Edmund Blunden

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Introduction

Three years ago, I don’t believe I had ever heard of Edmund Blunden. But since I started working for the British Council in Japan, I have been coming across him everywhere, and this has prompted me to look in more detail at his fascinating story.

Before I begin, I would like to thank in particular Professor Ogasawara, who came in to see me a few months into my current stay in Japan, and lent me three books, two of which were about Blunden. It was he who sparked my interest, and helped me put into context the traces of Edmund Blunden I started to come across at every turn.

I don’t claim that there is much original research in this paper. It is difficult to add much to Barry Webb’s excellent biography of Blunden, which draws on a huge amount of source material, mainly in the form of Blunden’s many letters to his friends. But I hope you’ll agree with me that Blunden’s relationship with Japan is a fascinating story and it is about time it was told to this society.

The first thing that struck me about Blunden was his prodigious work rate. He achieved so much in his life that I know I am going to disappoint many of you by not discussing certain aspects. He was, of course, a poet. He wrote one of the classic prose works about the First World War, namely *Undertones of War*. He was also a prodigious literary scholar, among whose many achievements was the rescuing from obscurity of the pastoral poet John Clare. But I am going to say very little about any of these things, and focus entirely on his relationship with Japan, and the longer-term impact it had. It is, I think, apparent that Blunden was the forerunner of the British Council in Japan.

Blunden’s early interest in Japan

According to Takeshi Saito (1976), Blunden’s interest in Japan originated when he was a boy. In Blunden’s poem “Looking Eastward” published in 1937, there occur the lines:

> Down our street when I was a boy I met with a friendly man  
> Who took me to the stone-cross steps and said to me, See Japan.

Saito says Blunden told him this actually happened (1976), while Sumie Okada locates this encounter in Blunden’s childhood village of Yalding in Kent. (1988)

I don’t plan to say much about Blunden’s poetry, but it is worth noting that he is primarily known for the strong presence of nature in his work. He was brought up in the English countryside, and his love for nature was presumably a factor in his championing of the pastoral poet John Clare. Given the
constant presence of nature in Japanese poetry, it may well have been a factor in his initial interest in Japan.

**Blunden’s first period in Japan (1924-7)**

In 1924 Blunden followed the “friendly man's” advice and accepted an invitation to take up the Chair of English Literature at Tokyo Imperial University (now Tokyo University), arriving in Japan that April. His name had been put forward by the Keats scholar Takeshi Saito, whom Blunden first met in November 1923, and who was to become one of Blunden’s most valued friends. (Webb 1990)

Blunden was evidently intrigued by Japan and did not require a great deal of urging to take up the post. “From a purely practical point of view, Blunden accepted his post in Japan because of the offer of a very high salary at Teidai [Tokyo Imperial University]. It was customary for the Ministry of Education to pay almost five times as much to foreign teachers as to their Japanese counterparts.” (Okada 1988) The salary, in fact, was £900 a year, a big increase from the £250 he had been earning on the staff of the *Athenaeum* magazine in London, although he had been supplementing this with other work. (Webb 1990)

Another factor seems to be that Blunden remained restless after the horrors of the First World War. Although the War had ended six years before, it contributed to his desire for a change of scene. But his wife, with whom he had two young children, decided not to accompany him. Blunden wrote to a friend “she can’t grow enthusiastic over foreign parts. She fears the earthquakes and the lingo.” (The great Tokyo earthquake had taken place the previous year.) Mary, on the other hand, wrote to the same correspondent “Will you write and tell this man not to go and bury himself in Japan for three years? He refuses to take any notice of my pleadings but says he will proceed with the proceedings. I cannot go – it depresses me greatly.” (Webb 1990) Blunden threw himself into his work with his usual extraordinary energy, but it seems to me that for a young man of 27 to be separated from his wife for over three years was a recipe for trouble.

