Blunden, Sassoon and the post-war experience

This article is adapted from a talk given by Margi Blunden to the Siegfried Sassoon Fellowship conference on 6 September 2008, at St.Hilda’s College, Oxford

I am very grateful to the Fellowship for asking me to give this talk, as it is a chance for me to talk about two men - one who was of central importance in my life and the other who was central to him. My father, of course, was central to my childhood and growing up; but the other man, Siegfried, was a name who lived in our household as a kind of extension of Dad. He was always there. I never questioned his presence, even though I only met him once or twice. During our time in Hong Kong when I was a child I was aware of the letters which came from “Sieg”, as my father referred to him. And later, when we returned to the UK, my parents would talk about Sieg whenever a letter arrived. My father’s tone was always one of affection – almost as if Siegfried were just in the next room and they had been talking together of all the things that interested them both. And I think this was the secret of their friendship: that they shared all the things that most interested them.

My great good fortune is that because I was asked to talk about these two, I have had the opportunity to look more closely at how this friendship came about and what it was that interested them so much - indeed to such an extent that they sustained a correspondence of forty-six years. It must be one the last great correspondences between two literary men before the computer came along, and by and large killed off the art of letter writing.

When Edmund wrote to Siegfried on 3 May 1919, Siegfried had never heard of Edmund. But Edmund had not only heard of Siegfried: he had seen him too, and had not forgotten that ‘tallish, striding youth’ (as he describes him in Cricket Country) who had come to play cricket at Yalding in Kent when Edmund was just a boy. So Edmund was already aware that they were from the same county. Later, in the trenches at Ypres, Edmund had read Siegfried’s poems in The Cambridge Magazine - in a letter to Siegfried (7 May 1919) he refers to them as “joy-beams”.

Clearly, Siegfried had been in Edmund’s mind for some while, and since reading Siegfried’s early war poems in 1917, Edmund had cherished the hope of meeting him. Something in Siegfried had touched him and driven him to push past his natural diffidence and take up his pen.

In 1919, only months after the end of the War, Siegfried was already a man in a position of influence as literary editor of the Daily Herald. He was a man of celebrity, mixing with the kind of people who for Edmund were simply names, if that. He was also very busy as literary editor. The letters and ‘bad verse’ (Siegfried’s words) kept arriving ceaselessly on his desk. So when Edmund’s first letter and chapbook of poems presented itself to Siegfried, he was not expecting anything particular to arouse his interest. But it did - and it was not the war that did it, but an evocation of a rural scene and story. Edmund had touched him and driven him to push past his natural diffidence and take up his pen.

At this point I’d like to reflect a little on the situation. Max Egremont – in his biography of Siegfried - wrote that ‘the greatest friendship of his post-1918 life began’ when Siegfried met Edmund. The question I asked myself when thinking about this talk is - where was the fit between this striking, tall man brought up in an upper middle class home where money was scarcely an issue and this other, slight man from a family of nine, headed by two teaching parents who struggled to keep things afloat financially? In addition there was an age difference of ten years between them.

The very first link forged was through both men’s interest in poetry. Edmund had been impressed by Siegfried’s early war poems and now as Siegfried read the chapbook of poems Edmund had sent him -

Within 5 minutes I knew that I had discovered a poet.
But also within that five minutes he was moved by Edmund’s poetic presentation of the Kent/Sussex countryside. As Siegfried read the opening verses of one of Edmund’s earliest poems “The Silver Bird of Herndyke Mill” (written Jan 1916 when he was nineteen) he had ‘quite a thrill of surprise’. Edmund had been brought up only eight miles away from Matfield (where Siegfried grew up) in the village of Yalding, and like Siegfried, he had a love of rural life and a detailed knowledge of its ways. Straightaway two major interests for both men had been ignited.

The third common interest was of course the War, and this too was mentioned in Edmund’s first letter:

- the poems were written at school but not printed until 1916 when I was in France…
With gratitude not only for your vivacious criticism in the Herald but also for your great efforts throughout the war to bring the ferocity of the trenches home to a public more disturbed about rations than Passchendaele -

Siegfried’s curiosity about Edmund had been roused: he wrote in reply:

*When are you going to Oxford? And how old are you? And what did you do in the Army?*

He included an invitation to come and see him in London. Within these first two letters to each other the foundation of much of their potential friendship had been laid.

