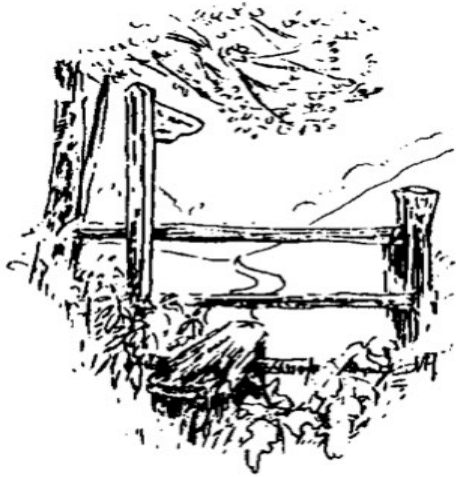


# THE EDWARD THOMAS FELLOWSHIP



Today I know that I walk because it is necessary both to live and to make a living.  
Once those walks might have made a book; now they make a smile or a sigh, and I am glad they are in ghost land and not fettered in useless print.

Dedication of *The Icknield Way* to Harry Hooton in *Edward Thomas on the Countryside* edited by Roland Gant (Faber and Faber: 1977)

## NEWSLETTER 81 January 2019

Chair: Jeremy Mitchell, Fairlands, Finchmead Lane, Stroud, Petersfield, GU32 3PF  
(mitchjd.etf@outlook.com)

Membership Secretary: David Kerslake, 3 Bream Close, Calne, Wiltshire, SN11 9UF  
(etfmembership@gmail.com)

Newsletter Editor: Julia Maxted, 54 Southmoor Road, Oxford OX2 6RD  
(maxtedjj@gmail.com)

We would like to include more news and items from different parts of the UK and overseas. Information about relevant literary and topographical events would be welcome; comments and criticism (of a reasonable length) can be included too. Please send any material to Julia Maxted via the email address above as a Word document (with any references in a list, not as foot- or endnotes) or by post. Thank you. Please note that there is a gap of two years between the appearance of the print version of the newsletter and its appearance on the web.

### From the Chair

As I welcome everyone to the eighty-first newsletter, in the thirty-ninth year since the Edward Thomas Fellowship was established (in name, I know the thought and deed has been in place for many years more than that), I wonder what lies ahead for us all in 2019. I shall not even mention the dreaded 'B' word, writing this as I do just two days before the 'decisive' vote on the Prime Minister's negotiated exit deal, however I find comfort in the fact that whatever the outcome the Fellowship, and Edward Thomas's prose and poetry, will still be with us. When you think about the changes that were taking place 100 years ago, and the dreadful 'War to end all Wars' that we were just coming out of, what is happening today can be put in some perspective.

Anyway, enough of that and back to my purpose, which is an introduction to this newsletter, and a review of the last few months. I find it hard to believe that I am approaching the end of my first year as Chairman of our wonderful Fellowship – foreshortened as it was by the 'Beast from the East' which led to what I think may have been the only postponement of the

Birthday Walk, which subsequently took place in April. I know some members still made a pilgrimage to the Memorial Stone on the original day, and I thank you for keeping the tradition alive.

The postponement did, however, provoke some debate amongst your committee about delaying the Walk until April each year – perhaps falling at the time of Edward Thomas’s death in the Battle of Arras, or later in the month. Any date in April, or even later in March, will have its own ‘challenges’ as once in every few years they will conflict with Easter Sunday and may have to be altered – thus not becoming a ‘fixed’ date in each of our diaries’. The committee would welcome your views / thoughts please as it is currently proposed that we consider the change in date under an agenda item at the 2019 AGM.

How you actually let us know your views / thoughts, however, brings me onto another subject – how your committee actually communicates with our members. Currently, we post out a half-yearly newsletter (this one, which I love) and ad-hoc news-notes when something comes to mind that we feel should be shared amongst the membership. Sadly, more down to postage costs than printing, the cost of printing and posting a news- note is not a lot less than that of a newsletter – but with a lot less content – and therefore it is no longer economic for the committee to communicate with you in this way.

We would therefore like to send news-notes (not the newsletter which will continue in its existing format unless individual members explicitly agree to receive it electronically) and other important communications to you by email. To be able to do so, in the light of the new General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) we require your explicit permission. With this in mind, amongst the enclosures with this newsletter, you will find a ‘Consent’ form to receive electronic communication – there is also a ‘box’ to tick to receive the newsletter by email for those that would prefer it in that format but please remember that if you do not tick that box you will receive a copy in the post, it is only the newsnote that will stop.

