

A T Turner – The Forgotten War Poet

An Introduction.



A T Turner M.M.

We were first made aware of A T (Tom) Turner whilst preparing for a World War One Centenary exhibition. Our appeal for stories about family members who had served in that terrible conflict drew attention to the uncle of Lesley Nelson of our church.

Turner did not have a good war. Enlisted in 1915, he was sent to the trenches, was wounded, convalesced, returned to the trenches, won the military medal, than died in awful circumstances in 1917 at the age of twenty four. His full story is given in the appendix at the end of this document.

Yet somehow, he found time to write poetry in the trenches. His major poem “Farewell” was published in *Blighty* magazine in December 1917 after his death, and in the 1920s his family published the remainder of his work. We have one flimsy copy. At this time of writing you will not find A T Turner on the internet, neither his book nor even his publisher Dranes of London. It is the purpose of this document to put that right.

What can we make of his poetry? Clearly struck down before fully developed in style, he nevertheless shares the distinction with other War Poets of writing about unpleasant personal experiences. Through him, we can glimpse some of the feelings of an ordinary Tommy in the trenches. His main work “Farewell to England” was clearly written close to Christmas whilst living in or near the front line. In it we have the wistful musings of a soldier in a badly damaged country, dreaming of his unspoilt homeland, and wondering if those who gave their sons to the conflict really understood what they had done.

Should we compare Turner to the greater, well known poets? In my view, contrast would be a better word. Take, for example the famous poem “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae. McCrae was a medical officer who had to conduct the burial ceremony of a friend in a Belgian Cemetery. His poem invoked the symbolism of the poppy, and we tend to associate the war dead with neat graves, with proud headstones, in tidy cemeteries. But the reality for the serving soldier was totally different. Read Turner’s poem “Placita Compostus Pace” and we find a comrade being left without ceremony in an unmarked grave covered in weeds.

Read these poems of a young man in the trenches, and you will understand better the tragedy of war.

FAREWELL!
AND
OTHER POEMS



BY
A. T. TURNER.

FAREWELL !
AND
OTHER POEMS.

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*(Died of wounds in France, August, 1917, aged
24 years.)*

*“ Could I have sung one song that should survive
The Singer’s voice, and in my country’s heart
Find loving echo. ”*

Sir Noel Paton.

LONDON :
DRANE’S,
DANEGELD HOUSE,
82A, FARRINGDON STREET, E.C. 4.

* FAREWELL TO ENGLAND.

(December, 1917.)

— : : —

“ *Aspera tum positis mitescent saecula bellis.*”

Aen. Lib. I. 291.

(*Then harsh ages will mellow when wars are put aside.*)

*The time is come to bid our land Good-night,
Our England, silent now, and decked with white ;
As if she donned, to charm our hearts and eyes
With beauties unsurmised in other skies,
That snowy robe wherein we most delight.*

*Good-night ! Yet, ere I go—
Since none, who says farewell to-night, can know
What things the Fates intend, or what may chance,
Glorious or hapless, there, in hapless France—
Ere going, I would speak. So may abide
Some few, weak words of mine, whate'er betide.*

continued...

To England, drowsing white beneath the stars,
This land of pain, of strong and tender hearts,
Enduring, like her steel, the furnace-smarts.
Tempered, not molten—should this noise of wars

With winter pass, and white hawthorns bring peace,
Or should the turmoil with the summer pass,
Or russet eves of Autumn; whensoever
The tidings make a sabbath in the air,
And all the winds cry "Peace," O, England, then
Forget not those who died, thy pride of Englishmen.

Beneath the snowy roof their children sleep,
True wives watch, sleepless: these they gave to thee,
Their joys, their lives, and these they gave, to be
The treasured of thy treasury, to keep.
Themselves you cannot aid: to mar their sleep,
Or soothe to greater peace their slumber deep,
Is far beyond your power, weep as you may.
But these, whose voice oft wakes to life your day,

Their boys and girls, whose play
Rejoices city streets and hamlets green,
These may you, for such sacrifice, repay.
From labouring deep in mines, from shop and quay,
From hopeless streets where not a leaf is seen,
From sharp struggle with the earth, their fathers came

continued...

