

Classic Poetry Series

Edmund Blunden

- poems -

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Edmund Blunden (1 November 1896 – 20 January 1974)

Edmund Charles Blunden was an English poet, author and critic. Like his friend Siegfried Sassoon, he wrote of his experiences in World War I in both verse and prose. For most of his career, Blunden was also a reviewer for English publications and an academic in Tokyo and later Hong Kong. He ended his career as Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford.

Early Years and WWI

Edmund Charles Blunden was born in London in 1896, moving with his family to Kent shortly afterwards. He was educated at Christ's Hospital and Queen's College, Oxford. Blunden was commissioned into the Royal Sussex Regiment in 1915 and served in France and Belgium from 1916 to 1919, fighting on the Somme and at Ypres. He was awarded the Military Cross.

Career as a Writer

In 1920 his collection of poetry *The Waggoner* was published after he sent a privately printed collection of verse to the then Literary Editor of *The Daily Herald*, Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon had immediately realised Blunden's abilities and wrote him an encouraging letter, starting a lifelong friendship between the two cricket-playing poets. In 1922 Blunden's *The Shepherd* followed, winning him the Hawthornden Prize. The *Shepherd* included poems from five previously privately printed collections published between 1914 and 1916. In 1928 Blunden published his chronicle of the First World War, *Undertones of War*, which gained him a wide reputation that was further enhanced by his collection *The Poems of Edmund Blunden 1914-1930* published in 1930.

Edmund Blunden is largely underestimated today as a war poet, mainly because the work of other poets such as Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon has eclipsed that of Blunden. It is ironic that it was Blunden's edition of Owen's poetry (published in 1931) which aroused the public interest in Owen which has never died since.

Further irony is to be found in that fact that Blunden took over the editing of Owen's poems after Siegfried Sassoon found he was still too upset over the death of his friend and fellow Craiglockhartian poet to continue. Blunden's own war poems are far more restrained than those of either Owen or Sassoon, but Blunden's hatred of the war and his grief for the war's dead, were just as intense as that of Owen or Sassoon. Blunden commemorated the dead in a passionately lyrical elegy, *Their Very Memory*. He also expressed his dismay at the destruction of the French countryside in his poetry, a theme missing from the poetry of either Owen or Sassoon (the

latter preferring to glory in the beauty of the English countryside when he wasn't describing life in the trenches).

Blunden was also unusual amongst the war poets for acknowledging that even amidst the senseless slaughter there could be, and were, moments of happiness. His poem *At Senlis Once* is a celebration of a brief interval of rest and refreshment, whilst *Concert Party : Busseboom* recalls an hour of innocent entertainment.

Blunden, like Sassoon, wrote poems about the English countryside; it was Blunden's description of a Kentish barn that had alerted Sassoon to Blunden's talent. His poems about the English countryside are often considered his finest; they have been described as combining "a formal, at times, archaic utterance with an exact portrayal of the scene, a delicacy of perception, and an air of unease and foreboding." Blunden's poems feature alms-women, lovers, village forefathers, midnight skaters and even a cornered weasel in *Winter : East Anglia*.

Between the wars Blunden earned his living as a literary journalist, as a Professor of English Literature at Tokyo University from 1924-27 (succeeding Robert Nichols), and as a fellow and tutor of English at Merton College, Oxford from 1931-43. During the ten years following the outbreak of the Second World War Blunden published three volumes of poetry : *Poems 1930-1940* (1940) shows traces of his continuing preoccupation with the conflict of 1914-18. Although in the Preface he denies "morbidly wishing to go back that road" he yet acknowledges "that tremendous time does not easily give up its hold". *Shells by a Stream* (1944) and *After Bombing* (1949) reflect his sombre thoughts about the darkness of the age, although these are lightened by his hope of renewal and his belief in traditional values.

After leaving Merton, Blunden worked for the *Times Literary Supplement* before he joined the UK Liaison Mission in Tokyo in 1948. In 1950 he began a second stint at the TLS before being appointed Emeritus professor of English Literature at Hong Kong University in 1953. He won the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1956, and returned to England in the early 1960s.

Blunden's last two collections of poetry were *A Hong Kong House : Poems 1951-1962* (1962) and *Eleven Poems* (1965). He was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1966, but he was forced, by ill health, to resign in 1968. His final years were spent with his third wife, Claire and their four daughters in the village of Long Melford, Suffolk. There in 1966 he wrote a guide to its magnificent parish church.

