

WAR, LITERATURE AND THE ARTS  
20TH ANNIVERSARY COMMENTARY  
BY THOMAS G. BOWIE, JR.

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*“Haunted ever by war’s agony”: Edmund  
Blunden, Undertones of War<sup>1</sup>*

I’VE BEEN THINKING A LOT ABOUT THE AGONY of war lately. Are you haunted by it as well? After over 30 years in uniform, I’ve donned the tweed of academe and settled into a teaching position in a small liberal arts college. But war’s agony has followed me even here. For the past several years I’ve been working with the Regis Center for the Study of War Experience, teaching a course each spring called “Stories from Wartime” to 50 or 60 undergraduates. But the students are only the official reason we teach such a course—one that’s open to the public, one taught in the largest classroom on our northwest Denver campus, one filled to capacity every Tuesday evening, one overflowing week after week, one that we’ve begun streaming via the internet to a worldwide audience. Why such interest? Each week we invite a small panel of veterans to tell their stories, to share their experiences, to give our students and our guests a glimpse of the personal agonies associated with their wartime experiences. Phil Antonelli might be sharing his trek across Europe with Patton’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Army, and then end of with the haunting tale of what it was like to liberate one of Hitler’s death camps. Or perhaps Joe Sakato is telling his story, a second-generation Japanese American who enlisted in the Army from just outside an internment camp in Arizona (need I add that they lost the family store and home in California?) so that he too could fight his way across Europe with the 442<sup>nd</sup> “Go For Broke” Regimental Combat Team, so that he could prove he was a “real” American. He too is haunted by the pain of loss, by the memories of what he did in war and what war did to him—even though as a

Medal of Honor winner he is one of the most highly decorated veterans of the war. Maybe we're listening to Paul Murphy tell the tale of surviving four days and five nights—and each night must be counted separately—in the water after the U.S.S. Indianapolis was sunk without warning late in the war. Is he haunted by visions of men floating off from the group—or later, once delirium had set in on the third or fourth day, actually swimming away from the safety of a cargo net—of sharks in the water, of the flesh literally falling off survivors as they are rescued days later? Would you be? Or maybe it's Bernie Langfield calmly explaining to the students what it felt like to send your young husband into conflict, explaining what you say to two young boys when their father just “disappears” during an attack one day, never to return, never to be found. And so it goes, night after night, week after week, in what gradually becomes the course many students call the most important one of their undergraduate experience.

So yes, I have been thinking a lot about the agony of war lately. But even if it weren't for this class, I still might be haunted. It's one thing, after all, to place yourself in harm's way, to be called to serve a just cause in a far off land. But it's another when your former students go in your place. It's another when they are called to command a flying group in combat, leaving their young wives and children. And it's another thing again when the Boy Scout you first met as a smiling eleven-year-old so many years ago calmly reports in an email that he's headed back to Iraq for the second year of his young life. Did you hear recently that over a third of those serving in Afghanistan and Iraq return damaged in some way? Wounded by a traumatic brain injury, or crippled by an improvised explosive device, or *merely* shattered in spirit, haunted by post-traumatic stress for the remainder of their lives.

Perhaps, as Edmund Blunden suggests in the poem quoted above, we're all haunted in some way by war's agony. Near the end of the “Preliminary” to Blunden's gripping 1928 memoir of the Great War, *Undertones of War*, he grudgingly admits “I must go over the ground again” (xvi). Even then, he recognizes the persistently haunting quality of his war experience. A voice, “perhaps not my own” he suggests, assures him that he “will be going over the ground again . . . until that hour when agony's clawed face softens into the smilingness of a young spring day” (xvi). These words prove prophetic for the poet one critic calls “almost indisputably his generation's foremost poet of war-hauntedness, the one most concerned with war's aftertones as well as its undertones.”<sup>2</sup> And yet. What if we're actually not haunted enough by such undertones, aftertones, such agonies? Perhaps that is part of what Blunden would wish to share with us today. Blunden himself recognized the haunting quality of his war experience, remarking 50 years later, in 1968 for the *Daily Express*, that “I have of course wondered when the effect of the Old War would lose its imprisoning power. Since 1918 hardly a day or night passed without my losing the present and living in a ghost story.”<sup>3</sup> Like Blunden, it is time for us

too to go over this ground again; sadly, we too still wait for that ever elusive spring day that can soften agony's clawed face.