I hope this is clear and please scan and return, or post, your forms either to me or David Kerslake at [mitchjd.etf@outlook.com](mailto:mitchjd.etf@outlook.com) or [etfmembership@gmail.com](mailto:etfmembership@gmail.com) until our new website is in place early in the new year. Our postal addresses are at the end of the newsletter. So, what else has been happening over the last few months, and I will mention the Study Centre and Petersfield Museum separately in a moment:

- There was an excellent ‘Masefield and Thomas’ Study Day delivered by Professor Patrick Dillon and his daughter Anna on a very wet day in September, together with a visit to Lollington Hill – on which there is more elsewhere in the newsletter.
- Dr Guy Cuthbertson delivered this year’s Chatterton Lecture at the British Academy - “I Should Want Nothing More - Edward Thomas and Simplicity”.
- Deirdre, my wife and the person who introduced me to Edward Thomas many years ago, and I went to Swansea in November for the release of *Edward Thomas & Wales* – a book edited by Jeff Towns exploring the ‘Welshness’ of Thomas’s work and of Thomas himself. It’s a good read and features an essay on the influence of Wales on the poetry of Edward Thomas by Andrew Webb – who contributed an article to the last newsletter (p.10).
- Finally, and what was a highlight for me, I was honoured to receive an invitation to the Armistice Service at Westminster Abbey on 11 November. Very moving an occasion I shall never forget.

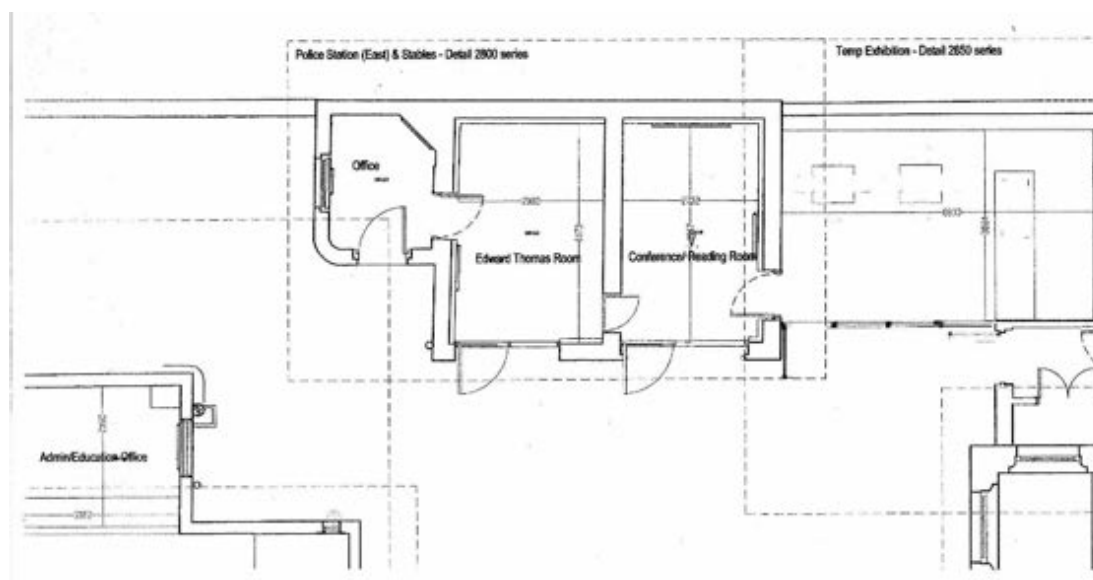
There have been many other events where I have been pleased to represent the Fellowship – either formally or informally – and there are too many to mention but I include Anna Stenning’s talk in Gloucester (organised by the Friends of the Dymock Poets) – Anna is the author of *Edward Thomas – A Miscellany* and another excellent walking companion as it is ‘rucksack’ size; and welcoming visitors to the Study Centre in Petersfield, which leads me nicely into an update on the Edward Thomas Study Centre and Petersfield Museum

Awareness of the Study Centre and its amazing resources in the Tim Wilton-Steer continues to grow, although probably not as quickly as I would like. We have, however, welcomed several researchers and students and I am always thrilled when they in turn introduce me to a hitherto unexplored (by me) poet such as George Herbert – thank you Helen Mason.

So, whilst more use would be welcome, having said that, as Petersfield Museum has recently secured its Heritage Lottery Funding and the bulk of its matched-funding (including for an extension to the funded ‘Pathways into the Past’ project), there will be a period from the middle of 2019 until late 2020 when the collection is in a temporary location again whilst major building work is underway.

However, with almost all funding secured to build an extension to the main project, this means that when the collection returns to the museum site – in ‘The Stables’ – it will be in a permanent home purposefully laid out with the collection in mind.

