

Charles Walter Blackall by Hilary Tolputt

Charles Walter Blackall was a distinguished soldier, actor, poet and artist. His birth was registered in 1876 at St Albans, his parents being Major Robert Blackall and Mary Emily [née Gifford] Blackall. The Blackalls came from a family of Irish landowners and Charles' grandfather, Samuel Wensley Blackall, had commissioned the architect John Hargrave to build Coolamber Manor, County Longford, a beautiful Classical country house with extensive lands. Colonel Samuel Blackall had a distinguished career as High Sheriff of Longford and MP for Longford 1847-51. He then served abroad becoming Governor of Sierra Leone 1862-65 and Governor of Queensland, Australia from 1868-1871.¹

Major Samuel Blackall had died at Brisbane in Queensland in 1871 and Charles's father, Robert Blackall, who was born in Dublin in about 1835, inherited the family home in Ireland. He seems to have spent much of his time in England attending Rugby School (1851 census), and joining the army, where he attained the rank of Major. By 1881, the family according to the census of that year were living at 4 Clifton Road, Folkestone.² Charles had an elder brother Edward [b. 1871 in Barnet, Middlesex] and a younger brother Algernon [b.1879 in Folkestone].

Charles Blackall joined the third battalion of the "Buffs" in 1900 serving in the Boer War as a second Lieutenant. He was awarded the Queen's South Africa Medal, with Cape Colony and Orange Free State clasps; the King's South Africa Medal with the 1901 and 1902 clasps.³ He left South Africa in 1902 with prisoners of war for St Helena. He was later to write a series of poems in 1914/15 and in one, "Then and Now", he described experiences in the Boer War:

".....It was a trek, trek, trek, trek,
From rise to set of sun.
Trek, trek, trek, trek,
Another day's march done.
The rolling veldt and the dusty trail,
And the trek-ox crawling like a snail,
And a thirst that you couldn't quench with a pail
When you got them on the run."⁴

After the Boer War, he was stationed at Canterbury, where he took part in amateur theatrical performances organized by Colonel and Mrs Moore Lane until about 1909 when he became a professional actor. He did not resign his commission until 1911. We also know from the Local paper that Blackall was a keen sportsman being a member of the Folkestone Hockey, Golf and Cricket clubs.⁵

¹ National Inventory of Architectural Heritage Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government of Ireland

² John PH Frearson "The Green Room Plaque"

³ John PH Frearson "The Green Room Plaque"

⁴ CW Blackall "Songs from the Trenches", Bodley Head, 1915

⁵ Folkestone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald, April 6, 1918

On 25 April 1910, by then a captain, he married Alice Evelyn Foutrell Briscoe, an actress, at St Luke's Church, Chelsea. He was aged thirty four and his bride was twenty six.⁶ Blackall appeared at the St James's Theatre, and later at Drury Lane in "The Whip and travelled to New Zealand and Australia in 1910 on tour with "The Whip".⁷ This was a thriller written by Cecil Raleigh and Henry Hamilton. Henry Hamilton lived at "The Haven", Sandgate from 1900 to 1918 worshipping at Holy Trinity Church, Folkestone; the parish church of the Blackall family.⁸

In 1912, Charles Blackall and his wife, listed as an actor and actress, sailed from Southampton to New York and their arrival was noted in the New York Times in October.⁹ Blackall received rave reviews in the New York Times of January 12, 1913 for his performance as Captain Sartoris in The Whip. There were one hundred and sixty performances of this at the Manhattan Opera House between November and April 1913. Other members of the cast were W. Croft, Alec Fraser, John Halliday, Lumsden Hare, Leonore Harris, Marie Illington, Robert Jarman, Evelyn Kerry, Ambrose Manning, M. McCready, Mona Morgan, Joe Pender, Horace Pollock, M. Raymond, John L. Shine, Dion Titheradge and Basil West. Arthur Collins was the producer.¹⁰

