Edmund Blunden and the Georgian Dilemma

by Rennie Parker



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Scope of the Topic

Edmund Blunden's prose masterpiece *Undertones of War* has never been out of print since it first arrived on the bookshelves in 1928. But his poetry nearly suffered the fate of the Georgian Poet generation; men of the 1914-1918 conflict whose styles proved out of sympathy with the postwar world. Blunden fared better than most, since his career as a scholar and editor guaranteed a lasting public profile, yet he has remained a puzzling figure for contemporary readers, who are never quite sure just how 'Georgian' he was. Sometimes, he confronts the harsh realities of modern life; at other times, he appears to be in retreat from it, revelling in rich phrasing and archaic diction which seem to place him in the 'old fashioned' category when compared with the poets of the 1930's. This Bookmark aims to highlight the main issues which readers will find in his work, and illustrate why Blunden should be read and studied today.

Books to Read

Edmund Blunden, Selected Poems, ed. Robyn Marsack (Carcanet, 1982 and 1993). Currently the only selection in print, with a helpful context-setting introduction.

Notes

Edmund Charles Blunden (1896-1974) was the eldest of nine children, born to schoolteacher parents. Although he was a Londoner by birth, his family moved to Yalding in Kent during 1900, and the Kentish-Sussex landscape became his much-loved childhood home. He was a studious boy and a quick learner, winning a scholarship to Christs' Hospital in 1909 and a Classics scholarship to Queen's College Oxford in 1914, but his nascent career as an intellectual was cut short by the events of August 1914, and Blunden was commissioned into the Royal Sussex Regiment as a junior officer.

As one of the youngest and least warlike officers (only nineteen when thrown into the trenches) it is remarkable that Blunden survived the conflict intact, despite his recurring asthma. His nickname of 'Rabbit' accurately pinpoints his outwardly light and speedy manner, although this belies his inward strength and determination, which kept him alive and largely sane long after his poet contemporaries had been invalided out. In total, he spent two years on active duty, making him the longest-serving poet in the conflict.

His earliest publications date from 1914, showing a typically pre-war pastoral emphasis, although the war and its aftermath made its impact on his second full collection, *The Shepherd* (1922) which sealed his reputation as a new poet to watch. Powerful descriptions of wartime experience such as 'Third Ypres' and '1916 seen from 1921' tell us what really happened to Blunden, despite his common technique of using the dark side of country life as a metaphor for his unease about the modern world. By 1921 he felt 'Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day', aware that he would never erase some of the trench sights from his mind: 'But who with what command can now relieve/The dead men from that chaos, or my soul?'

Blunden's home life too was affected by tragedy. His first-born daughter Joy died before she was two months old in 1919, leaving another indelible mark on his creative work. Several poems such as 'A Child's Grave', 'In A Country Churchyard', and 'To Joy', show him

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continually revisiting the image of his lost child, and any mention of 'joy' in a Blunden poem should be set against the context of his real-life bereavement.

Despite working as a literary journalist, money was tight for the Blunden family, and by 1924 he was compelled to take a post offered at the Imperial University, Tokyo. The distance from home eventually contributed to the breakdown of his marriage, although Blunden's modest personality soon endeared itself to the Japanese, and a successful career resulted. He was one of the first British writers to appreciate Japan, and his teaching did much to encourage the popularity of British writers among the students and schoolteachers who were his pupils. Naturally, Japan made an appearance in his poetry, and some of these later poems - 'The Daimyo's Pond' and 'The Author's Last Words to his Students' - are popular anthology pieces.

Blunden continued to publish poetry until the mid-1960's, although his style was regarded as unfashionable by the critics who informed artistic tastes after 1945. But the continued interest in first world war literature means that his work has never disappeared, particularly as *Undertones* often includes the poetry as a supplement after the main text. Apart from periods in the Far East, Blunden became a Fellow in English at Merton College, Oxford, ending his long tutoring career as Professor of Poetry, 1966-1968. A brief second marriage was succeeded by a third and successful liaison, which produced four daughters; and he retired to Long Melford in Suffolk, where he died at the age of 77.

In his lifetime, Blunden was celebrated for bringing John Clare's work to a wider public in 1921. Along with his colleague Alan Porter, Blunden beavered long and hard in literary archives to establish Clare as a major figure from the Romantic age. He would repeat this act alongside composer Gerald Finzi in 1954, producing the first selection of poetry by Ivor Gurney - a wartime contemporary of Blunden's, who had lived for fifteen years in an asylum (see Bookmark no.51). He was also an early advocate of Wilfred Owen. Blunden's biography and criticism, which includes works on the Romantics besides Thomas Hardy and Henry Vaughan, is from the age of the gentleman scholar; respectful and sometimes ornate, but always with the general reader in mind. Students of Shelley could do a lot worse than read his popular biography, *Shelley: A Life Story*, first published by Collins in 1946.

