda”, Lewis offers a repulsive picture of an ‘unnatural’ industrial town: ‘Hum of shaft-wheel, whirr and clamour/ Of steel hammers overbeat, din down / Water-hag’s slander. Greasy Rhondda [...]’ (l. 1-3).

On the future soldier-poet’s first deep attachment to Ellis in 1939, Scammell focuses:

“He found her ‘a fountain of joy, very lively. We live together tempestuously’. That meant friendship, not sex, and grappling with the demons of depression. Gweno soon grew familiar with the ‘cello of despair’, which sounded in him, ‘my self-hatred’, ‘my living Mr. Death’. Later he wrote: ‘I cannot think without a cold sweat of the terrible anguish I lived in once, when I was 19, 20, 21’. To some extent this was a common fixation of the period, Keith Douglas’s ‘beast on my back’, Sidney Keyes’s ‘meadows of despair’, but in Lewis’s case self-doubt and self-loathing ran wide and deep. [Only] [e]nlistment provided temporary relief”<sup>14</sup>.

With the United Kingdom announcing itself at war with Germany on 3 September 1939, Lewis was faced with a terrible dilemma. On one hand, he had become attached to Ellis and had gained prominence as a teacher; on the other hand, he was not ready to forgo his duties as a British citizen though contemptuous towards militarism. The *Channel-4* biographer records:

“In May 1939, [...] [Lewis] wrote to a friend, ‘The army, the bloody, silly, ridiculous, red-faced army—in its bloody boring khaki—God save me from joining up. I shall go to the dogs like blazes—it is the only honest way’. However, within months, his attitude had changed: ‘I shall probably join up. [...] I have a deep sort of fatalist feeling that I shall go. Partly because I want to experience life in as many phases as I am capable of [...]. But I do not know—I am not going to kill. Be killed perhaps, instead”<sup>15</sup>.

Throughout Autumn 1939, Lewis was trying to find a convenient way of enlisting and yet evade killing people. In 1940, however, having spent a considerable period in introspecting, he impulsively joined the *British Military Forces*—rather, its wing, *The Royal Engineers*—where he would not normally have to annihilate. In March, with the war raging on, he had hurt one of his hands in a classroom accident

and spent quality time with Ellis and her parents at their Aberystwyth home. It was unthinkable at that juncture that a pacifist like Lewis would willingly enlist.

While Douglas celebrated his own entry into the active military duties, Lewis was shocked at the strictness and squalor of military life. In May 1940, he was sent for training to Longmoor, Hants, where he wrote many of his more famous poems, including “The Sentry”, “The Soldier”, “The Public Gardens”, and “Raiders’ Dawn” (first printed in *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1941). “The Sentry”, beginning ‘I have begun to die/ For now at last I know/ That there is no escape / From Night. Not any dream/ Nor breathless images of sleep/ Touch my bat’s-eyes [...]’, mirrors the bleakness he was experiencing at the beginning of his training. In “The Public Gardens”, the atmosphere of wartime Britain is palpably depressing on a ‘strangely unpopular/ Saturday evening in the public gardens’ (l.3-4), when the benches are empty and even when full—the visitors include a ‘thin, little woman in black stockings [...] [and] spent knees’ (l. 6-7), an ‘older wealthier lady, gesticulating and over dressed’ (l. 10) and a ‘boy with his crutches laid against the wall’ (l.16), who are looked upon by a soldier who has ‘forgott[en] [...] [his] khaki, [...] [his] crude trade’ (l. 21). This is the same combatant who in “The Soldier” ‘within [...] him holding/ Turbulence and Time /—Volcanic fires deep beneath the glacier/ Feel[s] the dark cancer in [...] [his] vitals/ Of impotent impatience grope its way/ through daze and dream to throat and fingers/ To find its climax of disaster’ (l. 1-7). In “Raiders’ Dawn”, in a situation reminiscent of the *London Blitz* (7 September 1940—10 May 1941, in which approximately forty three thousand English civilians died and one lakh thirty nine thousand people were wounded), lovers ‘wak[e]/ From the night—/ Eternity’s masters, / Slaves of Time—/ Recognise only/ The drifting white / Fall of small faces/ In pits of lime’ (l. 5-12). Baker notes that in combat-poetry portrayal of the aftermath of war has always been difficult—particularly, that of the fate of the physically and psychologically wounded civilians (*The Faber* xxvi)—but Lewis has, within a short space, masterfully accomplished it. It needs to be mentioned here that Tolley has highlighted the fall in sales of such poetry collections as Lewis’s *Raiders’ Dawn* following the conclusion of the Second World War (4)—probably Lewis’s sentiments in poems like “Raiders’ Dawn” were found excessive by people of peacetime Britain.