Edmund’s second letter to Siegfried, of 7 May, is full of irony and humour, qualities that no doubt appealed to Siegfried. He must have recognised within this use of ironic humour a shared attitude to the war. The links between Siegfried’s complaint against the war and the way it had been run and Edmund’s experience of it are evident here:

*My age is 22 (writes Edmund).*

*I joined the Army – officers’ branch – from school in Sept. 1915, in a state (betrayed by some tearful verses in Pastorals) of singular misery.*

He pokes fun at his emotional state here when, to a schoolboy with a scholarship to Oxford in his hand, the war beckons and, still eighteen, he joins up:

*In May 1916, I reported “120 yds from where the mail boat berths AAA” …*

AAA standing for Ack, Ack, Ack: full stop in Morse Code and the phonetic alphabet. The sound resembles that of a gun – quite appropriate for the environment he had fetched up in.

*… and was sent to the 11th Royal Sussex (39th Div: am I right in thinking you were with the 38th)? The next 2 years passed pleasantly away (tho I didn’t, but came home for six month’s rest viz. painful experience of Home Service conditions, just in time to miss the 1918 performance).*

*I was stigmatised with the usual ribbon in 1916), and for a few weeks was on Brigade HQ …*

The ribbon was the Military Cross. Edmund is clearly here dissociating himself from the paraphernalia of military rewards – his opinion of the Generals was low:

*but my free speech secured my return to the less disgusting front line, where I kept people’s spirits up by letting loose any hopes of returning world sanity that I could collect.*
The tone of this letter sets a model for much of their correspondence, which is alive with wit and demonstrates the spark which fed their relationship. On 2 June Siegfried writes to Edmund:

- I like your poetry better than ever, but am too busy for words. You have the real spark in you, I am sure. Don't forget to let me know when you are within reach of town. I know Uckfield well. Used to hunt regularly with the Southdown.

Yours, SS

Edmund’s reply on 6 June takes up the reference to Uckfield, but as hunting was never an occupation of his – nor would it have been available to him - he shares instead with Siegfried his literary knowledge of Uckfield:

I believe Charles Lamb once patronized its first-class country hotels

He’d hit on another shared interest – writers and literature. Their subsequent correspondence is alight with references of all kinds to the stars, great and small, of English literature.

Their first meeting was arranged at 39 Half Moon Street: also present were Edward Shanks, WJ Turner, and JC Squire. Edmund was a man who lacked confidence and could feel awkward in the company of those whom he perceived to be of a higher social standing than his own. His reactions to that occasion were recorded as follows:

You will believe that I was at once bewildered and happy, and that I put on my best collar and tie. When I reached Sassoon’s rooms, he came forward – a tall young man, almost nervous I thought ... I made an attempt to seem used to such illustrious company, but it must have been rather weak.

Siegfried - Edmund’s senior and also a man already well known and in the swim of things - possibly represented something of the father-figure for Edmund. Siegfried certainly felt protective in his feelings of friendship towards Edmund and wrote in his diary:

It is the frailty of Blunden which makes him unique. Perhaps my vanity is flattered by my protective feeling for him. Spirit burns in his body with the apparent fragility of a flame. I want always to be imposing the bulk of my physical robustness between him and the brutish threatening winds of the outside world.

But for all his shyness and apparent fragility Edmund is undaunted in his pursuance of the relationship.

Siegfried’s reply to Edmund’s of 6 June is dated 19 August. He now refers to Edmund’s poem “A Country God” having been accepted by Graves for publication in the periodical The Owl, of which Graves was one of the editors. He is obviously responsible for the poem reaching Graves as he writes:

I hope you are pleased that you are making your bow in The Owl (I showed your poems to Graves and WJ Turner and both were very impressed).

The literary world is beginning to open up to Edmund, who is very aware that Siegfried’s encouragement is responsible for his continuing to write poetry and for this entrée into literary life. There is a tribute to Siegfried in a letter Edmund wrote to him on 24 November 1921:
I doubt that if you had not put new resolution into me by your immediate welcome of an unknown chapbook, whether I should ever have trained my poetical power into that of writing poetry – and since then I have cause upon cause for speaking your praise.