In 1914 he returned from America for a short holiday and when war broke out rejoined his old Regiment as a junior captain. He went out to France in November 1914 attached to the 1st battalion the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and began writing poetry about life in the trenches which was later published in 1915 under the title "Songs from the Trenches" Bodley Head, 1915. Blackall's poetry portrays the stoicism of the men, the hardships they suffered and their ability to find something humorous even in the direst circumstances. His words in the preface give a flavour of his writing:

"In the following rhymes, which make no pretension to literary merit, I have endeavoured to portray life in and around the trenches as I have seen it during several months of personal observation. Rejoining, as I did, my old regiment after several years in the theatrical profession, and coming, as it were, straight from the artificial to the real, enabled me to realise more fully than ever the wonderful pluck, endurance, and unflinching cheerfulness of our men. In the lines entitled "The Song of the Trench" I have tried to describe some of the discomforts and hardships suffered by the troops in the winter 1914-15, and which were borne by them without murmur or complaint. Truly, the men are splendid. I may mention that all the incidents described in this little volume are either facts or founded on fact ; and some, too, alas! are written around those who are no longer with us."¹¹

Four of Blackall's poems are reproduced in "A Deep Cry" by Anne Powell including "WGCG" a tribute to WG Gladstone's grandson, "Attack", "A Night of Horror" and "Their Dug-Out". Fortunately the complete book of Blackall's poems is now available on line having been digitised by the University of California. The Folkestone local paper recorded that Blackall, a gifted writer, sent these poems on scraps of paper home to his wife. The following one perhaps speaks directly to and of his wife the actress:

⁶ Marriage Reg:Q3, 1867, St George, Hanover Square, London, Middlesex, Vol:1a,611 quoted by Frearson in "The Green Room Plaque"

⁷ Folkestone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald, April 6, 1918

⁸ Burials Book, Folkestone Holy Trinity Church Cathedral Archives Canterbury
Folkestone, Hythe Herald, September 14, 1918

⁹ New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1957 on www.ancestry.co.uk quoted by Frearson above and The New York Times, Friday 4 October 1912

¹⁰ IBDB Internet Broadway Database

¹¹ Preface to CW Blackall "Songs from the Trenches" Bodley Head, London

"SEVEN DAYS' LEAVE

Bravely acted, little lady;
 Bravely acted, wife of mine.
 Though I know your heart is aching
 Almost to the point of breaking,
 Not a word of what you're feeling,
 Only just a teardrop stealing.
 Such a splendid little lady,
 Such a splendid wife of mine!

Bravely spoken, little lady;
 Bravely spoken, wife of mine.
 Just a tightening of your fingers
 While your hand in mine still lingers;
 Just " God bless and keep you, dearest
 In my thoughts you're always nearest."
 Such a sportsman, little lady ;
 Such a sportsman, wife of mine !

Is it fair, my little lady ?
 Fair to you, O wife of mine ?
 Seven days we two together,
 Then we part, perhaps for ever.
 (God! those days, though only seven,
 Seemed a little glimpse of Heaven!)
 That's the question, little lady.
 Yours the answer, wife of mine."¹²



¹² Blackall, CW "Songs from the Trenches" published London, John Lane digital
 source:<http://www.archiveorg/details/songsfromtrench00blacrich> from University of California Libraries

In 1915, he was given three months' leave on account of illness and was in Guy's Hospital. That year he returned to the "Buffs" being gazetted a temporary major. Later he was given command of a Cheshire battalion being gazetted Lt. Colonel. Following this in December 1917, Blackall was in charge of a South Staffordshire battalion, and was killed while leading his men into battle on 25 March 1918. The local paper in its obituary concluded with the words, "A lovable man with many friends, he was the last of a brilliant family of soldiers."¹³

He is commemorated on the Green Room Plaque, the Folkestone Town memorial, Folkestone Holy Trinity Church memorial, the Folkestone Golf Club memorial and the Arras Memorial to the missing Bay 2.

Photograph of Charles Walter Blackall¹⁴



¹³ Folkestone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald, April 6, 1918

¹⁴ John PH Frearson "The Green Room Plaque"