In addition, the popular short story, “Lance Jack”, in which the soldier-hero slowly and initially hardens himself into a distracted combatant (Rawlinson 151), was published in *Life and Letters*. The much-anthologised “All Day it has Rained”, first printed published in *The Horizon* in January 1941, and “To Edward Thomas” were written after he visited Edward Thomas’s house at Steep in East Hampshire

in October 1940, and was deeply influenced by the Great War soldier-poet's verses and personality. In the same year, even after enlistment, he organised a number of lectures and debates.

Readers of the Second World War soldiers' poems cannot but notice how the writers during the 1939-45 confrontation are aware of the presence of numerous superior verses composed by those bewildered or annihilated by the 1914-18 Great War. Desmond Graham mentions how "[n]ational traditions and language traditions [...] had different traditional strengths to offer [to] the [Second World War] poet[s]" (*Poetry...Second World War* xvi). Comforted by the presence of such 'traditions' and yet anxious to compose novelty, Keith Douglas wrote in "Desert Flowers" while convalescing at the *El Ballab General Hospital* in 1943, 'Living in a wide landscape are the flowers—/ Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying—' (l. 1-2). A tone of similar admittance can be traced throughout Lewis's "To Edward Thomas": 'Climbing the steep path through the copse I knew/ My cares weighed heavily as yours, my gift / Much less, my hope/ No more than yours. / And like you I felt sensitive and somehow apart, / Lonely and exalted by the friendship of the wind / And the placid afternoon enfolding/ The dangerous future and the smile' (l. 9-16). The last four lines of "All Day it has Rained" too end with a reference to Thomas: 'Or the shaggy patient dog who followed me/ By Sheet and Steep and up the wooded scree/ To the Shoulder o' Mutton where Edward Thomas brooded long/ On death and beauty—till a bullet stopped his song'. Adam Piette opines,

"To write Second World War poetry [...] was to write second rate, second-hand verse belatedly in styles borrowed from the trench poets, sons imitating fathers. [...] As [Keith] Douglas argued in an essay on war poetry, 'Poets of this War', the Great War hung over everything any combatant poet might care to say' (*The Cambridge... Second World War* 19).

William Scammell has more details on these two dedicatory poems:

"[...] [Lewis] joined up in May 1940, originally hoping for a non-combatant job in the merchant navy, and was sent to a training centre at Longmoor in Hampshire. This was Edward Thomas country, where he walked the poet's walks, visited his house above Steep, and wrote the first and best-known of his early poems, 'All Day it has Rained'. [...] [In this poem], [t]he moral climate and the physical one coalesce, perfectly capturing the boredom of army existence, the larger interregnum of the phoney war, the sacrifice of private life in dubious public rhetoric [...]. It also joins

one World War with another. Those acorns snatched up and ‘pattered against [...] our upturned dreaming faces’ recall Rosenberg’s lines about the song of the skylark dropping on ‘our upturned listening faces’ (‘Returning, we hear the Larks’). What a soldier expects to fall out of the sky is not birdsong, nor acorns riding on a Shelleyan wild wind, but death. It is a moment of reversal, renewal, transcendence, all the more poignant for the relaxed, colloquial pentameters in which it occurs, the supple, un-Popeian couplets, the homely rhyme of ‘faces’ and ‘braces’. It sounds more like a man musing to himself than leaping to answer the big questions of the time (and the ancillary one: ‘Where are the war poets?’), yet it touches convincingly on both. Edward Thomas looms large, appropriately, as the passage goes on in what is almost a recension of one of his greater poems, ‘Rain’. There is a companion piece, ‘To Edward Thomas’, almost as fine, in which a 13-line sentence takes us to the limit of human sight, ‘and the mind alone/ Can find the sheeps’ tracks and the grazing [...] until it too possesses ‘that hinted land’ where dream merges with death”<sup>6</sup>.

