

Edmund Blunden and First World War Writing 1919-36

Edmund Blunden is one of the most interesting voices of the literature following the Great War. His front-line memories haunted him. In contrast to the restrained, almost pastoral quality of his celebrated war memoir *Undertones of War* (1928) (1), as a critic his tone was frequently far from calm. It took years for him to reach equilibrium after his shattering experience in the First World War. Nonetheless, he had a good eye and pierced the dishonest and second-rate in the mountain of recollection, poetry and fiction from that era. Blunden's letters to his friend Siegfried Sassoon provide an illuminating commentary on this genre of literature. A reader looking for the elusive 'Truth about the War' will find a valuable guide in Blunden's views throughout this correspondence, despite some exaggeration.

Their friendship began early in May 1919, when Blunden, aged 22, wrote to thank Sassoon 'for your great efforts throughout the war to bring the ferocity of the trenches home to a public more disturbed about rations than Passchendaele.' (2) Encouraged by Sassoon's friendly reply, in his next letter he gave him an account of his war career: He had joined the army in August 1915, straight from his school, Christ's Hospital, 'in a state of singular misery,' then had gone out to France, in May 1916, with the 11th battalion, the Royal Sussex Regiment. 'I was stigmatised with the usual ribbon [the Military Cross] in 1916, and for a few weeks was on Brigade H.Q., but my free speech secured my return to the less disgusting front line, where I kept people's spirits up by letting loose any hope of returning world sanity that I could collect. Your sonnets and the excerpts in the CAMBRIDGE MAG: were the principal joy-beams.'

Sent home to 'rest,' he had missed the campaigns of 1918 (which made him feel guilty for deserting his battalion). Having married during the war, he explained to Sassoon, he now had a family to support. He was about to take up a scholarship to Oxford but would soon have to earn his living as a literary journalist. He revealed that his main interest was in writing 'a sort of introspective war book called "THE INNOCENT ABROAD."' (3) This was to become his masterpiece *Undertones of War*.

A strong mutual dependence grew up between the two men. Both had been in the trenches and both shared a common literary language, a love of pastoral poetry, and the English countryside, for the English tradition in learning and letters—and, not least, for cricket. Each had a mixed reaction to his experience. To both, the war had been an obscene tragedy, the pointless sacrifice of millions of young lives. They now were quietists, who had set their face against the crude nationalism of the war years. Sassoon indeed had felt so bitter against those running the war that he had made his celebrated attempt in 1917 to

resign his commission, and for a period after the war took a part in the English Peace Movement. Blunden too was later to add his voice to a last-minute effort to stop England becoming involved in a second world war. (4)

At the same time they were proud of their experience which had been for them a kind of fulfillment. All his life, Blunden kept up friendships with ex-soldiers in his battalion, attended their annual reunions and returned to his former battlefields in France and Flanders. He had a deep-seated tendency to cleave to institutions. He may have been a less than punctilious soldier in matters of dress and correct 'form,' just as he had been a sometimes inattentive scholar at Christ's Hospital. Yet he worked hard to carry out his duties, had been brave, dependable and alert as an officer—as formerly he had been a keen and original pupil. In both cases his devotion persisted to the end of his days. (5) Nonetheless, there were many things he had found irksome and inhuman about army life; and there was for him too the forever unanswered question: 'What good came of it at last?'—the 'one natural question which little Wilhelmine posed old Kaspar, and which stared up from so many slimy eyes in the grey, gory, mephitic shellholes of the Somme.' (6)

Sassoon was much the same—a model officer when it came to sympathetic concern for the men in his charge and to showing an example of exceptional courage (he had the MC and bar). Yet he revolted against the correctitude conventionally expected of officers and treated the petty aspects of army life in cavalier fashion, which reflected both his confident country gentleman's upbringing and a touch of the 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators' arrogance about him. (7)

Still less than the innocent and scholarly Blunden, can Sassoon be regarded as a 'typical' soldier—recklessly courageous, homosexual, belligerent, pacific, poetical, fox-hunting, passionate, confused, egotistical, altruistic—he fits into no large category. Which is only to say that it is unwise to treat his anti-war poetry as the voice of the common soldier. However his verses were widely appreciated by other soldiers and some of the contradictions in him were ones found, in a much less extreme form, in many.

