

## *Some corner of a foreign field*

Cecilia McDowall

*Some corner of a foreign field* draws texts from two associations with Dulwich College; Old Alleynians, Sir Ernest Shackleton, and the poet, Ernest Armine Wodehouse, the brother of P.G. Wodehouse, also an Old Alleynian. The work is scored for mixed chorus, tenor soloist, strings and harp and is shaped in three parts, presented without a break.

The opening section of *Some corner of a foreign field*, for chorus and soloist, sets two passages from the Bible with a most poignant connection to Shackleton. Queen Alexandra presented the Bible to Shackleton before his departure on the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. In October 1915 his ship, the *Endurance*, was finally devoured by the entrapping ice and after the vessel was abandoned, Shackleton instructed his men to pare down their personal possessions to no more than two pounds in weight. As an example to them all, he tore out the dedication flyleaf from Queen Alexandra's Bible and some passages from Job and the Psalms to keep, discarding the rest in the snow. One member of the expedition feared that casting off the Bible in this way might bring bad luck and so secreted the remains amongst his belongings.

The central section of the work sets a 'versioning' of E.A. Wodehouse's poem, *Before Ginchy: September 1916* by the Master of Dulwich College, Dr Joseph Spence. Dr Spence has fashioned a stark and gruesome portrayal from the elaborate verse of the original poem, evoking a visceral response to the sickening horror of war with his searing imagery. The music pushes on, relentless, with these uncompromising words and the passage here, for chorus alone, opens bugle-like with the words, 'Man is but carrion'. The forward propulsion is halted with, 'and scan the fearsome relic of what was once a man'; this moment of contemplation is brusquely brushed aside with a return to the bugle fanfare material.

The final section is a setting of the well-known poem by Rupert Brooke entitled *1914 V: The Soldier*. Rupert Brooke was a graduate of King's College, Cambridge and, most poignantly, he did die in a 'foreign field' on 23 April 1915. He is buried on the Greek island of Skyros. This poem was very much of its time, with its patriotic fervour, and contrasts sharply with the grim realism of Wilfred Owen's poetry. The tenor solo opens with the words, 'If I should die, think only this of me: that there's some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England.' The chorus joins in the dialogue, reprising much of the opening material, bringing the work to a peaceful and, one hopes, an optimistic conclusion.  
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The first performance of the Dulwich College commission, *Some corner of a foreign field* by Cecilia McDowall, was given by the combined choirs of Dulwich College Madrigal Choir and Chorus with the Dulwich College Concert Orchestra, Andrew Kennedy, tenor, and Richard Mayo, conductor, on 25 March 2015 at King's College Chapel, Cambridge.

## Some corner of a foreign field

1. Out of the south cometh the whirlwind; and (the) cold out of the north.  
By the breath of God frost is given: and the breadth of the waters is straitened.  
Out of whose womb came the ice and the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it? The waters are hid as with a stone, and the face of the deep is frozen.

***Job 37 v.9-10 | Job 38 v.29-30 King James Bible***

2. Man is but carrion here,  
Where his body, a poisonous clod,  
Lies rotting in an ulcer of this shell-pock'd land;

A mess of festering rags,  
From which a devil-swarm of flies  
Scorns the silent protest of his stiff, raised hand.

What hideous enervation bids me sit  
So stilly in the shelter of this pit -  
Untroubled and unperturbed - and scan  
The fearsome relic of what was once a man?

***Before Ginchy: September 1916***

Dr Joseph Spence, Master of Dulwich College,  
(after Ernest Armine Wodehouse, OA, 1879-1936)

3. If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,  
A body of England's, breathing English air,  
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,  
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;  
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,  
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

***1914 V: The Soldier***

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915)