

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].

* With additional material by Michael George

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

² John PH Frearson "The Green Room Plaque"

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

The Stage

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. 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".⁵ This thriller, written by Cecil Raleigh and Henry Hamilton, was ground-breaking in its portrayal of a train crash and a horse race, with real horses! Henry Hamilton lived at "The Haven", Sandgate from 1900 to 1918 worshipping at Holy Trinity Church, Folkestone; the parish church of the Blackall family.⁶

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

⁶ Burials Book, Folkestone Holy Trinity Church Cathedral Archives Canterbury
Folkestone, Hythe Herald, September 14, 1918



The horse race in 'The Whip'. The Drury Lane stage had a moving 'travellator', and the horses were real!
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Marriage and Sport

On 25 April 1910, by then a captain, Blackall married Alice Evelyn Foutrell Briscoe, an actress, at St Luke's Church, Chelsea. He was aged thirty four and his bride was twenty six.⁷ He retained his army commission for a time, but resigned it in 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.⁸

⁷ Marriage Reg:Q3, 1867, St George, Hanover Square, London, Middlesex, Vol:1a,611 quoted by Frearson in "The Green Room Plaque.

⁸ Folkestone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald, April 6, 1918

'THE WHIP' IS BIG, SMASHING SUCCESS

**It's Real Drury Lane Melodrama,
Full of Pictures, Thrills,
and Laughs.**

THE ACTING IS ADMIRABLE

**Marie Illington Heads Cast Which Di-
vides Honors with Sensational
Collision Scene.**

THE WHIP, a melodrama in four acts and thirteen scenes, by Cecil Raleigh and Henry Hamilton. Manhattan Opera House.
Hubert, Earl of Brancaster.....John Halliday
The Rev. Verner Haslam.....Lumsden Hare
Marquis of Beverly.....Herbert Jarman
Capt. Greville Sartoris.....Charles Blackall
Harry Anson.....Dion Titheradge
Tom Lambert.....Ambrose Manning
Joe Kelly.....John L. Shine
Sir Andrew Beck.....W. Croft
Capt. Rayner.....Horace Pollock
Lord Clanmore.....Basil West
.....Alec Fraser
Tomlin.....Joe Pender
Car, center at Tussaud's.....Peter Golden
Tom Foster.....W. Clay
Master Tomlin.....Codger Nutt
Golder.....George Zorn
The Hon. Mrs. Beamish.....Marie Illington
Lady Diana Sartoris.....Evelyn Keny
Mrs. D'Aquila.....Leonore Harris
Myrtle Anson.....Mona Morgan
Lady Antrobus.....Lillian Kellar
Miss Carlyon.....Miss Michael
Mrs. Purley.....Lois Arnold
Mrs. Tomlin.....Justine Cutting

New York Times extract

The War

In 1914 Charles Blackall returned from America for a short holiday but, with the outbreak of war, he 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

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 the villain, 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. Arthur Collins was the producer.¹⁰

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

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 unfailing 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 online having been digitised by the University of California.¹² The Folkestone local

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

¹² <http://www.archive.org/stream/songsfromtrenches00blacrich#page/n7/mode/2up>

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:

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."¹³

In 1915, Blackall 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. Twice Mentioned in Despatches, he was given command of a Cheshire battalion being gazetted Lt. Colonel. Following this, in December 1917, Blackall was appointed to command 4th Battalion South Staffordshires.

In March 1918, the battalion was in the front line at Fremicourt, near Bapaume, and faced the onslaught of the German 'Spring Offensive'. Their war diary gives an understated account of events:

¹³ Blackall, CW "Songs from the Trenches" published London, John Lane digital source:
<http://www.archiveorg/details/songsfromtrenche00blacrich> from University of California Libraries

March 1918 COURCELLES LE COMTE

1st to 12th In No. 2 Camp. Training carried on.

ACHIET LE GRAND

12th to 21st Battalion marched to RITZ CAMP, ACHIET LE GRAND. Training carried on.

21st Noon. The Battalion under Command of Lt. Col. C.W. BLACKALL marched to FREMICOURT: 'B' team remained behind, and proceeded to Corps Reinforcement Camp at ACHIET LE PETIT. 11.30 p.m. Battalion went up and dug in behind the Army Line on left of the road between BEUGNY and FREMICOURT.

FREMICOURT

22nd Remained in this line during the day.

23rd 3.00 p.m. 'C' and 'D' Coys. Formed a defensive flank on the left, 'A' and 'B' remaining in their position. At night 'C' and 'D' returned to support 'A' and 'B' who were still in the Army Line, which had now become the front line.

24th 2.0 a.m. Relieved by Battalion of 62nd Division; retire to position between FREMICOURT and BEUGNATRE and dug in there. 3.0 p.m. Reorganised in sunken road just N. of Railway Line. 6.0 p.m. Took up position in trench W. of BAPAUME - ARRAS ROAD and just S. of MONUMENT.

8.0 p.m. Retired across main road & dug in 400 yds due E. of BIENVILLERS.¹⁴

¹⁴ National Archives WO95/2583



Lt Col C W Blackall

Name	Grade	Rank	Regt. No.
BLACKALL	10 Kent R	10 Capt	
	attd 10 Staffs R		
Waller		10 Lt Col	

Medal	Roll	Page	Remarks
VICTORY	10 OFF 151	1A	
BURTON			
15th	10 OFF 151	29	
			IN X/1778 4/10/23 24 3 18
			NW/5/20561
Theatre of War first served in			France
Date of entry therein			9/10/14
6/2/20			NW/5/20867 1580

Blackall's Medal Index Card (TNA)

In fact, Colonel Blackall and his men found themselves occupying 'defences ... far from complete, and in the early hours of 21st March, 1918, those out-posts and hastily constructed strong points were subjected to the most destructive artillery barrage ever known, when 3.2 million (3,200,000) gas and high explosive shells fell on the unfortunate defenders in the opening barrage.'¹⁵

¹⁵ The Great War: The Standard History of the World-Wide Conflict' by H. W. Wilson and J. A. Hammerton, Chapter CCLV



Green Room Plaque



Folkestone Golf Club Memorial.
Photo Peter Bamford



Over the next three days the Battalion suffered heavy casualties and, on 24 March, Colonel Blackall joined the list of killed in action. As with so many victims of heavy artillery, his body was never recovered. The local Folkestone paper carried an obituary, and concluded with the words, "A lovable man with many friends, he was the last of a brilliant family of soldiers." ¹⁶

Charles Walter Blackall 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.

¹⁶ Folkestone, Hythe, Sandgate and Cheriton Herald, April 6, 1918

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