This drawing shows the new layout for ‘The Stables’ with the Study Centre itself (called the ‘Edward Thomas Room’ in the drawing and housing the Tim Wilton Steer collection) sitting between an office / research room and a conference / meeting room.



Use of the Study Centre will continue as now, and the conference / meeting room was always intended to be able to accommodate larger groups (by appointment). What is new is the possibility of having access also to the office as additional research space. Within Tim’s collection are several boxes of unlisted, as yet, ‘papers’ including extracts from University archives, press cuttings and goodness knows what – all I know is they will have a relevance to Edward Thomas and I am very excited by the prospect of putting a team, or teams, of people together to go through them, in due course.

In the meantime, however, the Museum still needs to make a last push on raising funds and if you would like to know how you may be able to help please visit the museum website - <https://www.petersfieldmuseum.co.uk/about/pathways-into-the-past>. On that page you will see that one of the ways to do so is to have a ‘brick’ named by you – and the Fellowship has already subscribed to one. I have been able to negotiate a space in front of the Study Centre exclusively for the Fellowship so if any members do donate for a brick please indicate that you are a member to be included within that space.

Finally, and on another tack, it is the committee’s wish to keep Tim Wilton-Steer’s legacy alive by adding new, and / or rare books as they come to market, to the collection. At present, whenever I buy a book I buy two but cannot continue to do this indefinitely. So an appeal

please, if you don't mind, if you would like to contribute to a fund to buy books for the Study Centre, or perhaps have a rare or important book you would like to donate, perhaps you would get in touch with me on [mitchjd.etf@outlook.com](mailto:mitchjd.etf@outlook.com) or in writing to Jeremy Mitchell, Edward Thomas Fellowship, c/o Fairlands, Finchmead Lane, Stroud, Petersfield, GU32 3PF. If you are going to enclose a cheque please will you make it payable to the Edward Thomas Fellowship (ETSC).

Before I close and allow you to venture forth into this newsletter, I would just like to thank our Committee for all that they do to keep the Fellowship both alive and relevant for all of us and the more casual visitor. We do have one prospective new committee member who we shall welcome to the committee at the AGM, and if there are others of you who have been thinking about it, now is your opportunity.

Thank you for supporting us by continuing your membership and Happy New Year.

**Jeremy Mitchell                      December 2018**

### **Subscriptions 2019**

Annual subscriptions of £15 per household are now due. If you have any questions concerning your subscription please email the Membership Secretary, David Kerlake at [etfmembership@gmail.com](mailto:etfmembership@gmail.com). Let us all try to introduce one new member in 2019. The more members we have in the Fellowship the better we can fulfil our aims. Please get in touch with David or any of the Committee if you know of any way we can assist you. Thank you.

### **The Birthday Walk – Sunday 3rd March 2019**

As in previous years, there will be two walks during the day, and you are welcome to join either or both walks. The walks will be led by Mike Cope and will start at the car park of Bedales School, Church Road, Steep, GU32 2DG. Parking and toilets will be available throughout the day. In the event of severe wintry weather being forecast, or on hand and people are in any doubt about the walk taking place please telephone Mike Cope on 01483 772913.

Those coming on the morning walk should meet in the car park between 10:00 and 10:15 am. The morning walk (a fairly strenuous 4 ½ miles) will start at 10:30 am prompt, and will include a visit to the memorial stone on the Shoulder of Mutton Hill.

The afternoon walk will start at 2:30 pm from the car park of Bedales School, and will be a more leisurely stroll of around 2 ½ miles. It will include a visit to Berryfield Cottage (the Thomas's first home in Steep).

Members of the Fellowship will read appropriate poems and prose during the walks. This year, the theme is 'Helen Thomas and the aftermath of war', and readings will be chosen from *Under Storm's Wing*, and from Edward's poetry (inspired by Steep).

We would encourage all walkers to keep up with the main group, so we are able to see the front and back of the 'walking line'. Please wear suitable clothing and footwear (walking boots or wellingtons) for both walks and take note of the safety briefing at the start of both walks. You are also encouraged to read the Health and Safety Procedure on the Edward Thomas Fellowship website:

<http://www.edward-thomas-fellowship.org.uk/downloads/ETFHealth&Safety917Signed.pdf>.

All those participating in the walks do so at their own risk.

Our lunch stop will be at Steep Memorial Village Hall. Please note that there will be no buffet lunch again this year. Bring your own packed lunch to eat in the hall; there will be beer, wine and soft drinks available for purchase. For those who prefer a pub lunch, The Cricketers and The Harrow Inn are only a short drive away. There will also be a lunchtime talk this year and a showing of the award-winning 'Home to the Hangers' film, by A.D. Cooper (included in the recent Imperial War Museum Short Film Festival to commemorate the Armistice).