In the early days of our twenty-first century, in a world haunted daily by warfare, in a world where it's impossible to watch the evening news without pausing to consider the many faces clawed by this exquisite agony, Blunden's voice reaches across time with particular power. We must indeed go over the ground again, today no less insistently than Blunden did in the 1920s. Writing near the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Great War, Samuel Hynes reminds us in his magnificent study of war narratives, *The Soldiers' Tale*, "there has not been a day since the [20<sup>th</sup>] century began when wars—many wars—were not being fought, and here at the century's end they go on as always: thirty by one count at the end of 1993, thirty-two by another at the beginning of 1994, surely at least that many as I write this preface in 1996."<sup>4</sup> Wars, many wars, plead with us for our attention, for our understanding. They invite us, just as Blunden did, to attempt to engage the "image and horror of it," to reflect on the "disastered 1917," or the "slow amputation of Passchendaele," even as we struggle to comprehend the latest suicide bombing in a market in Baghdad or rocket attack on the West Bank.

The University of Chicago Press has done us all a service by reissuing Blunden's powerful memoir this past fall, calling our attention to a forgotten classic. Following a similar impulse, back in fall of 1993, *War, Literature, and the Arts* recognized the seventy-fifth anniversary of end of hostilities on the Western Front with a special issue dedicated to literature from the Great War (Vol 5, Number 2, Fall/Winter 1993). In that issue, Steven Trout brought critical attention to R.C. Sheriff's drama *Journey's End* by offering a compelling reading of the play as "a deeply conflicted interpretation of war experience, tentatively exploring the anti-heroic themes that soon became fashionable during the late 1920s while also celebrating wartime devotion to duty and comradeship" (2). Elizabeth Muenger offered an insightful look at the way the Great War "remains part of our past in a half-remembered way" by reviewing the scholarship of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*, and Samuel Hynes' *A War Imagined*. I too joined this chorus, reading Blunden's *Undertones* as a valiant attempt to negotiate the haunting tensions ever present in his experience by framing them in terms of a dialectical exchange between the partial vision offered by his individual perspective and the transcendent wholeness implied by his narrative form. In each essay mentioned above, the conversation between text and context, between an author and his narrative, between what Hynes would later describe as the "myth of the war" and the "soldiers' tale"—the infinite variety of narrative that gets us as close as possible to the truth of what men and women do in war, and what war does to them—is absolutely central to the argument. As Hynes puts it in *Soldiers' Tale*, "What other route do we have to understanding

the human experience of war—how it felt, what it was like—than the witness of the men who were there? (25). And finally, it is this insistent call to bear witness to modern conflict, to listen carefully to the personal narratives of the overwhelming human experience of modern war, that Blunden shares with us when he goes over the ground again. The University of Chicago Press urges our attention with this new edition of *Understones*; we would do well to listen.

As I suggested in 1993, Blunden's narrative sets us on a journey with him, consciously inviting us *into* his narrative, enrolling us from the opening chapter in the school of the Western Front, in the school of modern warfare. Joining the war fresh from public school as a naïve nineteen year old, Blunden shares his experience of the war as both student and teacher, as both historical participant and transhistorical (re)presenter. In order to do so, he positions us resolutely in the midst of a narrative dialogue, encouraging us to actually participate in the story by intertwining his personal story with the larger narrative history—what Hynes calls the myth—of the Western Front. Put simply, it is this intermingling, this desperate attempt to finally find a story he can live with, that haunts Blunden's text—from its time of composition, throughout Blunden's life, to its most recent incarnation in this new edition published by the University of Chicago Press. For most of his adult life, Blunden was actually haunted by nightmares—"vivid memories of details of violence and bloodshed" as Barry Webb describes them in his comprehensive biography—that "were a private world which he shared with surviving soldiers, but most intimately with those who had not survived. The preservation of the memory of his dead colleagues became a life-long trust; it meant of course, that attempts to forget the past were a betrayal—and thus he fed his dreams with the poison of trench memories" (99). And it is this life-long trust that he has bequeathed to us. Can we, will we, listen to his compelling story? Can we, dare we, go over the ground again?

Even during the war, Blunden recognized the toxic effect of war upon him, confiding to his mother in June 1917 letter from the front: "I am ashamed I do not keep my promise to write to all the young ones [his brothers and sisters]—I must pull my socks up soon, only I find very little to say but that I am alive and shall shortly be otherwise, if lucky" (qtd. in Webb, 74). Just over a month later, following yet another abortive dash into No Man's Land and the inevitable casualties, Blunden wryly comments in *Undertones*, "one more brilliant hope, expressed a few hours before in shouts of joy, sank into the mud" (156). Over and over again, *Undertones* is punctuated with an almost ironic sense of wonder—wonder at Blunden's consistent luck, wonder at his ability to survive, wonder at the orders that almost get him killed again and again, wonder at the strength of his men and fellow officers in the face of so many brilliant hopes that so consistently disappear into the mud of the Western Front. And whether we follow Blunden

through the mud, or Phil Antonelli across Europe during the winter of 1944-45, or Patrick Brice along the highways north of Baghdad—trolling for IEDs, as it were—we too are invited to wrestle with the profound paradoxes of modern conflict, to bear witness to these powerful stories that must be told.