Blunden’s friends initially found some problem keeping in touch with him because they couldn’t understand the Japanese system of addresses. The situation was eased by a jingle from Blunden’s friend Eddie Marsh:

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Blunden does his lyric tricks
Down at Number Twenty-Six
Kitayamabushi-cho,
Ushigome, Tokyo.(Webb 1990)
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Saito says, sounding surprisingly half-hearted in the circumstances, that Blunden “did his best as professor” (1976). He certainly found it very difficult at first to adapt to Japan. But Blunden was destined to be one of those foreigners who overcome the initial frustrations and come to understand, appreciate and love Japan. He wrote later that “Japan does not disappoint the
stranger; she corrects him with her fancies, perhaps a little grimly, and then begins to enrich him with her truths”. (quoted in Webb 1990)

From the Japanese side, he was a hit. The students were initially surprised by his informality and approachability – his predecessor had always travelled to and from his lectures in grand style, by car from his rooms at the Imperial Hotel, but Blunden’s more modest rooms were constantly full of his students, on many of whom he had an important influence. The novelist Tomoji Abe, for instance, was one of his students at this time, and later stated that Blunden was “Japan’s best friend: he brings out the best in us.” (quoted in Webb 1990)

As Saito says, “he made a great number of friends and admirers not only in the university, but also among men of letters in general.” (1976)

One feature of Blunden which endeared him to the Japanese was his modesty and reticence. Another may have been his pacifism. Blunden had been permanently marked by his experiences in World War I, and he was writing them up during his first period in Japan as *Undertones of War*. He wrote the bulk of *Undertones of War* during his stay in Japan, although this work wasn’t finally completed until he returned to the UK. Yet according to Saito (1976), he never mentioned his war exploits, despite the fact that he had been awarded the Military Cross for them. (Morpurgo 1997)

But Blunden was not a saint. Indeed, this was part of his attraction to his students, one of whom wrote “that he was reminded of the nose of a tengu – a Japanese demon noted for his outsize nose, and his love for drinking and outrageous behaviour!” (Okada 1988)

Blunden was asked to extend his contract for a further three years, but there were ominous signs that all was not well with his marriage, and he decided it was time to go home. He promised, in typically poetic form, not to forget his students:

From “The Author’s Last Words To His Students” (1927) (in Japanese Garland (1928))

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And I will ever pray for your souls’ health,
Remembering how, deep-tasked yet eager-eyed,
You loved imagination’s commonwealth.
Following with smiling wonder a frail guide
Who bears beyond the ocean
The voice of your devotion.
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**Blunden’s relationship with Aki Hayashi**

I mentioned a moment ago that it seemed a recipe for trouble for a young man of 27 to leave his wife and children behind and take up a post in Tokyo for three years, especially given the difficulties in communicating across the world in the 1920s. And so it proved.
Blunden’s first marriage may have been a mistake anyway. He married in June 1918, when he was 21, and his wife Mary Daines was only 18. The War was still on at the time, but Blunden had been posted back to a training centre in Suffolk, and he had met her in the pub, where she was serving the drinks, just a few months before. (Webb 1990) The information I have about her is contradictory, but mostly suggests she was a simple country girl. According to one commentator, she was “a local girl from an unsophisticated and unliterary background… (her father was a village blacksmith).” (McPhail and Guest 1999) Another states that “[s]he had received the minimum of formal education and was entirely unbookish”. (Webb 1990) Siegfried Sassoon, whose life-long friendship with Blunden began at this period, says in his diary that “Mary B. has a peasant-like mind which does not interest itself in literature. But she is intelligent, in her own way…And she is an attractive little creature, in her countrified way.” (cited in Webb 1990) But elsewhere she is described as “an intelligent woman who occasionally sent her poems to The Nation and other magazines.” (Okada 1988) I can only assume that Blunden encouraged her to write, and that these poems were the result.

Overall, it looks likely that Blunden’s whirlwind courtship and marriage reflected, at least on his part, a yearning for the simple rural life amid the horrors of war. Mary Blunden’s first baby died at the age of five weeks in the summer of 1919, but the couple subsequently had two more children.

As mentioned earlier, Mary refused to go to Japan with Blunden, and also tried to persuade him not to go. It was a long way from the English countryside they both loved, and at the time, it was something of a hardship posting. Tokyo was still largely in ruins after the 1923 earthquake, and Tokyo University itself was undergoing rebuilding and was largely in temporary premises. This noise is referred to in one of Blunden’s poems:

Like men of fire, in painful night,  
The Eastern builders thud  
Their iron round;  

(Okada 1988)