*To make their living sacrifice for thee.
Dim were their minds, perforce : beauty, from them,
Remote as an imperial diadem ;
No art had touched their souls to generous flame :
And, being such, they died. So shall we see
Their sons unlightened live and die ? Thy name,
My England, be preserved from this dark shame.*

*For like spring-time sun to fields, and leaves, and
flowers,
Are art and beauty to the soul of man,
Waking its bloom and fragrance. Lives whose hours
Hold naught but toil within their grudging span—
Toil unremitted—these are winter bowers,
Wherein the spirit's blossoms never blow,
And souls, like mountain's birch tree stunted grow.*

*So winter-starved, so stunted, were the souls
Of those who died for us. O England, then
When history's new, stately page unrolls,
And Time rejuvenate takes up the pen
Dare you forget their sons ? Shall toil again
Possess their hearts with winter, and no spring
Of beauty wake their souls to blossoming ?
Beauty denied, they languish. Grant it then
My England, worthier thus thy diadem.*

continued...

*And so, at length, Good-night.
To hearts aglow for Christmas, and the white
Untroubled fields of home. No dearer dress
Could you have chosen to deck your loveliness
Against this night, dear land. Look up, and bless.
Farewell you fields of song, you skies of light.
For a little while, Good-night.*

** By kind permission of the Editor of "Blighty."*



THE MIRROR.

— : : —

*My love's a child yet : by hid ways she's flown
Beside a secret stream, with alders grown,
A secret rocky stream, where alders' shade
Shields from unkindly eye my simple maid.*

*Within the sandy bank she hollows out
A little pool : the murmuring, dimpled rout
Of waters eddies in, and all the green
Of kindly boughs o'erarching her is seen
Mirrored perplexed upon the water's face.*



*My love, sweet head bowed o'er the troubled space
Of circling waters, gazes rapt therein,
With smile half-waked, as hoping soon to win
Some flattering secret from a naiad there.*

*Soon langour takes the current, and my Fair,
Within the waters eddying to rest
Beholds her countenance, but ill express'd,
And wavering through the waters' tremulous stir.*

*The green and voiceless eddies long defer
Their period of quiet, but more slow
They circle, and my fair one's features grow
Complete, and luminous in the watery deep.*

*So may God's countenance, within the sweep
Of all this troubled universe, find its grace
Brokenly imaged for a little space,
But not for aye; His wond'rous likeness grows,
And ever in the Deeps it fairer glows.*

ON A DESOLATE HILLSIDE IN FRANCE.

— : : —

*Breathe, breathe a solemn air, you sombre pines
That lonely on the naked hillside stand,
While prostrate at your feet, on either hand,
Lie smitten elms in pall of withered vines,*

*And stricken orchard trees in serried lines,
Breathe a sad air : lament this desolate land,
This glebe untilled, these flaming homesteads, fanned
By winds abetting infamous designs,*

*And I will bear your message in my verse
To hearts in quiet English fields still blessed,
Whose sight is spared the workings of this curse
By which we see unhappy France distressed.
Sigh on, and I your message will rehearse :
“ Be France avenged, ere England sigh for rest.”*



MORNING OF AN ATTACK (April).

— : : —

*Birds call, and leaves put forth again ;
This morning larks were singing,
And the woods, the woods were ringing
Wi' the cuckoo's cry ;
Heaven's cup with light was brimming,
And golden spume rose, rimming
 The eastern sky.
And then, then fell the heavy iron rain
 Searing the plain :
And men whose mien and tone I knew,
 Whose ways
Were one with mine through long-familiar days,
Fell, rolled and locked to th' bosom
 Of Earth again.
Woods smile, and cuckoos call,
And yet the pitiless iron showers fall.*

AT REST BILLETS.

— : : —

*French skies in May : wide fields of bursting green :
Close-clustered elms, with roofs that gleam between,
Crimpled and red, around the taper spire :
Noons of still glory : twilights loth to tire :*

*Grey uncouth wains, that thread the springing grain
Like primal arks, adrift on a green main,
With horses huge of fetlock, grave, and slow,
That nod in steady rhythm as they go :*

*A wood of nightingales, on moonlight eyes
More full of song than shadowy boughs and leaves :
And a river fit for weary limbs, that flows
And robs the lax-blown blossoms as it goes :*

*Where girls, huge-bonnetted like poppy flowers,
And shod with clinging sabots, pass slow hours
Of sunshine, busied o'er the washing stool,
And spread around the linen white and cool :*

*Here may our limbs take grateful holiday,
Here thoughts of war pass, like the stream, away.*

HARVEST HYMN.