In this same letter Edmund shows he is unafraid to offer Siegfried poetic advice in response to Siegfried’s remarks regarding his own poetic output:

You have seen some of the duds I’ve secretly manufactured this year, and you know how dud they are.

Edmund replies telling Siegfried that he is

one of the most colour-charming lyrical landscape poets (the quality is Crome-like in you)

and encourages to him to write in pastoral vein about the Kent they both know. As Edmund is set to write his next book in pastoral mode he jokes that he and SS will have to divide up the parts of Kent to write about, and

tussle hard about Yalding, Collier Street, Marden and the parts adjacent.

In 1922 Siegfried sends Edmund ‘three little ditties’ of his, asking him, if he approves of them, to hand them to *The Nation*. He clearly has confidence in Edmund’s poetic judgement.

It is clear from the letters how quickly the ‘kinship of mind’ developed between these two men. They have already discovered a shared understanding of poetry, rural Kent and Sussex, the War and literature, and there are further interests to follow. But the relationship also worked at a deeper level and for Siegfried it was summed it up like this:

*He (Edmund) is one of the rare people in whom I recognize beyond all doubt some comradeship of the mind which leads me outside the exhausted atmosphere of my introspections. With Blunden I am my better self; I feel an intense sympathy and affection for him; but it is a kinship of mind; the gross elements of sex are miraculously remote.*

For Siegfried this was vitally important. Edmund was heterosexual but he understood and respected Siegfried’s homosexual side. He made efforts to include Siegfried’s homosexual friends and never judged that aspect of Siegfried’s life. What this meant was that they could explore all their other interests free of anxiety: the world they shared was safe from the emotional fluctuations of a sexual entanglement. To Siegfried this was a relief and for Edmund it meant that he could have the steady friendship he wanted and needed.

Life for Edmund was not easy at this particular juncture. He had married Mary Daines in June 1918, after coming back from France that spring. She was for him the epitome of the rural idyll – the eleventh child of the blacksmith in the Suffolk village of Cheveley. He was exhausted, and ill with asthma after two years at the Front, and the romance with her filled him with hope and the possibility of a future. She became pregnant in October 1918 and their baby Joy was born in July 1919.

Many of you will be familiar with Joy’s fate. But the irony is that Edmund and Mary had come to London so that Edmund could meet up again with Siegfried on 25 August. The way I was told it by my mother, Claire, was that they had been travelling up from Plymouth, where they had taken Joy to show her to Edmund’s parents. At the station they had bought some milk which it is thought was the likely cause of Joy’s death.
Edmund met Siegfried on the 26 August. By the afternoon of the 27 Joy showed signs of great distress and Mary took her to Great Ormond Street Hospital where Edmund joined her. He immediately gave his blood for a transfusion. But it was too late.

Her death was not only a dreadful loss for both parents - for Edmund it tapped into other levels of bereavement which perhaps up until now he had not had time to acknowledge. All the losses of his friends in the war now attached themselves to this huge loss of his first daughter. The result was a complicated response to the post-traumatic stress that he was already experiencing.

When Siegfried hears of Joy’s death he writes on 5 September 1919:

My dear Blunden,

I am too sorry for words to hear of your trouble. There is nothing more to say, is there?

I showed your early poems to Edward Marsh yesterday and he asked if you'd send him a copy of the purple book (The Harbingers).

Siegfried’s enthusiasm for Edmund’s poetry must have been a solace for Edmund, who never mentions his loss in the letters we have. Where his difficulties are expressed, however, are in his poetry - and it is his war poetry at this time that indicates his feelings of depression, dislocation, loss and stagnation.

The very first indication poetically appears in *The Waggoner*, which was published in 1920. Here, in the poem “The Estrangement”, written in 1919 he refers to his ‘soul grown strange in France’. By the time that “The Shepherd” is published in 1922 his predicament is clear to see. His war experience is beginning to emerge among all the pastoral poems – and it is not a pretty sight. Perhaps the most well known poem to describe his state of mind by 1921 is “1916 seen from 1921”:

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
For 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 lizards 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.

This poem expresses a great deal about Edmund’s inner world. His outer one carried on regardless, and the correspondence of 1921 shows how industrious the two men were in the literary world.