Much of Blunden's time was devoted to editing and writing biography and criticism. He edited volumes of poetry by John Clare in 1920 (with Alan Porter), and of Ivor Gurney in 1954 - rendering them the same service he had previously rendered Wilfred Owen in 1931 - that of bringing their poetry to a wider audience. His most important studies were of minor and major writers of the late-seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, reserving a particular affection for Shelley, Keats, Lamb, Leigh Hunt and their friends, and among later writers for Thomas Hardy.

Blunden is, however, better known for his poetry and *Undertones of War*. In the preface to his 1930 collection of poetry Blunden spoke of the Great War as an experience so early in his life "as to mould and colour the poetry throughout the book". In fact, as with so many other poets of the First World War, the conflict continued to colour his work throughout his life. His other major theme was the one he shared with the early Siegfried Sassoon, the English countryside in which he was born and to which he returned after his journeyings were over.

Edmund Blunden died in 1974.

Personal Life

Blunden was married three times. While still in the army he met and married Mary Daines in 1918. They had three children, the first of whom died in

infancy. They divorced in 1931, and in 1933 Blunden married Sylva Norman, a young novelist and critic. That marriage, which was childless, was dissolved in 1945, and in the same year he married Claire Margaret Poynting, a former pupil of his; they had four daughters. Blunden then met Aki Hayashi in Japan, and Aki moved to England with Blunden. The relation later changed from a partner to a friend, but they remained in contact for the rest of her life.

Blunden's love of cricket, celebrated in his book *Cricket Country*, is described by the biographer Philip Ziegler as fanatical. Blunden and his friend Rupert Hart-Davis regularly opened the batting for a publisher's eleven in the 1930s (Blunden insisted on batting without gloves). An affectionate obituary tribute in *The Guardian* commented, "He loved cricket ... and played it ardently and very badly", while in a review of *Cricket Country*, George Orwell described him as "the true cricketer":

The test of a true cricketer is that he shall prefer village cricket to 'good' cricket [... Blunden's] friendliest memories are of the informal village game, where everyone plays in braces, where the blacksmith is liable to be called away in mid-innings on an urgent job, and sometimes, about the time when the light begins to fail, a ball driven for four kills a rabbit on the boundary.

In a 2009 appreciation of the book and its author, Bangalore writer Suresh Menon writes,

Any cricket book that talks easily of Henry James and Siegfried Sassoon and Ranji and Grace and Richard Burton (the writer, not the actor) and Coleridge is bound to have a special charm of its own. As Blunden says, "The game which made me write at all, is not terminated at the boundary, but is reflected beyond, is echoed and varied out there among the gardens and the barns, the dells and the thickets, and belongs to some wider field."

Perhaps that is what all books on cricket are trying to say.

Blunden had a robust sense of humour. In Hong Kong he relished linguistic misunderstandings such as those of the restaurant that offered "fried prawn's balls" and the schoolboy who wrote, "In Hong Kong there is a queer at every bus-stop."

His fellow poets' regard for Blunden was illustrated by the contributions to a dinner in his honour for which poems were specially written by Cecil Day-Lewis and William Plomer; T. S. Eliot and Walter de la Mare were guests; and Siegfried Sassoon provided the Burgundy.

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Selected Works

Poems 1913 and 1914 (1914)

Poems Translated from the French (1914)

Three Poems (1916)

The Barn (1916)

The Silver Bird of Herndyke Mill ,Stane Street,The Gods of the World
Beneath,
(1916)

The Harbingers (1916)

Pastorals (1916)

The Waggoner and Other Poems (1920)

The Shepherd, and Other Poems of Peace and War (1922)

Old Homes (1922)
To Nature: New Poems (1923)
Dead Letters (1923)
Masks of Time: A New Collection of Poems Principally Meditative (1925)
Japanese Garland (1928)
Retreat (1928)
Winter Nights: A Reminiscence (1928)
Near and Far: New Poems (1929)
A Summer's Fancy (1930)
To Themis: Poems on Famous Trials (1931)
Constantia and Francis: An Autumn Evening, (1931)
Halfway House: A Miscellany of New Poems, (1932)
Choice or Chance: New Poems (1934)
Verses: To H. R. H. The Duke of Windsor, (1936)
An Elegy and Other Poems (1937); On Several Occasions (1938)
Poems, 1930-1940 (1940)
Shells by a Stream (1944)
After the Bombing, and Other Short Poems (1949)
Eastward: A Selection of Verses Original and Translated (1950)
Records of Friendship (1950)
A Hong Kong House (1959)
Poems on Japan (1967).