In the summer of 1925, a little over a year after leaving England, Blunden embarked on an affair with Aki Hayashi, a young Japanese woman, although she was seven years older than Blunden himself, and not especially prepossessing. She was an English teacher at a Junior High School near Nagoya, and he met her at a Summer School in Karuizawa. This affair and Hayashi’s subsequent life form the subject of a fascinating book by Sumie Okada (1988). There seems little doubt that the affair was adulterous – in a letter to Hayashi in September 1925, Blunden quotes back to her an earlier letter from her to him: ‘I have offered my heart, my body and everything to you.’ (Okada 1988) Blunden doesn’t seem to have had any intention of separating from his wife in favour of Hayashi; he told her “This is not a declaration against my wife,” and actually sent copies of his wife’s letters to Hayashi. But as he put it, “it’s unnatural to act like hermits or icebergs”. (Webb 1990) He was concerned that news of his liaison not get back to Britain, writing to Aki that “it will help us, if we can keep a secret.” His wife wrote to
him about rumours concerning Blunden’s friend Hodgson, who was in a similar university post in Sendai, advising Blunden “Above all keep out of people’s way so they cannot blame you for anything that is done; as you know, it would be such a blow for me I could never never forgive you.” (Webb 1990)

Nevertheless, the relationship can’t have been much of a secret in Tokyo. Hayashi gave up her job and moved in with Blunden in early 1926. Since Blunden was already married, it wasn’t clear where this relationship was going from Hayashi’s point of view, and this obviously preyed on her mind. He promised to take her back to England with him as his secretary when he returned, and she eventually persuaded him to write for her the closest thing she could get to a promise of marriage, dated January 17 1927:

In case I should ever marry a second time I should in all probability/likelihood marry Aki.

Edmund Blunden

(Okada 1988)

Return to England with Hayashi

In April 1927, when Blunden set sail back to England, Hayashi was with him, having obtained a visa as his secretary. (Okada 1988) It may well be that by then Blunden’s sexual interest in Hayashi had already faded; there is no evidence of any sexual relationship once they reached England, even though Blunden’s wife accused him of bringing back a “geisha girl” from Japan (Webb 1990). According to Okada, “[f]or a time [Blunden] established a ménage à trois with his first wife and Aki, and later hit upon the expedient of making Aki his permanent literary assistant”. (Okada 1988) This isn’t quite fair, since it seems that by the time he left Japan Blunden had every intention of limiting her role to that of his literary assistant. But this much, at least, he had solidly promised to her, and he carried out this promise faithfully by employing Hayashi for the rest of her life. Shortly after their arrival back in Britain, he posted Hayashi up to London to work for him in the British Library while he and Mary lived in Clare in Suffolk.

The fault, however, was by no means all on Blunden’s side. While her husband was away, his wife had also taken a lover, in the form of a local manual labourer, and her letters to Blunden had started to dry up at around the time Blunden embarked on his own affair. The local vicar gave Blunden some hints as to what was going on, and by February 1927, before he left Tokyo, his letters suggest he was already losing hope of rescuing his marriage. He wrote to Sassoon that “if this chapter of my life is now at an end I get rid of some encumbrances as much as I lose a very promising and gifted housemate….I am inclined in any event to live apart.”

In fact he was pleasantly surprised by Mary’s affection on his return, and all might yet have been well, but it was difficult to overlook the fact that Blunden had installed Hayashi in a flat in London. A number of Blunden’s friends took his wife’s side, and one of them asked Siegfried Sassoon to advise him to send Hayashi back to Japan.
Although it seems quite likely that by the time they returned to London, Blunden's relationship with Hayashi may have been purely platonic, Blunden regarded as sacred the promises he had made to her, and although she clearly played a part in the breakdown of his marriage, he considered this a price he had to pay. He wrote to his mother in 1928 that:

I have one unalterable principle left – touching personal affairs – and you may think it foolish, or implying some hidden factor, but I believe you will agree with me. I will not sacrifice Miss Hayashi who was so perfect in her devotion to me in Japan. I am aware that she is in love with me…. A.H. loves me, but without sexual entanglement. So earnest a piety cannot have a grossness in it. (quoted in Webb 1990)

Mary continued to meet her lover, whose name was Cyril Keeble, whenever Blunden was away. In June 1928 Blunden met Keeble, describing him as “a very sound and quite sensitive and devoted man”, and wrote to his mother “I accept my defeat.” The marriage was clearly doomed, and it ended in divorce in 1931.