We shall end the day at Steep Church around 3:30 pm, where tea will be available at a modest cost. This will be followed by the Fellowship's short AGM, and readings from this year's poetry competition winners. The 'Birthday Tribute' will be incorporated into the lunchtime talk and readings throughout the day.

### **Study Day 2019 - 'Two Roads Converge'**

We are pleased to announce that a joint study day between the Edward Thomas Fellowship and the John Clare Society will take place on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> September 2019 in John Clare's home village of Helpston near Peterborough. The title for the day, 'Two Roads Converge, is an inversion of the first three lines of Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*. During the day we want to explore points of convergence in the lives, concerns and work of two of Britain's best-loved poets. Further information and a booking form are enclosed with this edition of the Newsletter.

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### **Autumn Walk – Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2018**

Last year's Autumn Walk was led by landscape artist Anna Dillon, and her father, Prof. Patrick Dillon (a specialist in Environmental History). It started from the Village Hall in Aston Upton and covered the area's literary associations with Edward Thomas and John Masefield, who lived at Lollingdon Farm from 1914 to 1917. After some road walking through the neighbouring village of Aston Tirrold, we joined The Icknield Way to follow in the footsteps of Edward Thomas, who had walked here a century before and wrote about it in *The Icknield Way*. As we walked, we noticed large sloe-like fruits in the hedgerow, which tasted sweet, like plums. They were so unlike the bitter sloe or sharp-tasting damson, that someone suggested wild bullaces, which taste like greengage plums, and are part of the same wild fruit family.

As we left The Icknield Way to ascend Lollingdon Hill, one of the party remarked: 'we wouldn't call *that* a hill in Wales', and a ripple of laughter permeated the group. Edward Thomas may well have agreed with our Welsh friend when he described the topography here as: 'the wooded swell of the round hill called Lollingdon Hill'<sup>i</sup>. He was likening the local landscape to that of a sea swell, which describes the Berkshire Downs perfectly. As we made our way up the gentle incline, Anna pointed out a pair of prominent hills on the horizon known as The Wittenham Clumps. These twin-domed hills at Sinodun, near Wallingford, were originally Bronze Age burial mounds, and were investigated by the 'Time Team' in 2004, using ground-penetrating radar. Artistically, they had great significance for the landscape (and war) artist Paul Nash, who throughout his career had a special affinity for the wooded clumps<sup>ii</sup>. He first encountered them in his late teens, and was caught up in their *genius loci*, their atmospheric shapes and mystical associations. The Clumps became a rich source of inspiration that he returned to paint again and again. He writes of the Clumps and how they won his unhesitating allegiance: 'Ever since I remember them the Clumps had meant something to me. I felt their importance long before I knew their history. They were the pyramids of my small world'<sup>iii</sup>.

Having circumnavigated the hill, we re-joined The Icknield Way near Lollington Farm, the former home of the poet John Masefield, who lived here between July 1914 and Spring 1917<sup>iv</sup>. During that time, he wrote a series of sonnets and poems entitled 'Lollington Downs' and his only war poem 'August 1914' - a long and moving poem that connects seamlessly the beauty of life in the Berkshire landscape with the sadness and tragedy of life in the trenches. As we returned, we noticed an abundance of blue chicory flowers along the path, which were alluded to in Patrick Dillon's earlier talk.

Although the rain came down and persisted throughout the walk, it didn't appear to dampen the spirits of the Fellowship members, who responded to the weather with their usual equanimity, water-proof clothing and bright umbrellas. The offer of tea and home-made cakes at the end of the walk were also a powerful incentive to keep moving.

Virtually all the group took up the invitation to visit Anna's studio and to see the paintings she was preparing for her forthcoming exhibition: 'Battlelines Redrawn'<sup>v</sup>. The concept for the project evolved out of Anna's life-long interest in landscape history and the works of Paul Nash, and his powerful, dark and intense paintings from the First World War which reveal the sheer desecration of the countryside and the outrage that the shelling had on the land. Anna's exhibition, at Cornerstone Arts Centre, Didcot, ran from 15<sup>th</sup> October until 25<sup>th</sup> November 2018. One of the most striking paintings on display in Anna's studio was 'Approach to Mametz Woods' – painted in bright vivid colours and depicting the scene of one of the most tragic battles of WW1, in July 1916.

Before we returned to Aston Upthorpe Village Hall we called in at the village church where John Masefield's name was listed in the roll of honour. Although the interior was dimly lit, some keen-eyed member spotted a Green Man on one of the pillars, near the altar; another pointed out the woodworm that had left its mark on many of the oak pews.