1916 seen from 1921

Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,
I sit in solitude and only hear
Long silent laughters, murmurings of dismay,
The lost intensities of hope and fear;
In those old marshes yet the rifles lie,
On the thin breastwork flutter the grey rags,
The very books I read are there—and I
Dead as the men I loved, wait while life drags

Its wounded length from those sad streets of war
Into green places here, that were my own;
But now what once was mine is mine no more,
I seek such neighbours here and I find none.
With such strong gentleness and tireless will
Those ruined houses seared themselves in me,
Passionate I look for their dumb story still,
And the charred stub outspeaks the living tree.

I rise up at the singing of a bird
And scarcely knowing slink along the lane,
I dare not give a soul a look or word
Where all have homes and none's at home in vain:
Deep red the rose burned in the grim redoubt,
The self-sown wheat around was like a flood,
In the hot path the lizard lolled time out,
The saints in broken shrines were bright as blood.

Sweet Mary's shrine between the sycamores!
There we would go, my friend of friends and I,
And snatch long moments from the grudging wars,
Whose dark made light intense to see them by.
Shrewd bit the morning fog, the whining shots
Spun from the wrangling wire: then in warm swoon
The sun hushed all but the cool orchard plots,
We crept in the tall grass and slept till noon.

Edmund Blunden

A Country God

WHEN groping farms are lanterned up
And stolchy ploughlands hid in grief,
And glimmering byroads catch the drop
That weeps from sprawling twig and leaf,
And heavy-hearted spins the wind
Among the tattered flags of Mirth,—
Then who but I flit to and fro,
With shuddering speech, with mope and mow,
And glass the eyes of Earth?

Then haunting by some moanish brook
Where lank and snaky brambles swim
Or where the hill pines swarthy look
I whirry through the dark and hymn
A dull-voiced dirge and threnody,
An echo of the world's sad drone
That now appals the friendly stars—
O wail for blind brave youth whose wars
Turn happiness to stone.

How rang my cavern-shades of old
To my melodious pipes, and then
My bright-haired bergomask patrolled
Each lawn and plot for laughter's din:
Never a sower flung broad cast,
No hedger brisked nor scythesman swung,
Nor maiden trod the purple press
But I was by to guard and bless
And for their solace sang.

* * * *

But now the sower's hand is writhed
In livid death, the bright rhythm stolen,
The gold grain flatted and unscythed,
The boars in the vineyard gnarled and sullen
Havocking the grapes ; and the eve-jar wind
Spins, and the spattered leaves of the glen
In mockery dance the death-gavotte;
With all my murmurous pipes forgot,
And summer not to come again.

Edmund Blunden

Almswomen

At Quincey's moat the squandering village ends,
And there in the almshouse dwell the dearest friends
Of all the village, two old dames that cling
As close as any trueloves in the spring.
Long, long ago they passed threescore-and-ten,
And in this doll's house lived together then;
All things they have in common, being so poor,
And their one fear, Death's shadow at the door.
Each sundown makes them mournful, each sunrise
Brings back the brightness in their failing eyes.

How happy go the rich fair-weather days
When on the roadside folk stare in amaze
At such a honeycomb of fruit and flowers
As mellows round their threshold; what long hours
They gloat upon their steeping hollyhocks,
Bee's balsams, feathery southernwood, and stocks,
Fiery dragon's-mouths, great mallow leaves
For salves, and lemon-plants in bushy sheaves,
Shagged Esau's-hands with five green finger-tips.
Such old sweet names are ever on their lips.
As pleased as little children where these grow
In cobbled pattens and worn gowns they go,
Proud of their wisdom when on gooseberry shoots
They stuck eggshells to fright from coming fruits
The brisk-billed rascals; pausing still to see
Their neighbour owls saunter from tree to tree,
Or in the hushing half-light mouse the lane
Long-winged and lordly.
But when those hours wane,
Indoors they ponder, scared by the harsh storm
Whose pelting saracens on the window swarm,
And listen for the mail to clatter past
And church clock's deep bay withering on the blast;
They feed the fire that flings a freakish light
On pictured kings and queens grotesquely bright,
Platters and pitchers, faded calendars
And graceful hour-glass trim with lavenders.

Many a time they kiss and cry, and pray
That both be summoned in the self-same day,
And wiseman linnets tinkling in his cage
End too with them the friendship of old age,
And all together leave their treasured room
Some bell-like evening when the may's in bloom.

Edmund Blunden

April Byeway

Friend whom I never saw, yet dearest friend,
Be with me travelling on the byeway now
In April's month and mood: our steps shall bend
By the shut smithy with its penthouse brow
Armed round with many a felly and crackt plough:
And we will mark in his white smock the mill
Standing aloof, long numbed to any wind,
That in his crannies mourns, and craves him still;
But now there is not any grain to grind,
And even the master lies too deep for winds to find.