Even after fifteen years of peace, constant references to the war are conspicuous in their correspondence. When writing of other matters, Blunden would often use war imagery in a facetious and fanciful way: 'Into this languid current, your large envelope fell with a splash like a 5.9 in the Ancre,' he wrote to Sassoon in 1926. (8) In a sadder mood, when his marriage was on the rocks, he told him: 'I am almost all in & if I were in Albert shld feel less muddled.' (9).

On 24 August 1924, he reflected: 'Autumn in the

evening & the morning now, and I can't keep the war out—10 years ago the deluge, & no doubt if it was 100 the character of the Somme scenery & those British attempts & works would still be distinct. Some good must have come of it; but what a price! 10 years is not long.'(10)

From Japan, where he went as Professor of English Literature from 1924-27, he mused: 'I can still smell shelling, & chloride of lime.... Sometimes a sausage balloon hanging over Tokyo gives me an awkward feeling. The great question is, could we stand a year or two of Flanders now? I often think I could not.'(11)

Blunden had definite views on war writing. Above all it had to be truthful in detail and in spirit. Inaccuracies infuriated him, and he loathed sensationalism or sentimentality. He expected evocative writing, with 'turns of phrase which must be remorselessly selected to define and perpetuate those unique events.' Though liking its directness, he felt that a limitation of Max Plowman's humane and balanced *Subaltern on the Somme* (1927) was that it lacked that kind of literary power.(12) For him, too, an absence of detail meant an absence of atmosphere. This was, he admitted, particularly important to those who had actually been through the war: 'We have heard it urged that geographical accuracy of allusion is unnecessary in these retrospects of war experience. Our remembrance is that soldiers always retained very clearly in mind the places at which their unit had been, and their pleasant or unpleasant associations. Such localisation implies an intensity of moods towards the war; its absence will perplex the reader whose Flanders is burnt into his consciousness with all its ancient and modern names. Mention Meaulte, or Sere, or Station Road—and he begins to kindle.'(13)

Though some complained that in *Undertones of War* he underplayed the horrors, he was far from objecting to a recital of the terrible sides of war: In a March 1928 review, he called for a book on Passchendaele worthy of that grim episode: 'To look over the frozen and snowy Ypres battlefield at midnight on the last day of 1917 was to find that one hardly had any feelings left. This chapter in the annihilating of any army's faith, this long and grotesquely cadaverous chapter, awaits an author. He should have the hand of a skeleton and scrawl in muck on one of those rolls of paper that are required by daily journals with million circulations.'(14)

Even so, however 'anti-war' a book might be, Blunden felt deeply that it should never be contemptuous of front-line companionship, loyal self-sacrifice, or courage in battle. He also disliked coarseness, which has laid him open to the charge that he refused to face the realities of war in all its facets.

Finally he was sceptical of those, with limited experience of the front, pronouncing on it—such as the poet Robert Nichols, who went out of the line with shell-shock after a month. Still more he resented non-veterans passing judgements on the war—such as 'that damned dodger,'

Middleton Murray, who had stayed, in Blunden's view, safely away from the front as a conscientious objector. 'How different it is,' Blunden wrote, 'when a B.E.F. man speaks of war, and when, say, Raymond Mortimer does.'(15) Even more vehemently he accused the non-combatant Rudyard Kipling of choosing to ignore the real misery of war in his *The Irish Guards in The Great War*.(16)

He had reservations, bordering on dislike, about the work of Henry Williams on, though the latter shared his view of Kipling's volume.(17) Williamson, who never really recovered from his wartime service, had by 1928 made a considerable reputation as the author of *The Flax of Dream* (1921-29)(18), the lyrical novel sequence about a tragic Shellean war veteran, and of *Tarks of the Otter* (1927) (19), the imaginary account of an otter's life in North Devon. Blunden frequently complained to Sassoon about 'Mr. Tarkative Williamson,' whom he listed among his more over-voluble and intrusive acquaintances.(20) Williamson was obsessive, opinionated, and keen to enlist fellow war veterans in a kind of (eventually fascist) brotherhood of minds. His natural history writing was first-rate; and the brilliant war scenes in his much later novel series written in the 1950s, *The Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, were praised by one of the Great War's foremost authors, Richard Aldington, as absolutely authentic in all their details.(22) *The Flax of Dream* volumes, however, though they have charm and beauty, are undeniably sentimental and histrionic—as Williamson himself came to feel, though he remained fond of them. It is easy to see why Blunden was irritated by Williamson's writings, as he was by his personality. He considered them imaginatively dishonest; in *The Flax of Dream*, Williamson over-romanticised the leading character, whose death was pure melodrama.

