

**EDMUND BLUNDEN AND ALAN ROSS,  
CRICKET, AND MEMORIES OF THE  
PAST**

Edmund Blunden (1896–1973) spent from September 1953 to May 1964 as a Professor of English Literature at the University of Hong Kong where he managed to maintain his correspondence and obsession with cricket.<sup>1</sup> A hitherto unpublished letter from this period is now in the possession of the present writer<sup>2</sup> and addressed to Alan Ross (1922–2001),<sup>3</sup> the noted journalist, *The Observer* cricket correspondent, and poet. On a single sheet of unruled paper in black ink, Blunden writes in a semicopper printed hand:

The University | Hong Kong | 19 September 1955

Dear Alan,

Thanks to S. Sassoon. I have before me 'End of the Season', an excellent essay and adieu. You have often given people like me great pleasure by your cricket allusions in poetry and in prose. This one (but it really is your subject) is capital. (You will say I wish it was . . .) Neither John Langridge nor G. Cox need leave the 1st class field, & had they played for England this summer, well? But we are so tied nowadays to winning, after all. In the photograph they don't seem to care all that much.

Some day please have a (pro bono) talk with Bates at Christ's Hospital. You remember he was very nearly a Hobbs. I have kept wicket behind him, but he was not worrying (scored 40 or so.) He has been a blessing to my school, though not converting us into terrific performers: yet, D.Silk . . .

<sup>1</sup> See Bernard Bergonzi, 'Blunden, Edmund (1896–1974)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB), <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30828>> (accessed 4 Dec. 2019). For Blunden's time in Hong Kong, see Barry Webb, *Edmund Blunden: A Biography* (New Haven and London, 1960), 293–307.

<sup>2</sup> The letter was sold at Knight's Sporting Auctions, Leicester, 13 August 2016, lot 71: see <https://www.the-sale-room.com/en-gb/auction-catalogues/knights-sporting-auctions/catalogue-id-srkn10019/lot-> (accessed 10 Dec. 2019). David Higham Literary Agents on behalf of the Edmund Blunden estate have generously given permission for me to publish Blunden's letter. In the text '['' represents the end of a line, and material in parenthesis [ ] represents my addition.

<sup>3</sup> See David Hughes, 'Ross, Alan John (1922–2001)', *ODNB*, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/75435>>, (accessed 3 Dec. 2019). Ross became an editor of *The London Magazine* in 1961.

George Cox. It must be 50 years (but I shall be at the nets tomorrow evening here) since my father took me to a match at Chichester Priory, Sussex v. Hant<sup>s</sup> G. Leach (a Sussex bowler) made about 89, which were lusty runs. George Cox made 167 not out, but those were perfectly commanded. One or two of his off drives came where we sat. That was Old George, and after War I he had his days, one being at Lords, when he missed 2 centuries but that wasn't much to argue about. After all he was a bowler.

Catching, fe.[for example] I played sometime in Suffolk. The memory is the frightful catches at my expense. There were grim bowlers, but few batsmen, but it was horrible that if one slashed out some one just took the ball off the air; not every one of course. And similarly, go for the sharp run and - back you went.

But this as a letter of thanks is all astray. I can only add that in 1956 I shall hope to read you on an even more remarkable cricket season than that just closed.

yours sincerely | EBlunden

In his opening sentence, Blunden mentions Ross' 'End of the Season', which appeared in *The Observer*, 4 September 1955, 14. Ross' annual valediction to the cricket season is accompanied by a photograph of two Sussex cricketers 'George Cox and John Langridge in the Sussex dressing room at the end of their last season's cricket for the county'. George Cox (1911–85) played for Sussex and also for England between the years 1931 and 1955, in addition to playing professional football. He coached Sussex from 1960 to 1964.<sup>4</sup> After mentioning that Cox came from a Sussex cricketing dynasty, Ross observes that 'For 15 years until his father's death in 1949 he was Young George, a player of dash, brilliance and perpetual promise, who seemed always, on the margin of greatness, to have some imp tilting his cap over his eyes and dazzling him. His ironic parting advice last week to the young of Sussex was: "Don't remain a promising player as I did for 25 years.'" Ross adds that 'in a sense he did not fulfill his promise either, for he was against all but the very best spin bowlers, technically a Test batsmen who

<sup>4</sup> For George Cox, Jr. see <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Cox\\_Jr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Cox_Jr)> (accessed 3 Dec. 2019).

should've played Test cricket'. Cox's best season was 1950 'when his noble brow had wandered far over a head shaped like those on the earliest of Roman coins' (14).