— : : —

*For the Winter time of sleeping
When in earth the grain lay, keeping
Safe its wealth for Autumn's reaping,
Thankful, Lord, we come to Thee.*

*For the Spring with sun and showers,
Calling from the cloud-built towers,
Waking Life's still sleeping powers,
Thankful, Lord, we come to Thee.*

*For the grain in summer glowing,
For Thy tireless care, bestowing
Blessings on our weak hands' sowing,
Thankful, Lord, we come to Thee.*

— : : —

PASTORAL.

— : : —

*What know I of fame, the breath of other Poets' lips?
All day amid my browsing flock I lie, upon the slope
Of some smooth, green hillside, and see, across the
river plain,*

*The hills and trenchèd valleys. There God's flail,
in ancient days*

*Smote, and earth trembled. Like a dragon, who his
dusky length*

*Trails all across the valleys, stretch the woods, low-
browed : in part*



*The hills are kirtled with a yellow dress of ripened
corn,*

*And, by the river, poplars stand, and like the river
waters*

*They shimmer in wind and sun. This world is all
the world I know.*

*Watching the river plain beneath, which through the
summer days*

*Is filled with corn and fruit, and empties like an
hour glass*

*When winter comes, I measure out the passage slow
of time.*

*My flock is all my care, my song my leisure's sole
delight :*

*I nothing know of fame, the breath of other poets'
lips.*

WHEN TIME WENT SLOWLY IN
HOSPITAL.

— :: —

*Week adding still to week, as children lay
Brick upon brick in play*

*'Till topples their frail building. Week to week!
And men, it seems, would seek*

*To rear with added weeks a house secure
Unshaken, to endure,*

*Until the ebb of time : more foolish they !
Wise men know they play*

*With toyshop bricks. Skilful and diligent
Upon their game intent,*

*They learn to fashion life, which swept away,
Their practised hands essay*

Works that endure, no longer toys of wood and clay.

EXPERIMENTS.

— :: —

I.

(The Stream, Kimbridge.)

*I know not anywhere a sweeter sound
 Than that where water runneth, deep and fair,
 With bedded lilies, blossoms blue and white,
 And unquiet grasses, like cold naiads' hair :
 Where haply are low trees and rushes light,
 And by the bank the slow mill wheel goes round.*

II.

(Storm, Buttercups, etc.)

*Now comes the rain, with quick, impetuous sweep ;
 The hills are veiled, and all the branches weep
 Their drops into the bubbled pools below.
 Above, fantastic shapes of vapour flow
 From out the west, and yonder, by the spire,
 The sullen thundercloud doth nurse its fire.*

continued...

*Men fear the elements, and lurk beneath
The bending elm which spreads the thickest leaf;
But thou, fresh-smiling, slender buttercup,
With all thy golden fellows, liftest up
Thy cheek to drink the freshness of the shower.
And, though the sullen vapours heavier lower,
The thrush and blackbird answer in the trees,
And oft, when sounds of shower and breezes cease,
The cuckoo's note I hear.*

III.

. How tell

*The mid-noon light that like a garment lies
Upon the new-ploughed furrows, broad and bare!
How rich the earth, how quiet! Peace it has
Beyond the knowledge of our human life,
Yet what the glad fruition it shall yield
When, after months of still increase, it stand
Crowned with the glory of full-ripened corn!
And our unquiet life runs broken on
Through dreams and hopes of sad futility,
While still thou smil'st in quiet, and bearest still
Thy season's fruit, untroubled by a care.*

“ That best portion of a good man’s life
His little nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love.” WORDSWORTH.

Within my room alone I sate,
And pondered all the vast obscure
Of human will, prime cause, and fate,
What things shall pass, and what endure.
Long mused I, striving to secure
Some foothold whence I might ascend
From reason’s cavern, strait, obscure,
To air, and light, and freedom without end.

While thus I pondered, at my door
A tap came, and there entered in
A Lady, who a Teatray bore,
With cakes and teacup set therein.
My loneliness, it seems, could win
Pity, who brought me cakes and tea.
Was it a loss that this should be,
That thought fled, Pity entering in
With cakes, to waken gratitude in me ?

A THING HE WANTED TO SAY.

— :: —

*A beggared Poet I, who naught possess,
That is the poet's proper furnishing,
Save a great longing for the face of Beauty.*

*But this have I perceived—if I would win
An unobscured vision of her face,
And know her rightly for her perfect self,
Then must I change myself, to be, like her,
In habit, thought, and manners beautiful.*



GOD'S HELP IN BATTLE.