Williamson became something of a joke between Sassoon and Blunden. When Williamson's reminiscence of the War, *The Wet Flanders Plain*, appeared in 1929 (22), Blunden showed clearly that he was prejudiced against it from the start. This may have been partly because of Williamson's pugnacious criticisms of *Undertones of War* for being too underplayed, compared with works by Owen, Barbusse and others.(23) *The Wet Flanders Plain* was very characteristic of the Williamson of that period (didactic, self-pitying and anti-patriotic) whilst celebrating the war as an enlarging experience. In fact, however, the divided nature of Williamson's reactions to the war was not altogether dissimilar from Sassoon's or Blunden's. Blunden fired off a satirical verse to Sassoon:

The Wet Flanders Plain
Although I haven't read it
Produces an anticipative pain.
I have a tear & am prepared to shed it—
O how the bombs will roar,

The cannons grumble,
 The A.S.C. one mask of gore
 Through shot & shell will stumble:
 The most abysmal orgies will be staged
 In grim estaminets....
 O wasted Youth!
 O aeons! O fierce Company Commanders!
 O dreadful epithets—O the True Truth
 Speeding with windy Williamson through
 Flanders.' (24)

As is well known, Robert Graves's autobiographical *Goodbye to All That* (25) failed the Blunden test badly. Blunden had been a great admirer of Graves' poems and, until his war memoir was published, had continued to believe in his essential strength as a writer—'his timbers yet are sound'—though he had disliked his moving into Freudian interpretations of life and literary inspiration during the 1920s: 'When will he break out into poetic blossoms again?' 'Wouldn't he be more potent if he stopped thinking about bardism and bards, lift wings and displaced rhythms for a season?' he asked Sassoon in July 1927.(26) At the same time he nursed an underlying resentment against his old friend Graves for his tactless intervention in Blunden's marriage, when Graves had pointed out the incompatibilities between Blunden and his wife. Blunden might, he had suggested, 'look round for a more suitable companion.' Graves slipped compulsively into a moralising mode in his letters, pointing out his friend's weaknesses, teasing him in heavy fashion about what he saw as his obsession with John Clare's poetry. Despite genuine fondness, he could not strike the right note with Blunden, who was in too vulnerable a state to tolerate his heavy-footed advice, though grateful for Graves' generous review of *Undertones of War*, in December 1928.(28)

The appearance of Graves' *Goodbye to All That* revived all Blunden's earlier grievances, not least because he was close to a divorce from his wife. He was sent an advance copy of 'RG's reminiscental neuroses' and wrote a frantic letter to Sassoon in November 1929, knowing how upset he must be about the tone of Graves' claims to have rescued Sassoon from the consequences of publicly resigning his commission:

'I don't think a worse book was ever flung together. His unreliability, obvious in all passages where I was able to test him from my own information, destroys his war scenes. His self-importance and cold use and slaughter of others ruin the possible solace of a personality. He may recover one day, but quem deus vult perdere.... If R. Nichols was in France 4 weeks, what about R's legal foothold? [this was unfair: Graves had been in severe trench fighting from April 1915 to July 1916, though it is true that the canvas of him work

implies a longer acquaintance with the front.] The bombastic & profit-seeking display of your private affairs must, I suppose, have been still worse?'

Blunden's copy of the book was soon full of his angry comments, 'but I expect other & more destructive markings will be made, when it is published,' he told Sassoon, 'by those whose privacy he insults and whose affairs he misrepresents.' Reading 'this slop bucket,' with its 'trivial sensationalisms,' 'coarseness' and 'cruelty,' he professed himself amazed at Graves' insensitivity: 'Even now, R. must be oblivious of the effect that he makes. For I suppose that it was at his request that Cape sent me an advance copy? & that the hope was that I should hail the masterpiece....' (30)

He was incensed by the publicity that attended the book and the repeated appearances of 'von Rubberneck' in the press: 'I see that in the "Herald" dithy ramb he invokes you,' he told Sassoon on 18 December, 'per a poem of your 1917 purpose, in support of his general blasphemy against the B.E.F. He doesn't realise that you were pointing out the strain of war, and he was merely sensation-mongering.'(31)