John Langridge (1910–99) played for Sussex from 1928 until 1955, after which he became a well-known test umpire.<sup>5</sup> For Ross, in his 'End of the Season' piece, 'not everyone outside Sussex saw the point of John [Langridge] for he appeared often to have taken to the crease as a gardener to an allotment, his devotions more distinctly appreciable by opposing bowlers than by their supporters'. Ever alert to physical stature, Ross writes, in a sentence that lengthens almost as a Langridge innings, that his subjects 'sudden ritualistic shift of bat and feet from the blockhole as the bowler runs up, his inclining of the body and head towards mid-on as if he were turning politely to catch a conversational remark directed at him, his little amble down the pitch and swing of the left leg after playing his shot, the affirmatory pat of the stomach and touch of a cap fading yearly almost to the colour of sand, have made of him someone who, as his statistical value decreased, acquired a fresh esteem and affection among those who watched, as well as played against, him'. Ross also celebrates Langridge in his poem 'Cricket at Brighton' in the lines 'Today Langridge pushes the ball for unfussed | Singles; ladies clap from check rugs, talk to retired colonels; | On tomato-red verandas the scoring rate is discussed'.<sup>6</sup>

In the opening paragraph of his letter to Ross, Blunden refers to Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967)<sup>7</sup> and the 'cricket allusions in [his] poetry and . . . prose': the Blunden-Sassoon close friendship lasted from 1919 until Sassoon's death.<sup>8</sup> In a letter to Sassoon dated 10 September 1955, Blunden writes: 'The essay by Alan Ross is a very lively one and reminds me that he [Ross]

put John L. into one of his poems, what a sociable dressing room the picture shows with these two Sussex villagers in charge! Neither *need* have retired of course, but they are thoughtful men.'<sup>9</sup> Blunden's mention in his letter to Ross of Langridge and Cox not being selected for England alludes to the indifferent performances of a series of England openers in the 1955 summer tests against South Africa.

The second paragraph of Blunden's letter mentions Blunden's former school Christ's Hospital to which 'throughout his life . . . he was devoted',<sup>10</sup> which he attended between 1909 and 1915, and three cricketers, two of whom had connections to the school. Leonard Bates (1895–1971) was coach and head groundsman at Christ's Hospital from 1935 to 1963: Bates, born in the pavilion at Edgbaston Cricket Ground, was a right-handed batsman and right-arm pace bowler.<sup>11</sup> Dennis Silk (1931–2019) was educated at Christ's Hospital and then Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. A fine batsman, he captained the University side and then played for Somerset before becoming a schoolmaster and subsequently headmaster. He became a close friend of Siegfried Sassoon after being introduced to him by Blunden.<sup>12</sup> In his *Cricket Country* (London, 1944), Blunden wrote of the great Surrey and England batsman Sir Jack Hobbs' (1882–1963) 'ability to make the lightning delivery appear to be in no hurry at all, so far as he and his bat were concerned. There was no fast bowling to that immense clarity'(93).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Rothkopf, *Selected Letters of Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden*, III: 111–2.

<sup>10</sup> \* Bergonzi: *ODNB*: and cf. Webb, *Edmund Blunden*, 26–44. For details of the England and South Africa Test series summer 1955, see <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_African\\_cricket\\_team\\_in\\_England\\_in\\_1955](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_African_cricket_team_in_England_in_1955)> (accessed 5 Dec. 2019).

<sup>11</sup> For Bates and his cricketing career, see <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard\\_Bates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Bates)> (accessed 4 Dec. 2019).

<sup>12</sup> See Sassoon to Blunden, 17 July 1955, Rothkopf, 3:104–5 and obituaries of Silk <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2019/07/05/dennis-silk-outstanding-public-school-headmaster-welcomed-television/>>; <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dennis-silk-obituary-kkxhf3mh7>> [2 July 2019] (accessed 3 Dec. 2019).

<sup>13</sup> See Gerald M. D. Howat, 'Hobbs, Sir John Berry [Jack] (1882–1963), cricketer', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/33900>> (accessed 3 Dec. 2019).