Blunden's connection to the 'Georgian poets'(1) was tenuous from the outset - he only appeared in one of their official anthologies, *Georgian Poetry 1920-1922*. Unfortunately this was widely criticized as the worst volume in the series, and no more anthologies were produced; but the pattern was set. Blunden was perceived as a Georgian whether he liked it or not. To some extent, he had brought this situation upon himself, but his comments show that he never aligned himself with the Georgians, and he found the label annoying. When an early poem 'The Almswomen' became a popular benchmark for the Georgian style, he felt misrepresented in print, and he resented its success: 'Why should all my poems be neglected in order that 'Almswomen' may abound?' (Webb, p.115). He was still at school when the movement began; he did not arrive on the poetry 'scene' until 1920, and by this point the Georgian game was up.

Blunden's source material - the years in Yalding and his subsequent lodgings in Suffolk with his first wife Mary Daines - meant that he often sounded too Georgian for his own good. Here were the rustics and the folklore, the rich natural descriptions and the retreat from city life. But Blunden knew the countryside intimately, and he was aware that reality, not escapism, is what the poet should portray. He describes poverty and superstition, lack of opportunities, fear, and domestic disaster. In 'A Country Sale' (*English Poems*, 1925) bankrupt householders are forced to sell all their belongings; in 'At Rugmer' Blunden observes a cold and brown-tinted scene, admitting: '...But we have lived this landscape/And have an understanding with these shades'. Compare this with a typical statement from John Drinkwater, a born townie and arch-Georgian: 'A little land of mellowed ease/I find beyond my broken gate'(2). While for Blunden an involvement with the countryside means a closeness to danger and death, for Drinkwater it means escape and elevation, rarely encountering the bad weather and loneliness which Blunden expects.

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Poetic styles were revolutionised during the Edwardian and Georgian periods, with several brands of modernism competing for magazine space in literary London. Seen alongside Pound or DH Lawrence, Blunden would indeed seem like a throwback, with his measured rhythms and attention to form giving the impression that he paid little attention to his contemporaries. Yet Blunden uses free verse whenever his subjects need it: see, for instance, 'Into the Salient', which uses a clipped, expressionist manner also found in the war poetry of Herbert Read, or the leisurely way in which he describes 'A Japanese Evening', showing us a range of responses as he explains the English language to his hosts:

> Moon.
> He has got it; right first time,
> But not the next.
> Moooni.

In addition to free verse experiments, he would adopt a plain journalistic style when confronting episodes from the Western Front. Usually, he takes the lead from his great friend Siegfried Sassoon, involving direct speech and sarcasm in his armoury of tricks: 'But if you ask me, mate, the choice of colour/Is scarcely right; this red should have been much duller'.(3)

Even where Blunden seems wholeheartedly in Georgian mode, there is always something lurking round the corner. In 'The Pike', (from *The Waggoner*, 1920) we are made aware of incipient violence: 'The great pike lies, the murderous patriarch/ Watching the waterpit sheer-shelving dark'. In this poem, the relaxed, countrified start (complete with trees as 'moss-green bastions of the wier') works up to a climax where the verse-form changes suddenly to depict the energetic thrashing of the pike. While Blunden did not originate any verse forms and he avoided extremes in experimentation, his brilliant command of cadence and rhythm meant that he never united the wrong subjects to the wrong forms. Above all, his enjoyment of rhyming verse meant that folk-based poetry went with a real swing; see 'Concert Party, Busseboom' for a lively poem which carries a sting in the final stanza.

While other Georgians were content to observe the natural world, Blunden tends to use pastoral conventions for specific ends. This is beautifully demonstrated in 'Rural Economy, 1917', where the image of war and death is personified as a careful farmer: 'The sower was the ploughman too/And iron seeds broadcast he threw'. In fact, the farmer was so talented that 'The field and wood, all bone-fed loam/Shot up a roaring harvest-home'. Our historical hindsight gives added depth to this image; the fields of Picardy and Flanders are exactly as fertile as Blunden imagined, and farmers still plough up artefacts and corpses from the period.

Blunden's other outstanding feature is his use of irony, a trait which aligns him more firmly with modern poets. Time after time, images of safety are undercut with the realisation that things are not as they appear, where the 'bright bewildering green' looks 'Like a kindly meant lie' ('The Sunlit Vale'). When irony is linked with his manipulation of archaic words and ideas within a poem, it becomes a powerful tool for showing the folly of war. 'Treasure not so the forlorn days', he begins in 'Behind the Line', telling himself to forget the times when waiting troops 'grappled fear with drink'. Even though 'kindly Mirth' (capitalised like an out-of-date Classical deity) may 'raise his glass', Blunden and his war-damaged contemporaries are now oblivious to good cheer, 'muttering on/Over the shades of shadows gone'. In these circumstances, Mirth is impotent, like an outworn concept.

This poem has an added level of irony in that Blunden's note (included in the Taylor Overtones collection) implies that survivors of the conflict found peace-time more puzzling and unfamiliar than the war. For a different use of irony, see 'The Prophet', an entertaining free-verse poem which contrasts statements from an ancient guidebook with the poet's knowledge of the same landscape under siege. Two narratives run in tandem, with an

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unwitting 17th century writer informing Blunden's view of the present, being at once a genial companion and a comic foil for the poet's realism.