This should have been Aki Hayashi’s moment, but Blunden no longer wanted to marry her. Indeed, although Blunden was faithful to his promise to look after her, she must have had some difficult times. In 1930 she fell behind on her rent payments and had actually reached the point where “bailiffs had removed all the furniture from her home” before Blunden rescued her. (Webb 1990) In 1933 he married Sylva Norman, a journalist – a move which caused a temporary crisis in the relationship with Hayashi. In March 1932 he wrote to her:

[Y]ou are trying to make things difficult for me, I am afraid. I have noticed that tendency in you, and forgiven it; but try not to hurt me! …[S]hould it become possible for me to marry Miss Norman, I ask you to show your gratitude to me, and your love for me, by treating that with the greatest reverence and good will. As you know, such a step on my part would not mean that your living in London and serving me is to be altered. You have my promise and I mean it. (Okada 1988)

Blunden was also careful to head off any possible problems with his new wife. He wrote to her in 1932 that:

…on my side, as I briefly told you, there are long-sustained loyalties, for which I have had to fight and to risk much, and which I should do an ugly thing to desert now…one who loves me is Aki Hayashi…I have wished that she would find somebody to charm her, but she cannot: all her view is – the miserable E.B. by her invested with light and glory…to injure her by throwing her aside is unthinkable. (Webb 1990)

By late 1932 Hayashi gave up and accepted the situation. She continued to work for Blunden, not only as his research assistant in London but also “as his seamstress”. (Webb 1990) She told Blunden that “I would rather be at your
service starving, than do any other work for any other people in any country.”
(Webb 1990)

**Between the two Japanese periods**

Although there was in the end a 20-year gap between Blunden’s two periods in Japan, he considered returning there much earlier, particularly at the point when his marriage was falling apart. He maintained regular contacts with friends in Japan – particularly Takeshi Saito – and he continued to have some impact in promoting Japan at the British end. He spent most of this period as a Fellow at Merton College Oxford, a college which continues to play a very important part in the Japan-British relationship, as members of this Society know very well. Among the people he influenced there was Richard Storry, the historian of Japan who later became Professor of Japanese Studies at Oxford – he first travelled to Japan as a result of Blunden’s urging.

Blunden had been deeply affected by his experiences as a young man in the First World War. Indeed, his fellow First World War poet and life-long friend Siegfried Sassoon “maintained that Blunden was the poet of the war most lastingly obsessed by it.” (McPhail and Guest 1999) One result of this obsession was that Blunden was strongly pacifist, a stance which became increasingly controversial in the run-up to the Second World War. During the rise of the militarists in Japan in the 1930s, Blunden’s positive view of the country became an increasingly unusual one, but he was not deterred. “In the Margin”, a poem he published in 1938, gives a very clear statement of his view that Japanese militarism was an aberration and that the real spirit of Japan lay elsewhere:

“In the Margin” (1938)

> While few men praise and hardly more defend  
> That armed power which from here, and as things are,  
> Appears the whole Japan; while this forced war  
> Inhuman drags to some inglorious end,  
> And kills, and fires, and fouls, I too must feel  
> Horror and wonder at the deeds thus done,  
> And fear each day’s exploit of crashing steel  
> Has merely lost what old Japan had won.

> But through the smoke and dust I still can see,  
> And may I not forget, much that belongs  
> To that great name “Japan” as well as those.  
> Faultless devotions raise clear eyes to me;  
> Through crowded streets gray-headed virtue goes,  
> And from poor farms I hear peaceful old songs.

In 1940, Blunden attended a dinner in Oxford with Dr. Kawai, a Japanese “travelling Ambassador” who was on his way to meet Hitler. One of that Japanese group told Edmund that he had been very influential on the
Japanese literary world, and Edmund wrote in his diary that ‘the East may call me again’. (Webb 1990)

It wasn’t just Japan that Blunden remained positive about. He was a passionate believer in the ability of intercultural dialogue to build bridges and avoid war, and he maintained his German friendships well beyond the point at which it was considered suspect to do so. With hindsight, it is clear that Blunden was naïve; his horror of war meant that he refused to believe in Hitler’s aggressive intentions until the very last minute. After the war was under way, “he wrote a letter to the Times in 1940 to protest against indiscriminate bombing of German cities, and [as a result] came under suspicion for apparently ‘pro-German’ sentiments”. (McPhail and Guest 1999)

He did nevertheless serve in the military again in the Second World War as a map instructor with the Oxford University Officers’ Training Corps.

Blunden’s second period in Japan (1947-50)

While in Oxford during the War, Blunden had made a point of helping visitors from overseas. As well as maintaining his links with Japanese and German academics as far as he could, he also forged links with artists and associations from a number of other countries including Poland, India, France and Russia. In 1945, he was tempted by the offer of professorships in China and Korea. But ultimately it was Japan which was to claim him again.