Grieve not at these: for there are mills amain
With lusty sails that leap and drop away
On further knolls, and lads to fetch the grain.
The ash-spit wickets on the green betray
New games begun and old ones put away.
Let us fare on, dead friend, O deathless friend,
Where under his old hat as green as moss
The hedger chops and finds new gaps to mend,
And on his bonfires burns the thorns and dross,
And hums a hymn, the best, thinks he, that ever was.

There the grey guinea-fowl stands in the way,
The young black heifer and the raw-ribbed mare,
And scorn to move for tumbril or for dray,
And feel themselves as good as farmers there.
From the young corn the prick-eared leverets stare
At strangers come to spy the land — small sirs,
We bring less danger than the very breeze
Who in great zig-zag blows the bee, and whirs
In bluebell shadow down the bright green leas;
From whom in frolic fit the chopt straw darts and flees.

The cornel steeping up in white shall know
The two friends passing by, and poplar smile
All gold within; the church-top fowl shall glow
To lure us on, and we shall rest awhile
Where the wild apple blooms above the stile;
The yellow frog beneath blinks up half bold,
Then scares himself into the deeper green.
And thus spring was for you in days of old,
And thus will be when I too walk unseen
By one that thinks me friend, the best that there has been.

All our lone journey laughs for joy, the hours
Like honey-bees go home in new-found light
Past the cow pond amazed with twinkling flowers
And antique chalk-pit newly delved to white,
Or idle snow-plough nearly hid from sight.
The blackbird sings us home, on a sudden peers
The round tower hung with ivy's blackened chains,
Then past the little green the byeway veers,

The mill-sweeps torn, the forge with cobwebbed panes
That have so many years looked out across the plains.

But the old forge and mill are shut and done,
The tower is crumbling down, stone by stone falls;
An age doubt comes creeping in the sun,
The sun himself shudders, the day appals,
The concourse of a thousand tempests sprawls
Over the blue-lipped lakes and maddening groves,
Like agonies of gods the clouds are whirled,
The stormwind like the demon huntsman roves —
Still stands my friend, though all's to chaos hurled,
The unseen friend, the one last friend in all the world.

Edmund Blunden

At Senlis Once

how comely it was and how reviving,
When with clay and with death no longer striving
Down firm roads we came to houses
With women chattering and green grass thriving.

Now though rains in a cataract descended,
We could glow, with our tribulation ended--
Count not days, the present only
Was thought of, how could it ever be expended?

Clad so cleanly, this remnant of poor wretches
Picked up life like the hens in orchard ditches,
Gazed on the mill-sails, heard the church-bell,
Found an honest glass all manner of riches.

How they crowded the barn with lusty laughter,
Hailed the pierrots and shook each shadowy rafter,
Even could ridicule their own sufferings,
Sang as though nothing but joy came after!

Edmund Blunden

Can you Remember?

Yes, I still remember
The whole thing in a way;
Edge and exactitude
Depend on the day.

Of all that prodigious scene
There seems scanty loss,
Though mists mainly float and screen
Canal, spire and fosse;

Though commonly I fail to name
That once obvious Hill,
And where we went and whence we came
To be killed, or kill.
Those mists are spiritual
And luminous-obscure,
Evolved of countless circumstance
Of which I am sure;

Of which, at the instance
Of sound, smell, change and stir,
New-old shapes for ever
Intensely recur.

And some are sparkling, laughing, singing,
Young, heroic, mild;
And some incurable, twisted,
Shrieking, dumb, defiled.

Edmund Blunden

Chinese Paper Knife

For the first time ever, and only now
(Long waiting where I should see)
The tiny carved bird, the bony bough
Start sharp into life for me.

Why not until now, why suddenly now
This recognition? Replies
The bird must know who from that bough
Holds me with staring eyes:

The owl once more, but this time found
In foliage strange to me.
Fantastic branches warp around
From the scaly uptwisting tree.

A trifle, ah yes: but the carver achieved
A forest dream where flies
In and out the boughs so various-leaved
This bird with the pinhead eyes.

Then praised be this today whose light
Revealed this fabulous tree
And original owl, which many a night
Will lead into mystery.

Edmund Blunden

Concert Party: Busseboom

The stage was set, the house was packed,
The famous troop began;
Our laughter thundered, act by act;
Time light as sunbeams ran.

Dance sprang and spun and neared and fled,
Jest chirped at gayest pitch,
Rhythm dazzled, action sped
Most comically rich.