— :: —

*God dwells in silence, but He does not sleep.
Darkling we turn to Him, while night around
Steals close with cloakèd terrors, or when sound
Sudden alarms, whereat our pulses leap :*

*Then yearn we to Him ; but the silence deep
Within the soul, which is His sanctuary,
Betrays Him by no sign, and, doubting, we
Turn to our task, and murmur, " Does He sleep ? "*

*'Till, all accomplished, wondering we confess
" Not I did this, 'twas He sustained my feebleness. "*



“*PLACITA COMPOSTUS PACE.*”

(Laid to rest in quiet peace)

— :: —

*We toiled at night, with ne'er a breathing space :
We left the brown earth bare above his face,
With neither cross nor stone to mark the place.*

*And now we march away ; but well we know
That THERE the burnished grasses glint and glow,
There dandelions puff their seeds, and sow,*

*A coverlet of gold ; while daisies spread
A hem of marvellous gems to grace his bed
Who sleeps in England's toil outwearied.*



Appendix

The life and death of A T (Tom) Turner

TOM TURNER

(Uncle of Lesley Nelson)

**Lance Corporal Arthur Thomas Turner MM. (1893 - 1917)
2I4th Battalion, Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry
Service Numbers 3399, 201089**

Arthur Thomas Turner, was born in Canning Town, London in 1893. He was known in the family as Tom. In 1901 he was living with his parents, brother, baby sister and maternal grandmother at 8 Ford Street. West Ham. By 1911 the family had moved to 11 Brock Road, Victoria Docks, Canning Town and Tom was working as a pupil teacher. He attended Borough Road College from 1913 — 1915. The N.U.T War Records listed him as employed at Russell Road School in West Ham.

He enlisted with the 1/4th Battalion Oxford and Bucks Light infantry at Oxford, probably straight after completing his time at college. He embarked at Folkstone and reached France on 29 March 1915. The War Diary for the 1/4th battalion recorded that he was one of seven men wounded in action at Bayencourt on the night of 9 April 1916 whilst employed with "D" Company in digging a new trench about four hundred yards in advance of the present front line. At some point later he was attached to the 2I4th Battalion.

The War Diary for the 2I4th Battalion reports an attack against the Germans from front line trenches at St Julien at 4:45 am on 22 August 1917. Three Officers were killed and six wounded. Twenty six other ranks lost their lives, seventy-four were wounded and forty-four reported missing/probably killed or wounded. Thomas must have been one of the missing.

He died of gunshot wounds to the head and chest in No 3 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station on Monday, 27 August 1917, aged twenty four.

He was awarded the Military Medal in action with the 1/4th Battalion at Hebuterne in 1916, "*For consistent good work. His example and influence over the men have on many occasions proved invaluable*". described by his Officer as a quiet and reserved man. Tom wrote some poetry in the trenches which was published as '*Farewell and other poems*' by his family after the war. He is buried in Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, Poperinge, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium. His tombstone bears the *legend 'For a Little While Goodnight'*, a quotation from one of his poems.

His parents received official notification that he had died posted on 31 August 1917. A week after his death 2nd Lieutenant W.H. Moberly, his Platoon Commander in "B" Company, wrote to his father to express his deepest sympathy and to tell him what a personal grief his death had been. He described the circumstances of his death,

"On the morning of 22nd we were in an attack; your son was hit just before we reached our objective. All that day he lay in a shell hole and no one was able to get to him owing to snipers. We got to him at night and gave him water and did what we could to make him comfortable. But we had no stretcher-bearers, and we did not dare to move him towards our trench owing to his bad wound (apparently through the lung). 80, to our great distress, we had to leave him out another day. The next night, when we were relieved ourselves, four volunteers from among our own men carried him out."

No.

(If reply, please
quote above No.)

ARMY FORM B. 104-82.



Record Office,

31 AUG 1917 191

Sir,

It is my painful duty to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office notifying the death of:—

(No.) 201089 (Rank) Lt/Corporal

(Name) Arthur Thomas Turner

(Regiment) 4th OXFORD & BUCKS L.I.

which occurred with the British Expeditionary Force, France on the 27th August 1917.

The report is to the effect that he died from wounds received in action.

By His Majesty's command I am to forward the enclosed message of sympathy from Their Gracious Majesties the King and Queen. I am at the same time to express the regret of the Army Council at the soldier's death in his Country's service.

I am to add that any information that may be received as to the soldier's burial will be communicated to you in due course. A separate leaflet dealing more fully with this subject is enclosed.

Mr. A. Turner,
15. Chalk Road,
Victoria Docks,
London, E.

I am,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,
Major

W. H. Muscombe

Officer in charge of Records.

i/c T. F. Records

P.T.O.