When he finally got off an indignant review of 'Ronuk's Red Herrings,' 'this thing in book's clothing,' this 'budget of contraceptives and jockey's colours,' to *Time and Tide*, he professed to be pleased to have 'stung the pachydermatous R.' Blunden told Sassoon that he thought a copy of Graves' book should be placed in the British Museum with annotations by the two of them, and by anyone else who was critical. Unfortunately they never acted on this interesting suggestion. (32)

The only book that angered Blunden quite as much as *Goodbye to All That* was Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (33), which was widely taken to be, at last, 'the Truth about the War' and which still is so regarded by many. 'What can exceed the arrogance of an ignorant reviewer?' he wrote to Sassoon: "It supercedes all previous histories & renders all later histories superfluous." He can't have heard of S.S. Which. Owen, Montague, Liveing, the Australian War History, the Secret Battle, &c&c.' (34)

What enraged Blunden first about *All Quiet on the Western Front* was the book's inaccuracy. There is indeed good reason to suspect that Remarque's war experience was very limited, though the point of the book is more what it tells of the psychological effect of the war on those who had no pre-war life beyond schooldays, than about the actual nature of army service. For Blunden, however, the book was too dishonest to be treated with respect: 'A precise analysis of Remarque's million-sale mixture is almost enough to justify another war,' he began to Sassoon, in his most hectic vein, giving thereafter a detailed list of absurdities. These seemed to him a sure indicator of Remarque's mendacity.

'P.31, R. "kneads" a pair of boots for twenty hours

with intervals of course & “scrubs out the Corporals’ Mess with a toothbrush” &c &c. The German army must have been all mad. P.32 Himmelstoss reports R. for an excusable incident but p.33 for an outrage he doesn’t. P.34 they obey orders with deliberate slowness. A crime, but H. only “became desperate”....p.62 The prophetic Kat, “there’ll be a bombardment” But already the air (p.61) is full of the smoke of the guns”—they must have been very old guns. I don’t remember smoke, do you? A moment of flames and sparks per shot.. It’s dark, but our ‘our faces change imperceptibly’ (!)...in every face “can be read” &c.....p.150: We see soldiers run with their two feet cut off”.....’

‘I refuse to worry you any more with this piddling lying rubbish,” Blunden concluded. ‘It’s not only that the book doesn’t hang together in details. The whole thing is devoid of a sense of anybody’s good or evil except three or four self-confessed rascals. There is never an Army, or a Europe, or a Regiment even, in the story: humanity is considered as merely a blank, & these skrimshankers take the credit for the entire war experience and thought of all the nations.....O Siegfried, how gladly would I have had Remarque on a little pack-drill early one morning....’(35)

Even if Blunden’s judgements on Graves were hardly objective, and if his views on Remarque went against majority opinion, they should not be dismissed lightly. He certainly had an eye for first-rate works: It is interesting that he was not put off by Richard Aldington’s bitter *Death of a Hero* (1929) (36), despite the book’s sensational reputation. Its apparently misogynistic outlook, which shocked many, may well have fitted with his own mood as a ‘wronged’ husband at the time. He praised the book for ‘its excellent fury,’ pointing out that in the powerful, understated Western Front passages, which are some of the finest in English war literature, ‘his bombardments etc. are real,’ unlike Remarque’s.(37) Blunden also condemned an incompetent review in the *Nation and Athenaeum*, which had dismissed Frederic Manning’s moving novel about the Somme battle, *Her Privates We*, as a ‘naïf and well-meaning’ adventure story. It was in fact, he had rightly pointed out, ‘a lively and indeed a very powerful work with plenty of trench truth in every chapter’—though, he thought, ‘marred by the literal reports of B.E.F. bad language.’(38)

In December 1920, Blunden invited Sassoon to meet a friend of his, Edward Liveing (39), whose book *Attack* (1918)(40) described in plain, unemotional, but highly effective language, the hellish attack on Gommecourt on July 1st 1916, the first day of the great British Somme offensive. Liveing’s book had received little recognition.

