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# Christopher Chivers

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*The Kohima epitaph*

for unaccompanied mixed voices

ENCÔRE  
*publications*

for Barry Smith and the St George's Singers, Cape Town

# The Kohima epitaph

Words: attributed to  
John Maxwell Edmunds (1875-1958)

Music: CHRISTOPHER CHIVERS  
(b. 1967)

**SOPRANO** *mp* When you go

**ALTO** *mp* When you go

**TENOR** *mp* When you go

**BASS** *mp* When you go home, tell them of us, and say, \_\_\_\_\_

*for rehearsal only*

*mp*

*♩ = 55*

4 *mf* *poco accel.*

home, tell them of us, and say,

home, tell them of us, and say,

home, tell them and say,

\_\_\_\_\_ tell them and say, "For your to -

*mf* *mp*

*mf* *mp*

*poco accel.*

rit. molto rit.

“For your to-mor row we gave our to - day.”

“For your to - mor - row we gave our to - day.”

“For your to-mor - - - row we gave our to - day.”

- mor - row, your to - mor - row we gave our to - day.”

rit. molto rit.

### Note on the text and music

John Maxwell Edmonds, a Classical Scholar, who went up to Jesus College, Cambridge in 1894, and was a master at The King’s School, Canterbury, thereafter, before returning to a fellowship at Jesus and a University Lectureship in 1908, was – during the First World War – the contributor of a number of epitaphs to *The Times* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. The epitaph now bearing the title ‘Kohima’ was in fact written for a British graveyard in France. Many have thought it a translation of an ancient Greek epitaph, or at least inspired by one of Simonides, who wrote the following about the Spartan rearguard under Leonidas, who held the pass of Thermopylae against the Persians in 480BC:

Tell it in Sparta, thou that passes by  
here, faithful to her charge, her soldiers lie.

Muriel Brittain, in editing the diaries of her husband, Frederick Brittain – *Fifty years at Jesus* (2001) – points out that others wrongly attributed the epitaph to A.E. Housman, whilst Field-Marshal Lord Wavell attributed it – again incorrectly – to General Edmonds, who was a member of his staff during the Second World War. She also points out that though these ‘misattributions of authorship... and breaches of his copyright’ did not irk J.M. Edmonds unduly, he was frustrated that ‘even in the Ashendene Press edition of his epitaphs, *Twelve War Epitaphs*’, that now known as *Kohima*, was ‘misquoted’. She states that the correct version runs: When you go home, tell them of us, and say “For your tomorrows these gave their today.” It is not known who was responsible for the change to ‘for your tomorrow we gave our today’, though it has been suggested by Major General John Glover, who commanded the second division at Kohima, that the epitaph was composed by Major John Etty-Leal. I am very grateful to J. Michael Moss Esq., for drawing my attention to this ‘tale of origins’ in a letter to me dated 26 April 2004, as also to the staff of Jesus College, Cambridge, for checking the information.

When, as Canon Precentor of St George’s Cathedral, Cape Town, I found myself, in late 2000, presiding over an appeal to complete the Cathedral’s Great West Window to designs by Gabriel and Jacques Loire of Chartres – of which a central panel in memory of Earl Mountbatten of Burma had already been installed in 1982 – I turned

instinctively to the Kohima Epitaph. The new panels were to commemorate the struggle for freedom in South Africa, and the J.M. Edmonds 'Kohima' words seemed to resonate in this new context as they have so movingly resonated in relation to their original contexts, and those who also died in the cause of freedom.

When, subsequently, I took up an appointment as Precentor at Westminster Abbey, the setting that I had originally composed for an act of remembrance at the concert to initiate the appeal and the cathedral's centenary year in November 2000 – and which was at the heart of a similar act of remembrance in the service to celebrate the cathedral's centenary and the dedication of the completed Great West Window in 2009 – was a setting sung by the Abbey Choir just after the Two Minutes' Silence at the Unknown Warrior on Remembrance Sunday, and also on ANZAC Day, as at other military commemorations and services. Through the invitation of The Viscount Slim OBE DL to lodge it in the Imperial War Museum Archives and to send a copy to each branch of The Burma Star Association it became more widely known.

**Canon Chris Chivers**

London 2011

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