

Overtones of War: Poems of the First World War.

Steve Cloutier

Edmund Blunden. Ed. with an Introduction by Martin Taylor.
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Edmund Blunden, the war poet, according to the late Martin Taylor, has often been forgotten by even the most sensitive critics. Taylor illustrates the neglect of Blunden's war poetry with a speech by the late Sir Stephen Spender at the Imperial War Museum: "Included in his speech was a roll call of the significant names, beginning with Wilfred Owen, and embracing Siegfried Sassoon, David Jones, Herbert Read, Ivor Gurney, and Issac Rosenberg. But there was one important omission from this list: Sir Stephen had left out the name of Edmund Blunden" (1). Taylor traces this lapse of critical memory to the critics' misunderstanding of both Blunden's personal and literary lives.

His reputation has generally been based on his connections and, in one case, disagreements with other poets and the prose memoir *Undertones of War*. His connection with other poets can be clearly seen: Blunden edited and published a collection of poems by Wilfred Owen in 1933 and he was friends with both Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves. He was to fall out with Graves eventually, when it was reported to him that Graves had made some uncomplimentary comments about Blunden, a charge that Graves denied (R.P. Graves, *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic, 1895-1926*, 273). Graves's *Goodbye to All That* enraged Blunden for, Taylor asserts, the "preservation of the memories of his dead companions especially exercised Blunden's concern, assuming the character of a religious conviction" (Taylor, 25). For Blunden, the memory of his fallen comrades was a sacred trust, a trust that Graves betrayed in *Goodbye to All That*.

Views about Blunden's later personal life would take on sinister overtones in the thirties when Blunden continuously denied the possibility of a second war with Germany. This led Blunden to be "accused of having sympathy with a number of extreme political opinions, although he was only ever motivated by the desire to avoid another war" (Taylor, 27-8). Taylor believes that Blunden's anger at Graves and his reluctance to acknowledge the possibility of another war was rooted in his experiences from the First World War which haunted him. Taylor writes that "Sassoon maintained that Blunden was the

poet of the war most lastingly obsessed by it" (Taylor, 12). While Graves and Sassoon, in differing ways, attempted to put the war behind them, Blunden confronted his experiences, refusing to let them die. Graves's war experiences allowed him to say "goodbye to all that" and abandon England and go abroad. Sassoon, except for some poems written in the 1930s, returned to his and England's pre-war lives in an attempt to deal with the effects of the war on him.

Blunden, on the other hand, coped with his war experiences by keeping the war fresh in his mind and by refusing to let the memory of his dead comrades die.

Turning to his war poetry, critics have had two problems with Blunden. One is a result of critical taste, and the other is a result, it seems to me, of his own opinions of his poetry. In terms of critical taste, Taylor writes that "Blunden's war poems of this period [1920-1924] are not based on any revolution in style, technique or attitude, as with Sassoon and Owen, but rather on an adaptation of pastoralism to his new experiences" (Taylor, 7). To Taylor, Blunden was, like Hardy, "an elegist for a world that was passing away; undermined by urbanization and industrialization, and the repercussions of the First World War" (Taylor, 4). Taylor is constantly aware that Blunden saw himself as "a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat" (the final sentence from *Undertones of War*, which Taylor quotes). Two of the ten sections into which the poems are divided reflect Taylor's awareness of Blunden's attitude toward himself and are entitled "The Shepherd at War" and "The Shepherd Returns". During the war, the "understated style [Blunden] had developed for his pastoral poetry took a more ironic tone and perspective, but he was not seduced into an explicitness or a savagery he could not have sustained" (Taylor, 7). Taking the cue from Taylor, I would argue that Blunden's problem, like that of Rupert Brooke, was that the reading public did not want war poetry that was quietly ironic; they wanted the protest of Sassoon and the pity of Owen.

The second problem that Blunden's war poetry faces is the critics' preference for his memoir, *Undertones of War*. Blunden himself, it seems, is partially responsible for this. Critics turn to his memoir as the most successful example of his war writing. Taylor, writing about the war poems from Blunden's collection *Masks of Time* (1925), believes that "it was [the war poems's] failure, in Blunden's eyes, to communicate his experiences with the necessary depth that prompted the writing of *Undertones of War*" (Taylor, 18). The critics view of his war poet-

ry is apparently shared by Blunden. Blunden seems to show a lack of faith either in his ability or in the style he adopted for his poetry. Like the critics, Blunden seems to acknowledge that the pastoral style, unlike the styles adopted by Sassoon or Owen, cannot convey his wartime experiences adequately. As a result, Blunden felt compelled to write his prose memoir.

Having said all this, then, the next and most obvious question is: does Blunden's war poetry warrant an entire collection? How much importance should readers give to Blunden's consideration of the power of his poetry? After all, writers are not always the best judges of their own work. Do we, as readers, require a collection devoted entirely to Blunden? Indeed some of the poems seem to lack the power and depth evident in other poets of the First World War. Many of his poems seem out of touch with the modern world, employing rather dated and archaic language. Many of his poems may not rank with the best war poems of Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg, or Graves, but there are still glimpses of power in the collection. Perhaps his best poem is "Third Ypres", and it is a poem that comes closest to the style of Owen, Rosenberg, or Sassoon:

Runner, stand by a second. Your message. – He's gone,
Falls on a knee, and his right hand uplifted
Claws his last message from his ghostly enemy,
Turns stone-like. Well I liked him, that young runner,
But there's no time for that. O now for the word
To order us flash from these drowning roaring traps
And even hurl upon that snarling wire?
Why are our guns so impotent? (ll. 46-53)

Here we see can evidence of Owen's pity, Rosenberg's detachment, and Sassoon's anger. Blunden shows tantalising proof that his war poetry can, in fact, approach the depth achieved by other war poets. Clearly Blunden's war poetry deserves critical reevaluation.

This collection offers the opportunity and the tools through which to achieve this reassessment. Not only does Taylor give the reader an engaging and informative introduction but he also provides the scholar with the necessary background to the poems themselves. After each poem Taylor includes the publication history and, where available, comments about the individual poems by Blunden himself. A bibliography of works by and about Blunden would have been useful,

but this omission, however, is minor. All in all, the collection is a fitting testament to Blunden and to Taylor, and should become the definitive collection of Blunden's war poetry.