

# Undertones of War

## reviewed by Jane Mattisson Ekstam

### *Undertones of War*

by Edmund Blunden  
Folio Society, 1989



#### Edmund Blunden

Edmund Blunden was training as a volunteer with the Royal Sussex Regiment at the outbreak of war. As a temporary second-lieutenant, he crossed to France in 1916. *Undertones of War* is a very personal story of war. It was also a very popular one — first published in 1928, by February 1929 it ran into five impressions. Blunden addresses the tragedy of war, the profound grief over the death of brothers in the same battalion, the colors of German trench mortars, the clang of shrapnel, and the powdery glare of signal lights. Above all, however, *Undertones of War* is about the outrage at the violence done to man and nature. Blunden viewed the battlefield with a true countryman's eye: skulls are as plentiful as mushrooms, shrapnel is compared to crimson cloudlets, and the mist of evening is described as fit for a nightingale.

For Blunden, nature had a consoling beauty; human nature is part of nature. As a result, Blunden's memoir is less grimly realistic than Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*. Paul Fussell has noted in *The Great War and Modern Memory* that Blunden's writing is characterized by archaism, both in language and landscape. Blunden's focus is on pre-industrial England. This is also true of his poetry. "Festubert: The Old German Line," where he describes the violence endured by man and nature, is a case in point: "Sparse mists of moonlight hurt our eyes/With gouged and scourged uncertainties/Of soul and soil in agonies." A selection of Blunden's poetry is to be found at the end of the Folio Society and University of Chicago editions of *Undertones of War*.

Divided into 27 chapters, Blunden's memoir is introduced by a short "preliminary" beginning with the short and the deceptively simple question, "Why should I not write it?" Only a few will understand his memoir, writes Blunden, but that is not, he emphasizes, his fault. The implication is that only those who witnessed at first hand the events described can really understand. In the preliminary Blunden also addresses the vagaries of memory:

Order Now

*I know that memory has her little ways, and by now she has concealed precisely that look, that word, that coincidence of nature without and nature within which I long to remember. . . I must go over the ground again. A voice, perhaps not my own, answers within me. You will be going over the ground again, it says, until that hour when agony's clawed face softens the smilingness of a young spring day.*

Blunden soon realized that war was endless: "no one here appeared to conceive any end to it," he writes. He expresses relief that he is an officer and can thus "plough [his] way back to the black hole

under the Brickstack, and there imitate sleep with no greater defect than that of rats running over me." For private soldiers, however, long hours of huddling on the fire-step in the pouring rain awaited and there was "nothing but hope and a mackintosh sheet between them and the descent of minenwerfer shells."

Typically, however, Blunden also notes that "not all hours were poisonous. The summer afternoon sometimes stole past unmolested." His descriptions in Chapter Eight, "The Calm," of Lacouture and Cuinchy are almost idyllic and include such evocative phrases as "drowsy summer's yellow haze." Chapter Fifteen, "Theatre of War," however, tells the other and more obvious side of the story. The front line, for example, is described as "crude and inhuman," the cold is "foul" and the threat of ambush ever present.



**Column of German Prisoners, Including Wounded, at the Somme, 1916**

By 1917 Blunden had lost many old friends and he was tired of war. Not even the "huge old trees, the grass and herbs" could raise his spirits. *Undertones of War* shows how he longed for what he calls "the fragrance of ancient peace," as evidenced in the following lines:

*Now to attune my soul if I can  
To the contentment of this countryside,  
Where man is not for ever killing man  
But quiet days and quiet waters glide.*

As time passes, Blunden increasingly sought the friendship of kindred spirits who, through art, could transcend the horror of war. In Chapter Twenty-five, for example, he describes Worley, a sketcher. It is with clear affection that Blunden writes, "He showed these drawings to very few persons, to me most, for he believed I knew about such matters. I loved him for this new expression of a simple but profound trust." The famous final sentence of *Undertones of War* reads:

*No conjecture that, in a few weeks, Buir-sur-Ancre would appear much the same as the cataclysmal railway cutting by Hill 60, came from that innocent greenwood. No destined anguish lifted its snaky head to poison a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat.*

Throughout the horrors, Blunden remained a poetic "shepherd." He was never a soldier at heart. He survived the war, left the army in 1919, and took up the scholarship to Oxford that he had won while still at school. A writer and countryman at heart, Blunden loathed war; at the same time, it was also the source of some of his most important works, including *Undertones of War*. The Folio Society edition contains not only the earlier mentioned poems but also the memoir that is the foundation of *Undertones of War*, namely *De Bello Germanico*, written directly after the war but never finished. *Undertones of War* is the story of a survivor who, remarkably, managed to retain the qualities of a shepherd amidst the unprecedented horrors of modern warfare. Blunden died in 1974.

**Jane Mattisson Ekstam**