With generals and lame privates both
Such charms worked wonders, till
The show was over – lagging loth
We faced the sunset chill;

And standing on the sandy way,
With the cracked church peering past,
We heard another matinee,
We heard the maniac blast

Of barrage south by Saint Eloi,
And the red lights flaming there
Called madness: Come, my bonny boy,
And dance to the latest air.

To this new concert, white we stood;
Cold certainty held our breath;
While men in tunnels below Larch Wood
Were kicking men to death.

Edmund Blunden

First Rhymes

In the meadow by the mill
I'd make my ballad,
Tunes to that would whistle shrill
And beat the blackbird's ringing bill.—
But surely the innocent spring has died,
The sultry noon has hushed the bird,
The jingling word, the tune untried,
All in that meadow must have died.—
For that, the fuller speech of song
Has charmed me,
And lulled my lonely hours along;
Though beauty's truth that leads to-day
My longing trials
Shone then like dewdrops in my way,
When ' Nature painted all things gay.'

Edmund Blunden

Forefathers

Here they went with smock and crook,
Toiled in the sun, lolled in the shade,
Here they mudded out the brook
And here their hatchet cleared the glade:
Harvest-supper woke their wit,
Huntsmen's moon their wooings lit.

From this church they led their brides,
From this church themselves were led
Shoulder-high; on these waysides
Sat to take their beer and bread.
Names are gone - what men they were
These their cottages declare.

Names are vanished, save the few
In the old brown Bible scrawled;
These were men of pith and thew,
Whom the city never called;
Scarce could read or hold a quill,
Built the barn, the forge, the mill.

On the green they watched their sons
Playing till too dark to see,
As their fathers watched them once,
As my father once watched me;
While the bat and beetle flew
On the warm air webbed with dew.

Unrecorded, unrenowned,
Men from whom my ways begin,
Here I know you by your ground
But I know you not within -
There is silence, there survives
Not a moment of your lives.

Like the bee that now is blown
Honey-heavy on my hand,
From his toppling tansy-throne
In the green tempestuous land -
I'm in clover now, nor know
Who made honey long ago.

Edmund Blunden

Harvest

So there's my year, the twelvemonth duly told
Since last I climbed this brow and gloated round
Upon the lands heaped with their wheaten gold,
And now again they spread with wealth imbrowned -
And thriftless I meanwhile,
What honeycombs have I to take, what sheaves to pile?

I see some shrivelled fruits upon my tree,
And gladly would self-kindness feign them sweet;
The bloom smelled heavenly, can these stragglers be
The fruit of that bright birth and this wry wheat,
Can this be from those spires
Which I, or fancy, saw leap to the spring sun's fires?

I peer, I count, but anxious is not rich,
My harvest is not come, the weeds run high;
Even poison-berries, ramping from the ditch
Have stormed the undefended ridges by;
What Michaelmas is mine!
The fields I sought to serve, for sturdier tilage pine.

But hush - Earth's valleys sweet in leisure lie;
And I among them wandering up and down
Will taste their berries, like the bird or fly,
And of their gleanings make both feast and crown.
The Sun's eye laughing looks.
And Earth accuses none that goes among her stooks.

Edmund Blunden

Perch Fishing

On the far hill the cloud of thunder grew
And sunlight blurred below; but sultry blue
Burned yet on the valley water where it hoards
Behind the miller's elmen floodgate boards,
And there the wasps, that lodge them ill-concealed
In the vole's empty house, still drove afield
To plunder touchwood from old crippled trees
And build their young ones their hutched nurseries;
Still creaked the grasshoppers' rasping unison
Nor had the whisper through the tansies run
Nor weather-wisest bird gone home.
How then
Should wry eels in the pebbled shallows ken
Lightning coming? troubled up they stole
To the deep-shadowed sullen water-hole,
Among whose warty snags the quaint perch lair.
As cunning stole the boy to angle there,
Muffling least tread, with no noise balancing through
The hangdog alder-boughs his bright bamboo.
Down plumbed the shuttled ledger, and the quill
On the quicksilver water lay dead still.

A sharp snatch, swirling to-fro of the line,
He's lost, he's won, with splash and scuffling shine
Past the low-lapping brandy-flowers drawn in,
The ogling hunchback perch with needled fin.
And there beside him one as large as he,
Following his hooked mate, careless who shall see
Or what befall him, close and closer yet —
The startled boy might take him in his net
That folds the other.
Slow, while on the clay,
The other flounces, slow he sinks away.
What agony usurps that watery brain
For comradeship of twenty summers slain,
For such delights below the flashing weir
And up the sluice-cut, playing buccaneer
Among the minnows; lolling in hot sun
When bathing vagabonds had drest and done;
Rootling in salty flannel-weed for meal
And river shrimps, when hushed the trundling wheel;
Snapping the dapping moth, and with new wonder
Prowling through old drowned barges falling asunder.
And O a thousand things the whole year through
They did together, never more to do.