Mark Rawlinson, interestingly, has detected socialism in “All Day it has Rained”. He points out that the poem is written in first person plural probably to “underline the democratic character of the war’s aggregations of individuals. [...] This was a ‘poem in khaki’—an observing soldier’s experience—rather than a war poem proper. Soldiering was drill and waiting” (*The Cambridge...War Writing* 203-4). Other poems written during 1940 but most deliberately unpublished include “Greetings”, “The Guardroom”, “Khaki Xmas—Respecting Christmas”, “Manifesto of the Men”, “On a Fancy Dress Party”, “On Stoner Hill”, “Troop Train”, and “War”, and they contain all the traits that would later characterise Lewis’s poetry. In “Greetings”, the soldier-speaker is waiting—just like he waits in “All Day it has Rained”—but he is waiting to send greetings to a fallen comrade, and, between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> lines, says, ‘But I am anxious, in this silence, / for you, my everlasting friend. / For in the rain, three nights ago, I heard/ The scurry of death, and I saw you bend/ convulsed in darkness, clutching a sudden wound. / I saw your eyes distend’. His “After Dunkirk” was written following the humiliating *Operation Dynamo* (26 May—3 June 1940) during which the British forces evacuated approximately 340,000 Allied soldiers from the Dunkirk Beach, France, where they had been trapped by the German troops. The soldier-poet sternly comments, ‘[...] [O]ne learns to bear/ Insult as quietly as if it were/ A physical deformity. But hope/ Has left the calm humanity that waits/ In silence for the zero hour’ (1,50-4).

The year 1941 was as eventful in Lewis’s life as it was in that of the Eurasians. Though the British Navy won the *Battle of Matapan* against Italy and sunk the

German battleship *Bismarck*, the United Kingdom could do little as the Nazis invaded Greece, Yugoslavia, Crete, and, finally, Russia. On 7 December 1941, the *Imperial Japanese Air Force* joined the Second World War by invading the Hawaiian American Naval Base of Pearl Harbour, sinking at least seven major battleships and killing around two thousand and five hundred American naval cadets. In *Modern English War Poetry*, Tim Kendall writes about the inevitable consequence of such a bellicose atmosphere on the poets: they always exhibited an awareness of death (168-9). In Lewis, this awareness was heightened by two factors—first, his 1940 political lectures to his fellow combatants had led to his segregation in his own regiment as a prototype communist; second, he desperately wanted to be transferred to the *Education Corps* but was rejected. Just like Douglas, he did not respect his snobbish and proud superiors, and, importantly, he began to reject his own pacifist ideas. Adam Piette records a similar mental dilemma and deliberation Douglas faced in the North African desert:

“The men Douglas me[t] in his regiment and in the desert [we]re odd in a manner clearly referencing both Robert Graves’s *Goodbye to All That* and Waugh’s satires, but indebted too to Alice’s encounters with the strange beasts in her dream world. The brutal comedy of the war from Egypt to Tunisia [...] [was] stylised according to the economy of Carroll’s nonsense—[...] [that was] a war replete with farce and nightmare jokes and booby traps, run by half-crazy, obsolete military, fought caged in fantastic machineries of death, rolling over an unreal landscape, fighting an enemy not hated but admired as reflections of the desert rats themselves. The comedy has Carrollian pathos too, sentimentality being generated by the very illogicality of this strange world: ‘it is exciting and amazing to see thousands of men, very few of whom have any idea why they are fighting, all enduring hardships, living in an unnatural, dangerous, but not wholly terrible world, having to kill and be killed, and yet at intervals moved by a feeling of comradeship with the men who kill them and whom they kill, because they are enduring and experiencing the same things’” (*The Cambridge...Twentieth-Century English Poetry* 117).

Determined to come out of his dilemmas, Lewis applied for shifting to the infantry, was accepted, and, in June 1941, was sent to a Gloucester training centre. On 5 July 1941, six days before leaving to be trained as an officer-cadet at Heysham Towers, Lancashire, Lewis married Ellis in Gloucester. He emerged a second lieutenant from Heysham in end-October 1941, three months after he had written about his nuptial in “War Wedding”, a long poem of 146 lines which, in spite of

its title, is actually a grim focus on confrontation and consequent annihilations and destructions: 'She said I made her fertile with a smile. / But now the reaper shaves his head/ And goes to harvest with the dead/ Far from the pastures of his fond desire/ While War sets all her golden fields afire' (l. 136-40). In July too, he received the news that the publishing firm *Allen and Unwin* had agreed to publish his first collection of poems, titled *Raiders' Dawn*, which materialised in March 1942. In December 1941, Lewis, who had won the *Edward J. O'Brien Short Story Award 1941* with his story "They Came", was discussed as a promising British poet in *Lilliput*. Kendall writes how war litterateurs are commonly charged with 'distracting from universal concerns', and opines that their most urgent issue is the "relationship between art and violence" (3). In 1941, Lewis had identifiably been addressing universal concerns as well as portraying the relationship between art and violence.