Another war author of high quality whom Blunden picked out for Sassoon was R.H. Mottram, the Norfolk bank official who had served on the Western Front chiefly in a liaison role. His prize-winning *Spanish Farm Trilogy* (41), a detached and detailed novel sequence, looking at the war in the context of 20th century British history, was

again the kind of authoritative work which attracted Blunden. Mottram, Blunden told Sassoon, ‘had a way of getting to know the country & the people which few of us had equipment of leisure to approach’ (42). Blunden was so struck by ‘The Flower of Battle’, ‘a strange yet simple poem’ by Mottram in the January 1926 *London Mercury*, that he sent him a letter, to find that he had been writing verse for twenty-six years. ‘It’s excellent,’ wrote Blunden, ‘that he has at last found his subject, & his audience.’(43)

Blunden was equally moved by the poetry of Herbert Read, who had been an early critic of the war (from 1916), and whose very distinguished war career rivalled Sassoon’s. Blunden had read Read’s volume *Naked Warriors* (1919) and other later poems which went into the collection of his poetry published in 1925: ‘I ...was deeply stirred,’ Blunden told Sassoon. ‘Will he not give us something more? he has “simply set me yearning.”’(44)

Most important of all to Blunden was Wilfred Owen, and he was deeply grateful to Sassoon for encouraging him to produce the definitive edition of Owen’s works, a scholar’s task to which Blunden was well suited. The appearance of the book, towards the end of 1931, was both crucial for public understanding of the war and in itself a major literary event. (45)

A discovery of Blunden’s, again through Sassoon, was Captain J.C. Dunn M.C., the fabled R.A.M.C. doctor attached to the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers, Graves’ and Sassoon’s battalion. Dunn had compiled a meticulous chronicle of the battalion, constructed from accounts given by dozens of veterans who had served with it, including Sassoon. The aim was to recreate ‘a war the infantry knew’—to draw an authentic picture while ruthlessly eliminating unverifiable material, excluding any sensational tone, avoiding caricature and at the same time not letting it become too remote and impersonal. In other words, with the aid of diverse voices, he was trying to achieve most of the constituents of a great war novel—truth in detail, vividness and authenticity of atmosphere, and balance in the telling of a tragic, inspiring and not always cheerless story. Dunn’s compilation had been largely ignored by the regimental historians to whom he had offered it when a battalion history was being planned. Disappointed, he sent the manuscript to Sassoon, who handed on portions of it to Blunden. Blunden was impressed by Dunn’s ability to stand outside the action without losing his sense of what it had been like:

‘It is altogether the most remarkable history of a battalion I have seen, whether one judges it by the general shape of the narrative or the particular,’ he told Sassoon; ‘the way in which at the time the writer was able to view Western Front matters is admirable...The many kinds of interest wh. Dunn found in the battalion & its experiences obtain my vote. Those things which in base distortionists like Remarque merely fester have here a sort of brightness.... What admirable help the other survivors have given...The strength and leadership of the whole thing

explain to me why I still feel an exile from a world of real values.' (46) He was right about Dunn's manuscript, which, published in 1938 as *The War the Infantry Knew* (47), was indeed one of the best accounts of the war to appear.

He was passionately keen the book should come out, not least because he felt it was the most effective answer to Remarque, and still more, Graves. Dunn did indeed dispute many of the points in *Goodbye to All That*. Blunden passed on Dunn's views to Sassoon with the words: 'The more I read the more I was convinced of his being the B.E.F. Recorder.' (48)

He also welcomed the pamphlet by the right-wing polemicist and former Naval Brigade officer Douglas Jerrold, *The Lie About the War* (1930), which was intended as a counterblast to Remarque, Graves and other 'disenchanted' writings; but while Blunden praised its vigour and essential rightness, he felt it was a bit overdone: 'It seemed rather like a statement that people are silly not to have wars all the time, so "dam friendly they are," dangers rare, death only where you're silly enough to get killed, etc.' Works such as Jerrold's, in his view, were only necessary when so many distortions of the truth were being published. (49)

Blunden's work as a reviewer for the *Nation* had brought him, soon after the First World War, into contact with its literary editor H.M. Tomlinson, one of the foremost essayists of his day. A rugged figure who had spent much of his life sailing in different parts of the world, Tomlinson had been at the Western Front as a journalist from 1914, serving as official correspondent at General Headquarters of the British Armies in France from 1915-17. Eventually he had lost his job because he was unwilling to gloss over the truth. Weatherbeaten and bald, Tomlinson was more than twenty years older than Blunden, but became a close friend, though not as close as did his less successful brother Philip Tomlinson, who had been in the infantry during the war. Blunden's debt to Henry Tomlinson, however, was very great. Both 'HMT' and Massingham, the *Nation's* editor, were solicitous about the health of their indefatigable and highly-strung young reviewer.