Paradoxically, his refusal to hate his enemies – the very characteristic which had brought his patriotism into doubt in wartime – was now counted an essential element in the waging of peace. He found himself a guest at a Buckingham Palace garden party in July 1946, with a second invitation arriving in the following year, and he was then summoned to the Foreign Office. He was informed that a United Kingdom liaison mission was to be sent to Japan and that he was invited to become a member. The recommendation had come from a combination of those familiar with the Japanese literary and academic circles such as Vere Redman – who was to be the mission’s counsellor – and experienced diplomats such as the Ambassador to Japan, Sir Alvary Gascoigne, and a future ambassador John Pilcher. They were all acutely aware of Edmund’s special position in Japan and convinced the Foreign Office that he was the ideal person to take on the work of cultural adviser. He promptly accepted the post.[1] (Webb 1990)

According to Saito, it was Sir Vere Redman in particular who pushed to get Blunden back to Japan. (Saito 1976)

According to Webb, Blunden himself felt that he was “especially fitted” to achieve a work of reconciliation, and “[t]he idea that literature could heal wounds which politics could not was a notion which Edmund now believed more strongly than ever”. (1990) The mission, which was in a sense to use English literature to rebuild the friendship between Britain and Japan after the War, is likely to have had a strong appeal to Blunden. Blunden had consistently promoted the positive aspects of Japan in the 1930s, and he was
clearly eager to get the relationship between Japan and Britain back onto a friendly footing.

He left on 6 November 1947, this time with his family – now his third wife and child. He was delighted to be back.

When he first came to Tokyo, the city had been devastated by the great earthquake of 1923. Similarly, when he returned here in December 1947, he found Japan in a miserable condition after her defeat in war. This time he came on the staff of the United Kingdom Liaison Mission, as lecturer and educational adviser to the Representative of that Mission. He began by giving his well-prepared lectures at Tokyo University, as well as other institutions in the metropolis; and he also made lecture-tours throughout the country, from Kagoshima in the south to Asahikawa in the north, to express his deep sympathy for the Japanese people. During these two years and four months he devoted himself whole-heartedly to the revival of English studies in Japan, never once declining a request for either spoken or written contributions. According to the report of a Japanese newspaper, within that short span of time he gave about six hundred lectures in various cities - a tremendous task which no one could perform without a deep love for the Japanese, then so weary and hungry, both physically and spiritually, and not least for literary sustenance.

Wherever he spoke, he attracted huge audiences, not only of students of English literature, but of the reading public in general....One afternoon at Osaka, in April 1948, about two thousand people came to the City Hall...to hear his lecture on 'The Growth of English Literature'. They occupied even the small extra chairs that had been packed into the gangways and passages for the occasion; and many others had to stand or lean against the walls...The whole meeting, including the translation and my own speech, lasted three hours; but the audience did not move till we had left the hall. Another time, at Asahikawa in Hokkaido, in July 1949, we were taken to a Buddhist temple because in those days it was the largest building in the city. Blunden spoke on Hamlet to an overflowing audience. (Saito 1976)

Webb states that by the end of Blunden’s tour “he had delivered in excess of 600 lectures: an astonishing average of five a week.” Okada states that he delivered about 600 lectures from January 1948 to March 1950 in many places including “Kyoto, Osaka,…Tokyo,…Hokkaido and Sendai,…Hiroshima, Kure and Osaka,… Kyushu, …Okayama and Takamatsu…[and] Kumamoto….“(Okada 1988)

The lectures were intended as simple introductory talks for non-fluent English speakers – Blunden described them as ‘woolly homilies’, but with consecutive interpretation they often took two hours. (Webb 1990) Many of his lectures were published by Japanese universities as textbooks.

One reason for Blunden’s success was the friendships he had built up 20 years before. His students at Tokyo University had gone on to become influential teachers all over the country, and they rounded up their students to
sit at Blunden’s feet. As Blunden put it, “the audiences who sit through my lectures and demand that they should be long lectures, are there because they know I am an old friend of Japan”. (quoted in Webb p. 278) He was venerated to an extraordinary degree. At Jiyu Gakuen outside Tokyo, he gave a lecture to the graduates, writing Francis Bacon’s phrase ‘Abeunt Studia in Mores’ (Studies dissolve into real life) on the blackboard. The blackboard was left untouched for the next twenty years, and as far as I know Blunden’s words are still there.