In November 1941, Lewis, who had composed "The Snapshot" in between, began to correspond regularly with the famous First World War poet, Robert Graves. In the same month, after a leave of a few weeks, he joined the Sixth Battalion of the *South Wales Borderers* at Woodbridge, Suffolk, where he found a number of soldiers from southern Wales but unfriendly and arrogant military superiors. This led to his depression, and according to Ellis's testimony,

"The effect on him was to plunge him to the depths of an unwarrantable despondency. The symptoms were always the same: the desperation on waking into the crazy machinery of an uncoordinated world—a state of mind he managed to get under control by the time he had washed and shaved and generally moved around; the lack of concentration and the feeling of utter failure and worthlessness. I don't think others noticed anything wrong. If he appeared silent and withdrawn, wasn't he, after all, the battalion poet?"<sup>17</sup>

In 1942, Lewis attended training at Aldeburgh, during which he wrote the acclaimed stories "Acting Captain" and "Cold Spell", and rejoiced at the news of *Allen and Unwin's* consent to publish his first collection of short-stories, *The Last Inspection*, which was released in February 1943. In May 1942, the poet and his *South Wales Borderers'* comrades had tank training at Bovington, Dorset, moving to Southend in August. It was a critical period in Eurasian history, as writers like Shirer record (Shirer 1180-1220). The British fighters, who had had a decisive victory against the German during the *Battle of Britain* (10 July—31 October 1940), had to surrender Singapore in February 1942 to the *Imperial Japanese Armed Forces*. Army

trainees like Lewis were shocked to discover how Japan and the *Indian National Army* under Rashbehari Bose (1886-1945) and Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945<sup>3</sup>) were emerging as major concerns for the Allies. The Japanese engaged the Euro-Americans at the *Battles of Java Sea* (27 February 1942), *Coral Sea* (4-8 May 1942), *Midway* (4-7 June 1942), and *Guadalcanal* (7 August 1942-9 February 1943), forcing the U.S. troops to flee the Philippines. On the other hand, the Germans, who had been moving towards Stalingrad, lost the two *Battles of El Alamein* (1-27 July, and 23 October-5 November 1942) (in which Douglas participated as an armoured cavalry officer) to especially the Britons. In May 1942, Lewis paid a visit to *Clouds Hill*, Wareham, where the First World War liaison-officer Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888-1935) had lived, following which he wrote “Dusty Hermitage”, one of the more efficient stories in his 1943 collection. In October, *South Wales Borderers* were ordered to India to fight against the Japanese. Prior to embarking on *H.M.S. Athlone Castle* at Liverpool, Lewis and Ellis spend their last night together, and Ellis recorded in 1989,

“At 3:30 a.m. I woke and leaned over him, studying his face as he slept [...]. There was something so angelic, so ineffable there; I felt my heart would break. I studied his high smooth forehead and the soft dark hair, his dark fringed deep-set eyes and the little lines that ran away from them, deepening when he laughed and the hazel eyes disappeared altogether. The fine skin above the beard line was slightly flushed with fever; and his dear mouth still bore a scar from some game of hockey long ago. I prayed for the safe return of my dainty duck, my dearest dear”<sup>8</sup>.

Lewis commemorated their last leave-taking in the sensuous “Goodbye”: ‘So we must say Goodbye, my darling, / And go, as lovers go, for ever; / Tonight remains, to pack and fix on labels / And make an end of lying down together. / I put a final shilling in the gas, / And watch you slip your dress below your knees/ And lie so still I hear your rustling comb/ Modulate the autumn in the trees’ (l. 1-8). The *South Wales Borderers* arrived in Mumbai in mid-December 1942, and moved on to Nira, 80 kilometres southeast to the Maharastrian city of Pune. By that time, Lewis had produced “The Departure” “On Embarkation”, and “A Troopship in the Tropics”. “Port of Call: Brazil” was written when the *South Wales Borderers* briefly stopped at Bahia in November 1942, en route to India. He also wrote a Shakespearean “Sonnet (abroad a Troopship) to Gweno”.