Obsession with the war as well as anxieties about his marriage had pushed Blunden to the verge of nervous collapse by the autumn of 1921, and his two editors took it on themselves to arrange a sea voyage for him on a cargo boat. 'There you are, outward bound and southward ho!' wrote Tomlinson to Blunden, recalling an occasion long ago when he himself had taken ship to South "America in a steamer (subsequently sunk in the war)" and had pitied those who had not his lick. 'Now it is your turn. Make the most of it. It will do something to take away the taste of Stuff Trench.' With his characteristic brand of nautical heartiness, he urged him never to forget that a ship's master 'is a greater man than a colonel,' (50) Even so, or perhaps because of this, on the boat, Blunden continued to

have disturbing recollections of the war:

'They come unbidden, and when they will come, the mind is led by them as birds are said to be lured by the serpent's eye. A tune, a breath of sighing air—and there goes the foolish ghost back to Flanders.' (50)

Yet if he failed to rid Blunden of his obsession, Tomlinson's literary influence on him was important. Blunden considered 'HMT's' war memoir, *Illusion 1915* (52), a model of how one should write about the subject. 'He is the best prose writer alive,' he told Sassoon. Other examples of Tomlinson's 'vivid and comprehensive writing' (53) on the war appeared in his collections of short pieces, *Waiting For Daylight* (1922) and *Old Junk*—which was first published in 1918 at the request of a friend in the Guards who was killed before it appeared. It was re-issued by Jonathan Cape in 1927.

Old Junk consisted of vignettes and meditations, set on the high seas, in Africa, in wartime England and on the Western Front. At their best, his war recollections were poetical and powerful, evoking such scenes as a ruined village in Picardy; or a division on the march in France; or a platform in January 1918 crowded with silent soldiers returning to the front.

The tone was somber, and wistful; above all—and this was the main impression conveyed by his memoir *Illusion*—there was the sense that the whole war had the quality of a bad dream; real it may have been—very real to those who fought and were loyal to one another and who had a knowledge that no one else could share; yet at the same time it was not the ordinary, same world. When pages of a copy of *Pickwick* blew off a soldier's cartload of possessions into the author's path; when he came across a corn chandler's ledger on the Somme, with its list of customers in all the surrounding villages, Tomlinson had a glimpse of the solid universe that the war had displaced:

'It was not easy to understand it, my knowledge of those places being what it was. Those villages did not exist, except as corruption in a land that was tumbled into waves of glistening clay where the bodies of men were rotting disregarded like those of dogs sprawled on a midden.... Yet amid all the misery and horror of the Somme, with its shattering reminder of finality and futility at every step whichever way you turned, that ledger in the road, with none to read it, was the gospel promising that life should rise again....' (54)

These writings were a crucial inspiration to Edmund Blunden. This was the tone of voice he used repeatedly in *Undertones of War*, the book he dedicated to 'H.M. T's' brother Philip Tomlinson. It was partly from Tomlinson, who knew the trenches only as a correspondent, not as a fighter, that Blunden learnt the measured style for which his own book is famous—and not at all that of his agitated letters to Sassoon. Often in his books, Tomlinson adopted

a jocular, knowing manner. This was common enough among Tomlinson's generation of writers, probably through the pervasive influence of Meredith: C.E. Montague, Oliver Onions and Rudyard Kipling (all older war authors) had it. It was not wholly absent from Blunden's work and bespoke an old-fashioned quality in him.