In an echo of earlier Japanese traditions, Blunden also wrote poems at the drop of a hat on his travels around Japan. Takeshi Saito traced as many as seventy such unpublished poems in 1967, although I think there is room to doubt whether their quality matches their quantity.

According to Webb, Blunden’s initial contract was for a year, but this was quickly extended to 18 months and then two years. (p. 275) Subsequently his appointment was extended until March 1950. The Times, on the other hand, awaited Blunden’s return. In the archives of The Times there is some correspondence between the Foreign Office and The Times concerning Blunden’s extended stay in Japan. (Okada 1988) The Foreign Office was keen for him to stay still longer, but by early 1950 Blunden felt he really ought to be getting back to the UK.

On this second tour of duty, Blunden lived in the British Embassy compound at Ichibancho. He describes fondly the peace of his Embassy house (which I think we can identify as No. 9), compared with the chaos outside, in his essay “Tokyo Seclusion”:

> Across the lawn, above the shrubs and the wilderness (this is an English garden, more or less), the lofty mast for the old Imperial flag gleams in the moonlight. Beyond the boundary wall the lamplights of the huts which used to house the detachments of troops on duty are still shining...There are new wooden houses and offices where lately the bareness of the road-sides after fire-bombing was only dissembled with weeds and twisted metal. Two or three factory chimneys and several square magnitudes of concrete, industrial or whatever, tower above the fringes of tree and shack...The temptation is to stay within our garden wall, and let the world wag as it will. (Blunden 1950)

As word got around that I was preparing to speak about Blunden, I was deluged with materials relating to him that had been kept by the many people here in Japan whose lives he had touched. A fortnight before the lecture was given, my old friend Mr. Hiroshi Kurosawa, the Director of the Tokyo Madrigal Club, told me that Blunden had been a friend of his father Keiichi Kurosawa (who founded the Madrigal Club). It seems that Blunden didn’t have time to sing in the Club, although he had become an active singer in his Oxford days and was for a while a member of the Bach Choir (Webb 1990). I was particularly interested to hear of this connection with the Tokyo Madrigal Club because I myself have sung in the Club, on and off, since I first lived in Japan in 1983. Indeed, the Club used to rehearse at the British Council’s offices, so
it was through the Madrigal Club that I first came across the British Council 25 or so years ago. When Blunden finally left Japan, the Club took part in a combined farewell lecture and concert, and Mr. Kurosawa has kept the programme.

According to McPhail and Guest (1999), an (unnamed) Japanese professor recorded that 'the greatest merits of the occupation period in Japan were the dispatch of General MacArthur from the United States and Professor Blunden from the United Kingdom.'

Blunden after he left Japan

Blunden of course did not sever his links with Japan after he left it a second time. He came to visit and to lecture on five occasions, often accompanied by his family, which continued to grow. On one of these trips, in 1960, he even made a translation into English of two short Japanese poems, written on the occasion of the Eighth Congress of the International Society of Blood Transfusion in Tokyo. His interest in blood transfusion may seem odd, but there is presumably a connection with the fact that his first daughter, Joy, had died just five weeks after her birth in 1919, and that Blunden had given his own blood for a transfusion in the effort to save her. (Webb 1990)

His work in Japan was certainly never forgotten here. He was elected to honorary membership of the Japan Academy in 1950, and received the Order of the Rising Sun in 1963. (Webb p. 282) Commemorative stones with his poems engraved on them (sekihi) stand in Ito City in Shizuoka, in Matsushima, on Miyajima near Hiroshima and in Hiroshima itself, as well as in Hokkaido, Kyushu and Shikoku (according to Webb (p.282)).

What happened to Aki Hayashi?

Aki Hayashi never saw her homeland again. She had in a sense burnt her boats by running off with a married foreigner. When Blunden returned to Tokyo in 1947 with his third wife, Claire, and their daughter, he had left Hayashi back in London. She probably wouldn’t have come even if he had asked her. According to Okada,

She...sought to hide her address from Japanese visitors. Her strong tendency to secrecy about her life and status seems to imply a fear of Japanese gossip, and she was in any case ashamed of her one-room accommodation and single status. (1988)

In 1953, three years after returning to the UK from Japan, Blunden took up a Professorship at Hong Kong University, and he was still there in 1962 when Hayashi died. In her will, she left all her possessions to him.