In spite of hailing from a former English colony, Lewis can be classified as what Edward Said defines as an ‘Orientalist writer’ (7). Archard writes, “Alun [...] [was]

struck by the pitiless heat, dryness, and poverty of India” (Lewis 12). However, the British colony, which Lewis found so disgusting, was also the region where he wrote many of his more famous poems, including “By the Gateway of India: Bombay”, “The Way Back”, “Karanje Village”, “The Mahratta Ghats”, “Holi”, “Ways”, “Water Music”, and so on. Importantly, all these India-poems explore the despondency of an unwilling fighter posted to a place that he hates. At the *Gateway of India*, he watches the beggars and naked-footed pilgrims. When an Indian sweeper says ‘Karanje had a village/ A roof of gold in the gaon:/ But I saw only the long-nosed swine and the vultures/ Groping the refuse for carrion’ (“Karanje Village”, l. 1-4). Near “The Mahratta Ghats”, the ‘valleys crack and burn, the exhausted plains/ sink their black teeth into the horny veins [...]’ (l. 1-2). Even the ‘Hindu festival of Spring’ “Holi” becomes a festival attended by Indian girls whose ‘eyes are dark with shame’ and ‘young men [who] are fain’ (l. 8, 10).

Most of these poems were written in 1943, a year which began with Lewis fracturing his jaw in a regimental football match and spending one and half months at a Pune hospital where he was twice operated upon. Prior to returning to Nira in March 1943 as intelligence officer who would make numerous reconnaissance trips to the Mahratta Hills, he wrote “In Hospital: Poona (1)”, “In Hospital: Poona (2)”, and the much-anthologised “Burma Casualty”, in which he writes about a wounded soldier, who while convalescing, hears about the Japanese butchering of his comrades: ‘And he lay in the lightness of the ward / Thinking of all the lads the dark enfolds / So secretly. / And yet a man may walk / Into and through it, and return alive. / Why had his friends all stayed there, then?’ (l. 56-61). On 20 March 1943, Lewis’s battalion joined the 36<sup>th</sup> *Indian Infantry Division* at Lake Kharakvasla, opposite Kudje, Maharashtra, and began to train to engage the *Imperial Japanese Army* in Burma. During this period, he produced more poems of despondency, exhaustion, and boredom, including “Village Funeral: Maharashtra”, “Home Thoughts from Abroad”, “Bequest”, and “Shadows”, broadcasting some of them on *All-India Radio* in June. “The Raid” is a short story from this year about the arrest of an Indian nationalist. In “Home Thoughts from Abroad”, Lewis is found nursing grievances against the Europeans: ‘We surely were not hard to please/ And yet you cast us out. And in this land/ We bear the dark inherited disease/ Bred in the itching warmth of your hand’ (l. 19-22), but his experiences of July, which would result in the publication of *A Cypress Walk: Letters from Alun Lewis to Freda Aykroyd* (2007) by *The Enitharmon Press*, London, would lead his abandonment of complaining.

On 24 July 1943, Alun Lewis went on leave to Coonoor, a picturesque south Indian Nilgiri hill-town between Mettupalayam and Ootacamund, Tamil Nadu, situated at an altitude of 1839 metres. On the next day, he met Freda Aykroyd (1910-2005) for the first time and fell deeply in love with her. She was married to Wallace Aykroyd, the director of the *Nutrition Research Laboratories*, and lived with him and their daughter, Gilly, simultaneously maintaining an open house for recuperating British army officers and nurses. Reviewing *A Cypress Walk*, Charles Bainbridge writes,

“They were instantly attracted to each other. As Aykroyd writes in her introduction, ‘Though much has faded from memory his arrival stays as vivid as lightning’. They spent several idyllic days wandering through the lush landscape that surrounded them—‘The quality of the air at that great height is difficult to describe. It caused an excitement, an ecstatic appreciation of life [...]. We pushed the war away as far as we were able, though we were acutely aware of it, as we were aware that this love was wounding to the other loves to which we were committed’. When Lewis returned to his regiment his letters, entrancing and vivid, started pouring in. They reveal a man wrestling fiercely with a whole range of contradictions both within himself and those around him. Even in a state of intoxicating celebration, Lewis’s anxieties were never far away”<sup>19</sup>.