Edmund Blunden

Pillbox

Just see what's happening Worley! Worley rose
And round the angled doorway thrust his nose
And serjeant Hyde went too to snuff the air. . . .
Then war brought down his fist, and missed the pair!
Yet Hyde was hit by a splinter, the blood came,
And out sprang terrors that he'd striven to tame,
A good man, Hyde, for weeks. I'm blown to bits,
He screams, he screams. Come Bluffer, where's your wits,
Says Worley, Bluffer, you've a blighty, man!
All in the pillbox urged him, here began
His freedom: Think of Eastbourne and your dad,
The poor man lay at length and brief and mad
Flung out his cry of doom; soon ebbed and dumb
He yielded. Worley with a tot of rum
And shouting in his face could not restore him,
The ship of Charon over channel bore him,
All marvelled even on that most deadly day
To see this soul so spirited away.

Edmund Blunden

Pill-Box

Just see what's happening, Worley.-Worley rose
And round the angled doorway thrust his nose,
And Sergeant Hoad went too. to snuff the air.
Then war brought down his fist, and missed the pair!
Yet Hoad was scratched by a splinter, the blood came,
And out burst terrors that he'd striven to tame.
A good man, Hoad, for weeks. I'm blown to bits.
He groans, he screams. Come, Bluffer, where's your wits?
Says Worley. Bluffer, you've a blighty, man!
All in the pillbox urged him, here began
His freedom: Think of Eastbourne and your dad.
The poor man lay at length and brief and mad
Flung out his cry of doom; soon ebbed and dumb
He yielded. Worley with a tot of rum
And shouting in his face could not restore him.
The ship of Charon over channel bore him.
All marvelled even on that most deathly day
To see this life so spirited away.

Edmund Blunden

Premature Rejoicing

What's that over there?
Thiepval Wood.

Take a steady look at it; it'll do you good.
Here, these glasses will help you. See any flowers?
There sleeps Titania (correct - the Wood is ours);
There sleeps Titania in a deep dugout,
Waking, she wonders what all the din's about,
And smiles through her tears, and looks ahead ten years,
And sees the Wood again, and her usual Grenadiers,

All in green,
Music in the moon;

The burnt rubbish you've just seen
Won't beat the Fairy Queen;

All the same, it's a shade too soon
For you to scribble rhymes
In your army book
About those times;
Take another look;

That's where the difficulty is, over there.

Edmund Blunden

Preparations For Victory

My soul, dread not the pestilence that hags
The valley; flinch not you, my body young.
At these great shouting smokes and snarling jags
Of fiery iron; as yet may not be flung
The dice that claims you. Manly move among
These ruins, and what you must do, do well;
Look, here are gardens, there mossed boughs are hung
With apples who bright cheeks none might excel,
And there's a house as yet unshattered by a shell.

"I'll do my best," the soul makes sad reply,
"And I will mark the yet unmurdered tree,
The tokens of dear homes that court the eye,
And yet I see them not as I would see.
Hovering between, a ghostly enemy.
Sickens the light, and poisoned, withered, wan,
The least defiled turns desperate to me."
The body, poor unpitied Caliban,
Parches and sweats and grunts to win the name of Man.

Days or eternities like swelling waves
Surge on, and still we drudge in this dark maze;
The bombs and coils and cans by strings of slaves
Are borne to serve the coming day of days;
Pale sleep in slimy cellars scarce allays
With its brief blank the burden. Look, we lose;
The sky is gone, the lightless, drenching haze
Of rainstorms chills the bone; earth, air are foes,
The black fiend leaps brick-red as life's last picture goes.

Edmund Blunden

Report on Experience

I have been young, and now am not too old;
And I have seen the righteous forsaken,
His health, his honour and his quality taken.
This is not what we were formerly told.

I have seen a green country, useful to the race,
Knocked silly with guns and mines, its villages vanished,
Even the last rat and the last kestrel banished -
God bless us all, this was peculiar grace.

I knew Seraphina; Nature gave her hue,
Glance, sympathy, note, like one from Eden.
I saw her smile warp, heard her lyric deaden;
She turned to harlotry; - this I took to be new.