Announcement of death

Sunday, Apr 2 / 17

Dear Mr. Truman

You will have heard before this reaches you of your son's death in hospital from wounds a week ago to day. But I have lately been his platoon commander, & I feel I must write a line to express my deep sympathy with you & to tell you what a personal grief to me his death has been.

As you of course know well he was a very quiet & reserved man in no way lacking active interest or eagerness to get to know well in a hurry. I only wish I had known him better. But I always disliked, as you could not help realizing, that he was a man of quite exceptional physical calibre & endurance. And I have been much struck the day or two past by the fact that he was a most respectful & polite in your quiet but firm manner, & that he was a most

respectful man to his bad wound (apparently through the leg) So, to our great distress, we had to leave him on another day. The next night, when we were re-boarding our boat, four volunteers from among our own men carried him out. All the time, in great pain & exhaustion & loneliness, when most men would have been utterly demoralized, he remained extraordinary serene & patient, & I hope against hope that his life might be preserved. God has willed to otherwise. I know what was the source of your son's untimely strength, & I can assure you that in the hour of his extremity he was and more anxious to the point of dying to overcome all human weakness. I can assure you that it was with a most respectful sympathy in your quiet but firm manner, & that he was a most

to the other men about being in the fact that his modest & unassuming manner had in no way hidden itself. They all were conscious that he was a man living on a higher plane, both intellectually & morally than his fellows. And without the best reputation of character or stand-offishness on his part. I wish you could hear some of the things that they say about him.

On the morning of the 22nd we were in an attack, & your son was hit just before we reached our objective. All that day he lay in a shell hole & no one was able to get to him owing to snipers. We got to him at night & gave him water & did what we could to make him comfortable. But we had no stretcher & he was not able to move him towards

C.Os letter to father

Sunday Sept 2/17

Dear Mr Turner

You will have heard before this reaches you of your son's death in hospital from wounds a week ago today. But I have lately been his platoon commander and I feel I must write to express my deep sympathy with you and to tell you what a personal grief to me his death has been.

As you of course know well he was a very quiet and reserved man, in no way courting notice and not easy to get to know in a hurry. I only wish I had known him better. But I always realized, as one could not help realizing, that here was a man of quite exceptional calibre and endowment. And I have been much struck during the last few days, in talking to the other men about him, the fact that his modest and retiring manner had in no way hidden his real worth. They all were conscious that he was a man living on a higher plane, both intellectually and morally, than his fellows. And this without the least suggestion of conceit or stand-offishness on his part. I wish you could hear some of the things that they say about him.

On the morning of 22nd we were in an attack; your son was hit just before we reached our objective. All that day he lay in a shell hole and no one was able to get to him owing to snipers. We got to him at night and gave him water and did what we could to make him comfortable. But we had no stretcher-bearers, and we did not dare to move him towards our trench owing to his bad wound (apparently through the lung). So, to our great distress, we had to leave him out another day. The next night, when we were relieved ourselves, four volunteers from among our own men carried him out. All this time, in great pain and exhaustion and loneliness, when most men would have been utterly unnerved, he remained extraordinarily serene and patient; and I hoped against hope that his life might be preserved.

God has willed it otherwise. I know what was the source of your son's unearthly strength, and I can assure you that, in the hour of his extremity, he was one more witness to the power of religion to overcome all human weakness.

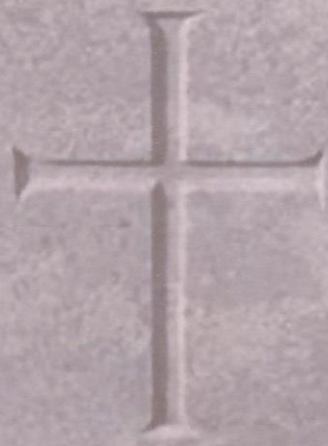
I am very sure that all is well with him. But to you I can only express my deepest and most respectful sympathy in your great loss.

Yours most sincerely, Walter H Moberly 2/Sept/17

Transcript of COs letter



201089 LANCE CPL.
A. T. TURNER MM.
OXFORD & BUCKS. LIGHT INF.
27TH AUGUST 1917 AGE 24



FOR A LITTLE WHILE
GOOD NIGHT



HE whom this scroll commemorates was numbered among those who, at the call of King and Country, left all that was dear to them, endured hardness, faced danger, and finally passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom. Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten.

*Lt Col. Arthur Thomas Turner M.M.
Oxf. and Bucks. I.I.*