“Ways”, “Wood Song”, “Beloved Beware”, “The Way Back” (written en route to *Karachi Military Intelligence School*), “Pastorals”, “Renewal”, and “A Fragment” are seven poems that can be identified to have been written by Lewis during the period of his torrid attraction to Aykroyd, with whom he spent five days together in Mumbai in September 1943 before rejoining his battalion. “Beloved Beware”, written in August, captures a military officer confused with his newfound amour: ‘Under stress we change. / What book of chemistry/ Can tell what forms will grow/ From this corporeal mystery’ (l. 13-6). In “Lady in Black”, also written during this period, he captures the dilemma of a soldier who is informing a bereaved mother about the combat-death of her son. Lewis knew how much the common soldiers meant to their parents—he understood the depth of the bond between them. It was precisely why he turned down in August 1943 a promotion to staff officer: he did not want to be separated from the general soldiers. However, he was temporarily separated from them when in November he contracted malaria, and spent a week at a Pune hospital. He met Glyn Lewis—the last time he ever saw his relatives—at Pune in December 1943, and commemorated it in the short-story, “The Reunion”.

Probably the intuitive Lewis foresaw his own death in 1944 because he wrote his last verse of ninety-nine lines, "The Jungle", in January, and refrained from writing any more poems. There is a tone of dejection and defeatism in the concluding five lines of his last poetic testimony: 'Then would some unimportant death resound/ With the imprisoned music of the soul? / And we become the world we could not change? / Or does the will's long struggle end/ With the last kindness of a foe or friend?' However, he did not refrain from literary activities altogether. He pre-decided that his second collection of poems (which was posthumously published in August 1945) would be ironically titled "Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets", a quote from Job 39. In February 1944, the *South Wales Borderers* were sent first to Kolkata (India), thereafter to Chittagong (Bangladesh), and finally to Cox's Bazar, then located in northern Burma. Waiting in anxiety to encounter the Japanese and believing that every annihilation is a crime, Lewis began writing long letters to his family and Aykroyd, sending his last letter from Bawli to Ellis in end-February 1944. In it, he wrote,

"The long self-torture I have been through is resolving itself now into a discipline of the emotions and hopes of you and me [...]. I feel my grasp is broader and steadier than it has been for a long time. I hope it is true, because that is how I want to be: and the rest of me is invulnerable. I want you to know that"<sup>20</sup>.

Lewis requested joining *B Company* at Goppe Pass, Mayu Range, on 4 March 1944: apparently he wanted to engage the Japanese head on. However, on the next morning, he was found shot through his head, and after his death, was buried on the same day at *Bawli Military Cemetery*. On 31 March 1944, a military court concluded that his death occurred through an accidental self-shooting. On 7 March 1944, two days after his death, Gweno Ellis received his pre-booked birthday greetings cable: "Many happier returns. Dearest love. Alun".

It may be mentioned in conclusion that the Second World War, in which approximately seventy three million people were killed, did not leave plenty of scope for war poets to survive and describe. Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) famously commented in *Cultural Criticism and Society* (1949) that to 'write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. In fact, Douglas and Lewis were writing their war poems while, unknown to themselves and to the defending Allies, exterminations were continuing at Oświęcim. However, had not Alun Lewis, Keith Douglas, or Sidney Keyes written their superior verses, posterity would outrightly have remembered soldiers who fought in the 1939-45 belligerence as bloodthirsty marauders

without any emotion and sentiment. To the readers of war poetry, Lewis's oeuvre perceptively has an extra charm because it was created by a 'conscientious objector' who, nevertheless, participated in warring, and though not known to have killed enemy combatants, performed all the other duties expected of a patriotic combatant without, unlike Douglas, identifying their miseries as his own. He lived both peacefully with Gweno Ellis and tempestuously with Freda Aykroyd, and even after his death, one can still remember his resentment against the politicians and military commanders for depriving him of a joyous and beautiful world free from all anxieties: 'Then sons would come in season/ Sturdy as the apple tree/ Inheriting my land, / And love and pride have reason. / But I stand here instead/ With dry earth in my hand, / And death in my head/ Crying Treason! Treason!' ("Pastorals", l. 10-7).

## Notes

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Roy Pinaki, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of English, Malda College, India.