Siegfried’s continued encouragement must have helped Edmund enormously. The guidance, the encouragement, the acceptance which Siegfried gave to Edmund must have provided an important support at a time when his personal life was difficult. He is able to separate off the emotional difficulties and forge his way forward with his work in the arenas of poetic, journalistic and literary research. The way they are now addressing each other conveys the increasing regard between them: ‘My dear Protagonist’ starts Edmund on 15 December 1920, and ‘Dear B’ writes Siegfried on 22 June 1921.

Edmund decided to dedicate The Shepherd to Siegfried, and this tells us a great deal about what he already meant to Edmund. Siegfried is delighted about the dedication and writes to Edmund on 1 November 1921:

About the dedication – can only say “a proud moment in my life,” as you are one of the very, very few from whom a dedication means anything to me.

Friendship was something that was important to both men, and it was this value which they both placed on it which helped them through the more difficult patches of their lives. Perhaps it was also that both men had a need – Edmund for a steady encouragement and interest in him, while Siegfried ‘needed to be needed’, as J.Stuart Roberts writes in his biography. Roberts also remarks:

It has been written about Sassoon that, like Edmund Blunden, he ‘was absolute for friendship. [For Siegfried] Only one person still came near the ideal – Edmund Blunden. He was ‘the living emblem of all that is finest in this hazardous world of dust and dreams.’

Siegfried had a generous spirit, and the more he got to know Edmund, the more he wanted to share what he valued in him with someone who had provided him with support. This was Thomas Hardy, and so it was that Siegfried took Edmund to Max Gate. Afterwards Siegfried wrote about the two of them:

B is sensitive in the same way as TH. They share a sort of old-fashioned seriousness about everything connected with authorship. Both are fundamentally countrified and homely. Even in outward appearance they have a similar bird-like quality … With each

\(^1\) John Stuart Roberts: Siegfried Sassoon 1886-1967 (Richard Cohen Books 1999)
of them I feel unembarrassed and able to chatter about commonplace matters in a commonplace way. Two little men of genius. One is 82 and the other barely 25....

Gradually, as the friendship developed, a sense of equality established itself. It has been written that nowhere in their relationship was there any rivalry except where cricket was concerned. This passion that both men shared is first mentioned by Edmund in his letter of 26 November 1920:

I notice one flaw in Clare – he has no reference to cricket though you’ll see a football sidelight.

Cricket becomes a shared passion, both men having a huge knowledge of the game and its players at all levels. Siegfried writes to Edmund on 19 July 1923 and addresses the letter from:

Mount Stand, Lords, W9:

I write this at my ease, as J. Pluvius is giving “a delightful display” and saturating slowly “all round the wicket”. However the score board looks fine to amateur eyes, 11.2.6. Hobbs, lbw and Sutcliffe clean bowled by Sussex express (Tate). I was here yesterday, and vastly struck by the length and speed off the pitch of young Tate, who has a most impressive way of doing his bowling work, though curiously ungainly in build and ordinary gait.

And it carries on in the same vein. The rivalry was expressed when they were playing on opposing teams as they did at Heytesbury in 1938, when Edmund’s team was beaten by Siegfried’s.

But I wonder if yet another of their shared passions did not include a sense of healthy rivalry. That concerned book hunting. For both of them this activity had started when they were little more than boys, and it was something they loved to talk about in their letters. My father, always careful with money and never having an excess of it, had a policy of never spending more than 6d on a book. Siegfried did not restrict himself to such a rule. Because of their knowledge of literature, they knew what they were looking for and over the years they encouraged each other with their constant search for the unusual, the interesting, the seemingly lost copy of whatever took their interest.

This lively and semi-rivalrous interest is beautifully expressed in a piece by Siegfried which he called a ‘jeu d’esprit’: “An Adjustment”. It encompasses much of the essence of their friendship. This humorous and witty piece, written in the style of Shakespeare, is about book collecting, cricket, literature.

The copy I have in our Blunden archive has written in it: Edmund with love, SS.

And:

This edition of AN ADJUSTMENT is limited to 150 numbered and initialled copies, of which this is number...13 not out (in SS’s hand)

The book central to this poetic dialogue is The Young Cricketer’s Tutor by John Nyren, edited by Charles Cowden Clarke (friend of Keats), and published in 1833. Siegfried had bought a first edition of The Young Cricketer’s Tutor in Brighton in 1900 when he was just fourteen - he already had the book- hunter’s quick eye. Twenty-three years later he gave it to Edmund.