Say what you will, our God sees how they run.
These disillusionments are His curious proving
That He loves humanity and will go on loving;
Over there are faith, life, virtue in the sun.

Edmund Blunden

The Ancre at Hamel: Afterwards

Where tongues were loud and hearts were light
I heard the Ancre flow;
Waking oft at the mid of night
I heard the Ancre flow.

I heard it crying, that sad rill,
Below the painful ridge
By the burnt unraftered mill
And the relic of a bridge.
And could this sighing river seem
To call me far away,
And its pale word dismiss as dream
The voices of to-day?
The voices in the bright room chilled
And that mourned on alone;
The silence of the full moon filled
With that brook's troubling tone.

The struggling Ancre had no part
In these new hours of mine,
And yet its stream ran through my heart;
I heard it grieve and pine,
As if its rainy tortured blood
Had swirled into my own,
When by its battered bank I stood
And shared its wounded moan.

Edmund Blunden

The Child's Grave

I came to the churchyard where pretty Joy lies
On a morning in April, a rare sunny day;
Such bloom rose around, and so many birds' cries
That I sang for delight as I followed the way.

I sang for delight in the ripening of spring,
For dandelions even were suns come to earth;
Not a moment went by but a new lark took wing
To wait on the season with melody's mirth.

Love-making birds were my mates all the road,
And who would wish surer delight for the eye
Than to see pairing goldfinches gleaming abroad
Or yellowhammers sunning on paling and sty?

And stocks in the almswomen's garden were blown,
With rich Easter roses each side of the door;
The lazy white owls in the glade cool and lone
Paid calls on their cousins in the elm's chambered core.

This peace, then, and happiness thronged me around.
Nor could I go burdened with grief, but made merry
Till I came to the gate of that overgrown ground
Where scarce once a year sees the priest come to bury.

Over the mounds stood the nettles in pride,
And, where no fine flowers, there kind weeds dared to wave;
It seemed but as yesterday she lay by my side,
And now my dog ate of the grass on her grave.

He licked my hand wondering to see me muse so,
And wished I would lead on the journey or home,
As though not a moment of spring were to go
In brooding; but I stood, if her spirit might come

And tell me her life, since we left her that day
In the white lilled coffin, and rained down our tears;
But the grave held no answer, though long I should stay;
How strange that this clay should mingle with hers!

So I called my good dog, and went on my way;
Joy's spirit shone then in each flower I went by,
And clear as the noon, in coppice and ley,
Her sweet dawning smile and her violet eye!

Edmund Blunden

The Giant Puff-Ball

From what sad star I know not, but I found
Myself new-born below the coppice rail,
No bigger than the dewdrops and as round,
In a soft sward, no cattle might assail.

And so I gathered mightiness and grew
With this one dream kindling in me, that I
Should never cease from conquering light and dew
Till my white splendour touched the trembling sky.

A century of blue and stilly light
Bowed down before me, the dew came again,
The moon my sibyl worshipped through the night,
The sun returned and long abode; but then

Hoarse drooping darkness hung me with a shroud
And switched at me with shrivelled leaves in scorn.
Red morning stole beneath a grinning cloud,
And suddenly clambering over dike and thorn

A half-moon host of churls with flags and sticks
Hallooed and hurtled up the partridge brood,
And Death clapped hands from all the echoing thicks,
And trampling envy spied me where I stood;

Who haled me tired and quaking, hid me by,
And came again after an age of cold,
And hung me in the prison-house adry
From the great crossbeam. Here defiled and old

I perish through unnumbered hours, I swoon,
Hacked with harsh knives to staunch a child's torn hand;
And all my hopes must with my body soon
Be but as crouching dust and wind-blown sand.

Edmund Blunden

The Midnight Skaters

The hop-poles stand in cones,
The icy pond lurks under,
The pole-tops steeple to the thrones
Of stars, sound gulfs of wonder;
But not the tallest thee, 'tis said,
Could fathom to this pond's black bed.
Then is not death at watch
Within those secret waters?
What wants he but to catch
Earth's heedless sons and daughters?
With but a crystal parapet
Between, he has his engines set.

Then on, blood shouts, on, on,
Twirl, wheel and whip above him,
Dance on this ball-floor thin and wan,
Use him as though you love him;
Court him, elude him, reel and pass,
And let him hate you through the glass.

Edmund Blunden

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Edmund Blunden

The Poor Man's Pig

Already fallen plum-bloom stars the green
And apple-boughs as knarred as old toads' backs
Wear their small roses ere a rose is seen;
The building thrush watches old Job who stacks
The bright-peeled osiers on the sunny fence,
The pent sow grunts to hear him stumping by,
And tries to push the bolt and scamper thence,
But her ringed snout still keeps her to the sty.