The paradoxical world of natural beauty and traumatic violence that Blunden invites us to join, the education he presents for us that desperately seeks to comprehend some of life's most difficult lessons, the guilt he feels for surviving what so many did not, each call to us with renewed urgency as we mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war to end all wars. Blunden marked such anniversaries the remainder of his own life, constantly struggling to make sense of this overwhelming and formative moment in his life. In part because he had shared the mystery, had gone over the ground once before, Blunden also felt called to serve as the custodian for the work of so many soldier poets—Owen, Rosenberg most notably from the Great War, then Keith Douglas, his former student, during the Second World War. He took such stewardship as a sacred task, one he willingly embraced for over forty years. So the undertones of Blunden's war transcend his own experience, just as they transcend his own war.

Readers of **WLA** understand the sacred nature of this trust. At its best—always good, clearly **WLA** has gotten stronger with each subsequent issue—under the inspired leadership of Donald Anderson, **WLA** has energized the academic debate about war, bringing a wide variety of perspectives, voices, and texts into a dynamic conversation with one another. Such a conversation seems absolutely vital today, at the very time it also seems clearly indebted to Blunden's notion of discharging a sacred duty, of maintaining a sacred trust. Most recently, the National Endowment for the Arts, under Dana Gioia's direction, has joined this conversation in a powerful way. The publication of *Operation Homecoming* (edited by Andrew Carroll and published by Random House, 2006) testifies to the importance of maintaining this trust.<sup>5</sup> Created in the midst of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, published while the wars are still underway and the nightmares still fresh, *Operation Homecoming* sought to support every viewpoint of the war, whatever the political stance. As Dana Gioia describes the book, "the volume comprises a chorus of one hundred voices heard as much in counterpoint as in harmony. These independent-minded people have earned their right to speak, and they do so candidly" (xiv). Their candor, their independence, and yes the counterpoint so central to their narratives cannot fail to move a reader.

We use *Operation Homecoming* as the final text in our "Stories from Wartime" seminar, and students tell us it is the most powerful book they've read during the semester—and perhaps the most moving of their young lives. As Gioia suggests, it "is a book about a war, America's current war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The book presents a stark and powerful composite, full of passionate, diverging individual

accounts. It's a book not about politics but about particulars. . . . These stories are personal, emotional, and focused" (xv). Personal narratives powerfully told. Emotional experiences, focused particularly on what young men and women do in war and what war does to them. This "stark and powerful composite" is certainly worth your time to read, so I recommend it without hesitation.

But I also commend it to you as a current payment on an ancient debt. I commend it to you in the spirit of **WLA**, a journal that "exists as a forum for many voices seeking an understanding of war and art, and the intersection of the two." And I commend it to you in the spirit of Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, as well as that of his life-long dedication to preserving the literary works of "soldier-poets." For twenty years, **WLA** has sought to engage war's agony, to name its ghosts, to tell its stories. As my friend and mentor Donald Anderson puts it, "from time immemorial, war and art have reflected one another, and it is this intersection of war and art that **WLA** seeks to illuminate. If it seems to fall to the historian to make distinctions among wars, each war's larger means and ends, the trajectory for the artist, regardless of culture or time, seems to fall towards an individual's disillusionment, the means and ends of war played out in the personal. For the individual soldier, the sweeping facts of history are accurately written not in the omniscient, third-person plural, but in the singular first." Edmund Blunden understood this better than most, living war's agony in a deeply personal way every day of his life. We're fortunate to have a scholarly journal and editor that shares this understanding. Happy anniversary **WLA**!

## Notes

1. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 2006. Originally published in November of 1928 in London by R. Cobden-Sanderson, Ltd. The haunting line of poetry comes from Blunden's tribute to his battalion, "11<sup>th</sup> R.S.R." which, as Blunden's biographer, Barry Webb, notes captures "the mixed reactions to his war experience" that are characteristic of Blunden's writing (131). This particular poem was first published in the collection *The Shepherd* in 1921, and then re-collected in *Poems of Many Years* in 1957.
2. Thomas Mallon, *Edmund Blunden*. Boston: Twayne, 1983. p. 52.
3. Barry Webb. *Edmund Blunden: A Biography*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990. p. 101.
4. Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*. New York: Penguin. 1997. pp. xi-xii. I have been influenced by Sam Hynes' ideas since the mid-1980s when he began taking his argument about war narratives public in the *New York Times Book Review*. At the time, I was an itinerant graduate student, lost in my own "whirl and muddle of war." Sam generously offered advice, conversation, and encouragement. I visited his literature of war class at Princeton during the fall of 1988, and it has served as a model for much of the teaching I have done since.

5. *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*. Edited by Andrew Carroll. New York: Random House. 2006.



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