<sup>5</sup> See Derek Hodgson, 'Obituary: John Langridge', *The Independent* 8 July 1999, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-john-langridge-1104937.html>> (accessed 3 Dec. 2019). The author wishes to thank James Fergusson for drawing his attention to this obituary.

<sup>6</sup> See Hodgson n 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Rupert Hart Davis, revised 'Sassoon, Siegfried Loraine (1886–1967)' (*ODNB*) <<https://www.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/35953>> (accessed 3 Dec. 2019).

<sup>8</sup> See *Selected Letters of Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden, 1919–1967*, 3 vols., ed. Carol Z. Rothkopf (London, 2012) and Webb, *Edmund Blunden*, 358–9.

George Cox, Snr (1873–1949), the subject of the third paragraph of Blunden’s letter to Ross, was the father of George, and frequently mentioned in Blunden’s letters to Sassoon and in his *Cricket Country*. Cox, played for Sussex from 1895 to 1928, was a right-handed batsman and close to the wicket fielder, primarily noted for his left-arm bowling, initially medium paced but subsequently a spin bowler.<sup>14</sup> Blunden recalls that his ‘father’ took him ‘to Chichester on a far summer morning’ (64). Blunden writes that ‘on the golden day at Chichester ... some special grace fell upon the batsmanship of this sweet-spirited cricketer. Others did great things too, but he, as it were without warning, took the form and manner of a consummate stroke player’. Blunden remembers ‘the tone of his on-driving, the delicacy of his cutting, the inward judgment of the gaps in the field’ (76). Also mentioned in the third paragraph is George Leach who played for Sussex between 1903 and 1914 as a bowler. Blunden’s excellent memory of past cricket scores fails him in his letter to Ross: Leach scored 79 runs and not ‘about 89’.<sup>15</sup>

Blunden in the fourth paragraph of his letter refers to his own playing experience and especially, his catching and batting. His observations confirm Webb’s comment that Blunden ‘was never to be more than a competent player’ who played ‘regularly for a variety of clubs ... and when living in East Anglia he played for his villages –Stansfield and Cowlinge’ (256).

On the verso side of his letter, Blunden writes ‘Please send to Alan Ross when convenient’. This is possibly a request to Aki Hayashi (1889–1962), the Japanese schoolteacher devoted to him ‘whom Blunden met in the summer of 1925. They soon became intimate but he always referred to her as his secretary.’ Rothkopf comments ‘He brought her to England, where she continued to do research

for him. He supported her until her death’ (I: 150: n.6).

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## Reviews

ELYVYN TRIBBLE, *Early Modern Actors and Shakespeare’s Theatre: Thinking with the Body*. Pp. x + 227 (The Arden Shakespeare Library). London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc for The Arden Shakespeare, 2017. £70.00 (ISBN 978 1 4725 7603 3).

Evelyn Tribble’s book is very successful at combining a wide range of approaches from a large variety of fields and periods, in order, ultimately, to offer new readings and new solutions to old textual problems hitherto unresolved. Tribble encourages scholars to think about plays as texts animated by actors on a stage, and not just as texts on a page, and particularly to think of ‘skill’ as a research category useful to solve puzzling scenes. Each chapter starts with a discussion of a particular skill (gesture, fighting, dancing, and ‘skill behind skill’ like memory and wit) from a theoretical point of view, combining information about that skill found in early modern treatises, manuals, and references in plays or other texts, with medical, philosophical, or anthropological research from today, in order ‘to ask how skill is inculcated, appraised, transmitted, valued and evaluated’ (5). Comparing the learning techniques and evaluation of skills in the early modern period and in the present day, Tribble shows the similarities and differences, and explains why modern scholars might have underestimated skill as a useful category of investigation. Her book re-evaluates this category and moves away from a solely author-centred approach to early modern texts, a movement also recently promoted in work done by scholars such as Lucy Munro and Laurence Manley. This work is important, as it encourages us to look at early modern plays with fresh eyes by opening

<sup>14</sup> See ‘George Cox Sr’, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Cox\\_Sr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Cox_Sr)> (accessed 3 Dec. 2019), which also gives the scorecard of the Sussex v Hampshire match Blunden witnessed with his father at Chichester Priory on 7 June 1906. For Blunden’s other mentions of this, see Rothkopf I:97 and elsewhere, see III: 333[Index].

<sup>15</sup> For Leach, see <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Leach\\_\(cricketer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Leach_(cricketer))> (accessed 4 Dec. 2019).