Eleven years later he bought a second, even more immaculate, copy - this one bearing the signature of C.C.Clarke. He gave this new copy to Edmund in exchange for the first copy, and
between its pages he inserted “An Adjustment”. It is a witty skit full of the soul of their friendship and describes the giving of the second copy to Edmund by Siegfried.

Siegfried sets the skit at “Heytesbury Palace”.

AN ADJUSTMENT

SCENE. A ROOM IN HEYTESBURY PALACE

ENTER DUKE AND BLUNDED.

DUKE

Eleven completed cycles wheeling on
Have now made hoary winters in the world,
And with a punctual or unpunctual redict
Engross’d old earth with green-stuff; umpired out,
Eleven full-fixtured seasons, wet or fine,
Our levell’d swards with combats have beteamed
Since I that valued volume first entrusted
To thy wise wardenship.

BLUNDE

They have. ’Tis so.

DUKE

Worthily said. Thy answer fits me well,
And, like the modest groundsel which prefers
A privy growth in gaudy prank’d parterres,
Emboldens my couch’d eloquence.

BLUNDE

Speak on;
And heedfulness, like mustard brought to beef,
Shall source the zeal of mine obedient ear.

DUKE

How say’st thou, - sauce?

BLUNDE

I did, my liege, employ
A homely figure of contemporal speech,
For which excess I humbly crave remission.

DUKE

Hereby I grant it; and with separate breath
Do now appoint you, in perpetual fief
Bat-oiler to our person.

BLUNDE

The appointment
Outruns my merit by as many leagues
As the computed centipede hath legs.

DUKE

Thanks, thanks, good Edmund. (Clock strikes)
But yon duteous dial
Bids me proceed and instantly divulge
The cargo of my yet unhaven’d vessel
Which doth much daily. Hold you, sirrah, still
Tough to that purpose which you, some few moons
Removed from what I can but call ‘this day’,
To me imparted? Dost thou still propose
To render back that first edition (cloth
Frontispiece slightly spotted, name erased
From fly-leaf of old Nyren’s “Cricket Tutor”
Which I on thee conferr’d full ninety years
Subsequent to the date of publication?
Art thou resolved?

BLUN DEN I am, my lord, enforted
In concrete pill-box of that same intent,
And no combusted engin’ry of logic
Shall from that vow evict me.

DUKE Nobly spoken.
Hand me the book. (Inspects it)
Thou hast conserved it well,
And in recognisance of thy safe stewardry
I grant thee, gratefully, and sans compunction,
This cleanlier copy of the immortal work,
Engarnish’d by th’ authentic autograph
Of the editor himself, Charles Cowden Clarke!

BLUN DEN I do, my lord, most thanksomely accept
This token of thy topmost blandishment.

DUKE Enough. Let’s hence and roll the well-marled turf.
Good wickets than fine speeches are more worth.

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In concluding, I would like to acknowledge Carol Rothkopf’s part in my research for this talk. She was most generous in allowing me access to the typescript of the Blunden/Sassoon correspondence from 1919 – 1929: herein lies a treasury of riches which, once it is published, we will all be able to enjoy. Because of my privileged preview I have come to understand something of the love, in the best sense, that Siegfried and Edmund gave each other.

They saw the best in each other - Edmund seeing Siegfried as:

   in the line – a princely youth emerging from a gray, greasy dugout’s maw into the upheaval of iron and clay, a sun to face the Sun.

For him the light that Siegfried brought to his world was one of the brightest in his firmament. For Siegfried, Edmund is:

   my ideal brother-poet and writer.

With Siegfried’s death their great correspondence concluded. Edmund, writing his obituary on Siegfried, described him as ‘one of the ablest men I have known’.

It seemed as if, with the loss of Siegfried, my father’s own life started to shut down. Less than a year later he wrote his final contribution for the TLS, as he gradually retreated into the illness which influenced his very last years.

On 17 June 1929 Siegfried had written to Edmund:
May we walk some day with Crabbe and Clare, and Coleridge, and be coached by Alfred Mynn [all round cricketer for Kent]

In meadows where all names are one with Grace [the great cricketer]
And Henry Vaughan reveals his unknown face.

Let us hope that Siegfried got his wish.

Margi Blunden