I wonder if Blunden had Aki partly in mind in his 1937 poem “Lonely Love”:

I love to see those loving and beloved
Whom Nature seems to have spited; unattractive,
Unnoticeable people, whose dry track
No honey-drop of praise, or understanding,
Or bare acknowledgement that they existed,
Perhaps yet moistened. Still, they make their world.

Blunden as a forerunner of the British Council

Blunden himself did not of course work at the British Council, having been employed by the Embassy – or more accurately its immediate post-War equivalent. One interesting precedent to his work at the Embassy is that Blunden’s fellow poet John Betjeman was Press Attaché at the British Embassy in Dublin for much of World War II. Betjeman invited Blunden to visit him there, but Blunden never actually made it. (Webb 1990)

The British Council was founded 75 years ago, in 1934, and Blunden started to have dealings with it during the war years. It was through the British Council that he was offered a Professorship in Ankara in 1944, although he didn’t take it. One of his students at Oxford was Laurence Brander, who later joined the British Council as a member of staff. As far as I know Brander did not work in Japan, but he published works on both Smollett and Thackeray for the British Council. Blunden himself wrote a pamphlet on John Keats for the British Council during his second tour of duty in Japan.

The British Council was founded to foster friendly relations with other countries through cultural and educational links. Indeed, at the beginning we were called the British Committee for Relations with Other Countries. Blunden was surely very much in sympathy with our ideals, as suggested by this extract from a poem of his written in 1937 as the world moved steadily closer to war:

> Speak then with love and knighthood of each fact
> Or project or desire of human good
> In other nations; nothing thence detract.
> Be the true best by you best understood.

(from “Stanzas: Midsummer, 1937”, quoted by Takeshi Saito (1976))

I have already mentioned the enormous importance of Blunden’s work in rebuilding friendly relations between Britain and Japan after the War. I think that what happened next was also important for the history of the British Council in Japan:

G. S. Fraser (1915-80), a poet and critic...was Blunden’s successor in the post of cultural liaison officer in the British Embassy, Tokyo, in 1950 and 1951....On his way back from a lecture tour in Fukushima, he attempted suicide by jumping out of the train between Utsunomiya and Tokyo, narrowly escaping death. He was believed to have been suffering from a nervous breakdown caused by strains associated with his work. US Occupying Forces took him into their care, and he returned to England. It was said that Fraser was much frustrated because he felt it impossible to maintain the standard Blunden had set by giving 600 lectures, and by
working from 7 am to 10 pm, never refusing requests from the Japanese people. (Okada 1988)

By 1953, two year’s after Fraser’s attempted suicide, the British Council was established in Japan. Blunden’s work had been put on an institutional footing.

**Blunden and William Adams**

Returning to my own interest in Blunden, it was shortly after I had read the two books about him lent to me by Professor Ogasawara that the Embassy passed me a request to attend the annual William Adams birthday celebrations in Ito City, Shizuoka Prefecture, in July 2008. Adams, better known to Japanese people as Miura Anjin, is said to have been the first British person to reach Japan, arriving in April 1600, so it is understandable that the Embassy should celebrate his birthday as, in a sense, the birth of Anglo-Japanese relations.

I might have guessed that Blunden would have been there before me. He, too, as (in effect) my predecessor as Cultural Counsellor at the British Embassy, had made the journey down to Ito to attend this celebration, exactly 50 years before me. Unlike me, however, he had written a poem to mark the occasion, which in Japanese fashion has now been inscribed on a stone by the harbour, next to the memorial to Will Adams himself. Together with all the dignitaries of Ito City, and the local press, I took part in a Christian service to pray for Adams’ soul, standing outside by the harbour on a beautiful fine day when the breeze from the sea perfectly offset the summer heat. And then I had to read out the poem.

*To the Citizens of ITO*

Here then, while Shakespeare yet was with us, came
An Englishman to win a different fame;
And with his different skill, to find a place
In the long chronicles of Nippon’s race;
How gladly I, after three hundred years,
Come where Will Adams led the pioneers
Of ship-design in ITO; still you praise,
You men of ITO; his laborious days,
And still, though Time has borne him so far hence,
Name him the Pilot in pre-eminence.
I know his home in England and I know
At last his home by the Pacific’s flow,
And am most happy, thinking of that man
Who first united England and Japan;
Happy, to find that spirit flowering still
Which set your garland on the brow of Kentish Will.

8 July, 1948            Edmund Blunden


Acknowledgment

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