Then out he lets her run; away she snorts
In bundling gallop for the cottage door,
With hungry hubbub begging crusts and orts,
Then like the whirlwind bumping round once more;
Nuzzling the dog, making the pullets run,
And sulky as a child when her play's done.

Edmund Blunden

The Survival

To-day's house makes to-morrow's road;
I knew these heaps of stone
When they were walls of grace and might,
The country's honour, art's delight
That over fountain'd silence show'd
Fame's final bastion.
Inheritance has found fresh work,
Disunion union breeds;
Beauty the strong, its difference lost,
Has matter fit for flood and frost.
Here's the true blood that will not shirk
Life's new-commanding needs.
With curious costly zeal, O man,
Raise orrery and ode;
How shines your tower, the only one
Of that especial site and stone!
And even the dream's confusion can
Sustain to-morrow's road.

Edmund Blunden

The Watchers

I heard the challenge 'Who goes there?'
Close kept but mine through midnight air
I answered and was recognized
And passed, and kindly thus advised;
'There's someone crawling though the grass
By the red ruin, or there was,
And them machine guns been a firin'
All the time the chaps was wirin',
So Sir if you're goin' out
You'll keep you 'ead well down no doubt.'

When will the stern fine 'Who goes there?'
Meet me again in midnight air?
And the gruff sentry's kindness, when
Will kindness have such power again?
It seems as, now I wake and brood,
And know my hour's decreptitude,
That on some dewy parapet
the sentry's spirit gazes yet,
Who will not speak with altered tone
When I am last am seem and known.

Edmund Blunden

The Zonnebeke Road

Morning, if this late withered light can claim
Some kindred with that merry flame
Which the young day was wont to fling through space!
Agony stares from each grey face.
And yet the day is come; stand down! stand down!
Your hands unclasp from rifles while you can;
The frost has pierced them to the bended bone?
Why see old Stevens there, that iron man,
Melting the ice to shave his grotesque chin!
Go ask him,, shall we win?
I never likes this bay, some foolish fear
Caught me the first time that I came here;
That dugout fallen in awakes, perhaps
Some formless haunting of some corpse's chaps.
True, and wherever we have held the line,
There were such corners, seeming-saturnine
For no good cause.

Now where the Haymarket starts,
There is no place for soldiers with weak hearts;
The minenwerfers have it to the inch.
Look, how the snow-dust whisks along the road
Piteous and silly; the stones themselves must flinch
In this east wind; the low sky like a load
Hangs over, a dead-weight. But what a pain
Must gnaw where its clay cheek
Crushes the shell-chopped trees that fang the plain –
The ice-bound throat gulps out a gargoyle shriek.
That wretched wire before the village line
Rattles like rusty brambles on dead bine,
And there the daylight oozes into dun;
Black pillars, those are trees where roadways run
Even Ypres now would warm our souls; fond fool,
Our tour's but one night old, seven more to cool!
O screaming dumbness, o dull clashing death,
Shreds of dead grass and willows, homes and men,
Watch as you will, men clench their chattering teeth
And freeze you back with that one hope, disdain.

Edmund Blunden

Thiepval Wood

The tired air groans as the heavies swing over, the river-hollows boom;
The shell-fountains leap from the swamps, and with wildfire and fume
The shoulder of the chalkdown convulses.
Then the jabbering echoes stampede in the slatting wood,
Ember-black the gibbet trees like bones or thorns protrude
From the poisonous smoke – past all impulses.
To them these silvery dews can never again be dear,
Nor the blue javelin-flame of the thunderous noons strike fear.

Edmund Blunden

To Joy

Is not this enough for moan
To see this babe all motherless -
A babe beloved - thrust out alone
Upon death's wilderness?
Out tears fall, fall, fall - I would weep
My blood away to make her warm,
Who never went on earth one step,
Nor heard the breath of the storm.
How shall you go, my little child,
Alone on that most wintry wild?

Edmund Blunden

Vlamertinghe: Passing the Chateau

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest -
But we are coming to the sacrifice.
Must those flowers who are not yet gone West?
May those flowers who live with death and lice?
This must be the flowerist place
That earth allows; the queenly face
Of the proud mansion borrows grace for grace
Spite of those brute guns lowing at the skies.
Bold great daisies' golden lights,
Bubbling roses' pinks and whites -
Such a gay carpet! poppies by the million;
Such damask! such vermilion!
But if you ask me, mate, the choice of colour
Is scarcely right; this red should have been duller.

Edmund Blunden