His use of archaic forms and literary sourcing reaches its peak in 'Third Ypres', a narrative poem where Blunden's learning informs the contents instead of laying heavily on the subject matter, as one might expect. Here, inverted word-order is always used to point out something false, ironic or tragic about the situation he is in; 'they move not back' says imaginary 'faith' with a pitying smile (l.20), knowing that the mentioned troops cannot move because they are dead. 'So shouting dug we' he writes earlier (l.12) aware (with hindsight) that their joyful preparations are largely pointless in view of the enemy bombardment they are about to receive. Echoes from Shakespeare and Marlowe also figure largely in this poem, giving soldiers the status and dignity of literature's great heroes. As usual, Blunden is not content to display his wide learning; it must be broken down and re-formed to bring new dimensions into his subject matter.

Undertones of War is one of several influential prose works arising from the 1914-1918 period, along with Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That*, and Frederic Manning's *Her Privates We*. It was written several years after the Armistice, while Blunden was engaged on his lectureship in Tokyo. With money and career troubles temporarily at an end, he was allowed a certain amount of Wordsworthian recollection in tranquillity, giving the text its overall impression of artistic polish and consideration. Images are used and developed, rather than briefly passed over as he hurries us on through the book; even his chapter headings are carefully placed in opposition, with 'The Calm' followed by 'The Storm', and 'Backwaters' by 'The Cataracts'. Naturally, it wouldn't be Blunden without a literary overlay; and so he leads us on like Dante's Virgil, taking us deeper into the circles of Hell until the heaviest attacks are upon his company and their deaths seem inevitable: 'We should all die, presumably, round Ypres' (chapter XXII).

Despite this, Blunden characteristically shows us more than one viewpoint. He is quick to mention the remaining beauty of the countryside, and he even discovers enjoyment in marching, finding the movement exhilarating and poetic. And it is surprising how matter of fact he is too, stopping readers in their tracks with his frank descriptions of bodies and trapped soldiers who cannot be saved, a single eye found under a duckboard, and a pair of feet still inside a dumped pair of boots. His intention is always to show us what it was like - and with this aim in mind, he rarely depicts himself in any detail. He acts like the window or the viewfinder through which we experience his terrible world. It is not so much 'Blunden' as 'Everyman', while his corresponding tolerance and admiration for his fellow soldiers serves to highlight themes of comradeship and community, as opposed to relentless tragedy and waste.

His self-description as 'a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat' (chapter XXVII) is therefore a multi-layered image, not such a hangover from Georgian poetics - as well as being a pastoral poet in uncompromising conditions, the shepherd Blunden was also a leader of similarly harmless men, trying to bring them safely through a war. The 'real' Blunden had responsibility and duties, whereas the literary Blunden is an objective eye, playing down his own achievements so that the men he 'shepherded' might flourish in our imaginations. Re-interpretations of pastoral imagery are always possible with an author like Blunden, who knew as much about the manipulation of literary styles as his modernist contemporaries. Subsequent readings of *Undertones* allow further levels to be discovered, for example, trench humour and a sly criticism of authority.

Although Blunden adjusted to the twentieth century and led an active, even colourful private life, he was always conscious of the dark shadow which war had cast across him. In an anthology produced one year before his death, he wrote: 'my experiences in the First World War have haunted me all my life and for many days I have, it seemed, lived in that world rather than this.'(4) Fortunately for his readers, that haunting had enabled a body of work which stands among the finest literature produced during a period of unprecedented change.

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1. A new movement in poetry, began by arts patron Eddie Marsh and poet Rupert Brooke in 1911, intended as a reaction against late Victorian heaviness. Characterised by a return to naturalistic speech and a love of the British countryside - although soon hijacked by sentimentalists with nothing to say, which angered journalists and war poets alike.
2. Drinkwater, 'The Broken Gate' from *Poems 1908-1914*.
3. 'Vlamertinghe: Passing the Chateau, July 1917'. Blunden contrasts a flower-garden with tributes for the dead.
4. Quoted in Taylor, *Overtones*, p.32.

Further reading:

Edmund Blunden, Barry Webb (Yale, 1995). A standard biography, detailed and comprehensive; essential for anyone who is studying the period.
Edmund Blunden: Overtones of War: Poems of the First World War, ed. Martin Taylor (Duckworth, 1996). The complete war poems, annotated and introduced with a critical essay.
Undertones of War, Edmund Blunden (Collins, 1964; many other editions available, including a Penguin paperback). The First World War in Blunden's own words, fusing lyrical language with the horror of life in the trenches.

A new selection is in preparation, ed. Margi Blunden and Rennie Parker, to be published by Laurel Books: for details, see www.laurelbooks.co.uk.

There is a website about Blunden: www.edmundblunden.org.

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