Occasionally, however, he could be critical of "HMT"'s writing. Tomlinson's most ambitious work, *All Our Yesterdays*, which took a long view of the decline of Britain's power and confidence between the years 1900 and 1918, was marred by some irritating tricks of style, though it contained eloquent and impressive passages. Tomlinson spent three years on his well-publicized novel, which he hoped would make him a good deal of money. He described to Blunden how he worked on it: 'The wife clears a room for me. Assembles divisional histories, trench maps, biographies, diaries, & an old gas-helmet. Then I close my eyes (a glass of old brandy beside me) & try to See it All again. For I've got to do It. Under orders! It's up in the orders of the day. Pray for me.' (55)

All Our Yesterdays appeared in 1930 when the war-book fashion was at its height. Though clever and thoughtful, it was far less effective than, for example, his essay 'On Leave' in *Old Junk*... which eloquently highlighted the gulf between those who had been at the Front and those who stayed behind. Blunden, loyal though he was, could not conceal his disappointment with *All Our Yesterdays*: 'Admirable in all his pictures,' he told Sassoon, 'a little halting between autobiography & a tale' (56)—the fact that Tomlinson had temporarily abandoned the essay form, his real forte, in favour of what he and his family expected would be a more saleable literary product, accounted largely for this being a much less satisfactory work than his shorter pieces.

In Tomlinson's correspondence with Blunden, the war was a constant topic: As late as June 1955 'HMT' was still reminiscing to his friend in tones that recall Blunden's letters to Sassoon: 'O what changes, beyond the sight of the best seers, have come about since that eerie August of 1914! The first day of that month I alighted from my suburban train at Charing X & lo, a train full of Frenchmen at one platform, & another loaded with Germans & Austrians (these were cheering happily) at another. I noticed that the Frenchmen were silent. It was a lovely morning, & for a wonder I didn't know what to think, there was but a wild & dreadful surmise. I turned away from the "Daily News" office. O, Edmund, since that

morning! Dear God! And I was 82 last week. And no peace yet.' (57)

Blunden's observations, particularly to Sassoon, are a valuable commentary on the First World War literature of his time. Though his private remarks were frequently intemperate, there was a core of sound judgement, all the more worthy of respect because it was personal to him and not influenced by current trends. Henry Williamson, a contemporary with a usually good critical eye, later confessed to having been affected by the fashion for disenchanting attacks on the conduct of the war, even though he was not one of those taken in by Remarque (58). Herbert Read, whose front-line experience could not be questioned, was nonetheless notoriously susceptible to the new and fashionable and gave *All Quiet* more credit than it deserved, calling it 'the first completely satisfying expression in literature of the greatest event of our time.' (59) Blunden's indictment of that book is important, for Remarque still commands an inordinate respect from readers who bracket it with Owen for authenticity. Nobody could accuse Blunden of being 'pro-war.' What is important is that he spoke with a clear understanding of the nature of military service and was determinedly faithful to his memory of it. However painful the past, it had also been inspiring to him, and he loathed the spirit in which he felt that Graves, rejecting it, distorted its truth—and in the process consigned people like himself—and better than himself—to 'All That' (60). The 'Truth about the War,' he felt, was to be found in the writings of those such as Liveing, Dunn, Owen, Sassoon and Tomlinson—and at least one German, Ernst Junger (61)—who had recorded with unstinting accuracy what they had seen and felt at the time.

By the early thirties Blunden had achieved a considerable reputation as poet, critic and author of *Undertones of War*. In 1922, he had won the Hawthornden prize for his collection of poems, *The Shepard*. In 1930, he became literary editor of the *Nation and Athenaeum* and was awarded the medal of the Royal Society of Literature. In October 1931 he was elected a Fellow of Merton College, Oxford. His parents were proud of him, he told Sassoon in June 1930, but the war still claimed him: '...I know I did better one or two nights on the R[iver] Ancre than I ever can with ink-bottle.' (62) *Undertones of War* represented an effort to distance himself from the war years and escape the choking bitterness or sentiment which he felt so much marred the books of Williamson. Yet he was still a long way from genuine tranquility when he wrote it.

Notes

1. Edmund Blunden, Undertones of War, R. Cobden-/Sanderson Ltd, London 1928.
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10. HRHRC, MSS. Sassoon, Blunden-Sassoon, 24 Aug 1924.
11. HRHRC, MSS. Sassoon, Blunden-Sassoon, 22 July 1926.
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13. Blunden, Ibid., 15 July 1929, p. 369.
14. Blunden, Ibid., 24 March 1928, p. 946.
15. HRHRC, MSS. Sassoon, Blunden - Sassoon, 14 March 1930, 3 March 1933.
16. Webb, op. cit. p. 43.
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29. HRHRC, MSS. Sassoon, Blunden - Sassoon, 11 Nov 1929.
30. HRHRC, MSS. Sassoon, Blunden - Sassoon, 17 Nov 1929.
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