In conclusion, it was a fascinating literary walk and the perfect follow-up to the study day in the morning. We are especially grateful to the father and daughter collaboration that made the day happen, and caused it to be so successful.

## **Mike Cope**

### References

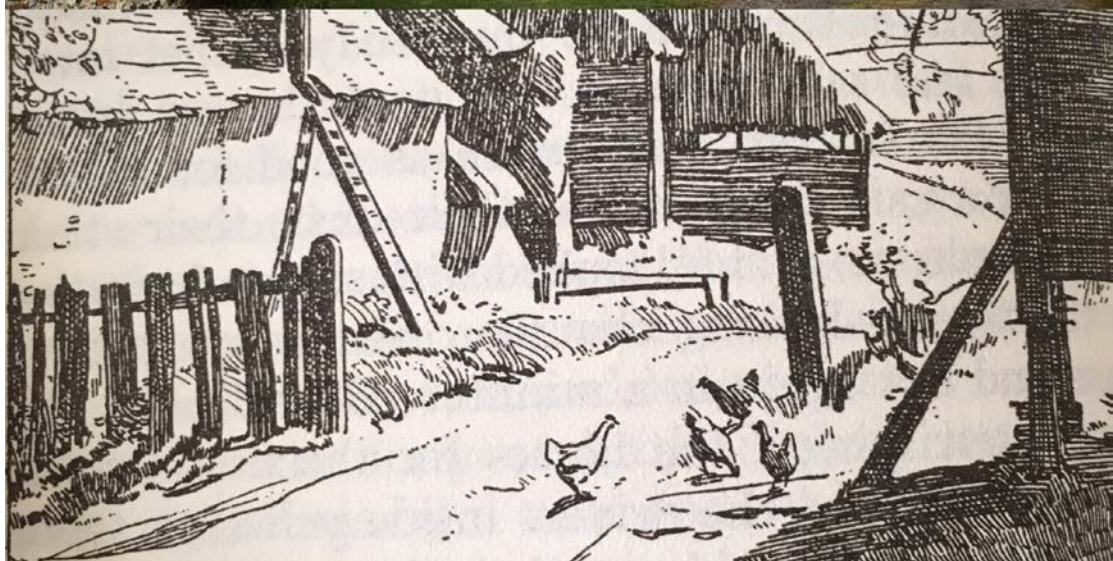
<sup>1</sup> Thomas, E., *The Icknield Way*, London, Constable, 1913

<sup>2</sup> See website: [www.nashclumps.org](http://www.nashclumps.org) by Anna Dillon

<sup>3</sup> Cardinal, R., *The Landscape Vision of Paul Nash*, Reaktion Books, London, 1989, p. 21

<sup>4</sup> See website: [www.battlelines-redrawn.co.uk/masefield.html](http://www.battlelines-redrawn.co.uk/masefield.html)

<sup>5</sup> See [www.battlelines-redrawn.co.uk/paintings.html](http://www.battlelines-redrawn.co.uk/paintings.html)



Above: By Lollington Farm (September 2018), photo by Julia Maxted  
Below: “By Lollington Farm” Illustration by A. L Collins in *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable 1913)

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### **“The father of us all”: Edward Thomas and Parenthood**

*The following is a transcript of a talk I delivered at Cardiff University in April 2017. The article that emerged from that talk – ‘Keep Innocency: Edward Thomas and Fatherhood’ – will be published in the December 2018 edition of *The Cambridge Quarterly*.*

S. J. Perry

This paper stems from thinking about a service that was held at Westminster Abbey on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1985 to commemorate the lives of those poets who fought in the First World War. Among the speakers was the Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, and it was on this occasion that he described Edward Thomas, one of sixteen poets to have their name inscribed on the memorial stone, as “the father”<sup>1</sup> of modern poetry. Hughes’s remark tends to be interpreted as a reference to the way in which Thomas’s poetry continues to shape the work of those who came after him. But Hughes’s conception of Thomas as a paternal figure serves as

a timely reminder that he was also a father in a literal sense and, moreover, that his relationship with his children acted as an important stimulus for his writing.

I want to argue that those poems in which Thomas adopts a paternal persona reflect a hitherto neglected dimension of his literary achievement, born of his fascination with childhood and the artistic forms associated with it. That passion was sustained by Thomas's friendships with contemporaries like Walter de la Mare, Eleanor Farjeon and Robert Frost, as well as the conversations he struck up with poetic predecessors like Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the seventeenth century English mystic Thomas Traherne. However, in this paper, I'm going to start by exploring the significance of Thomas's relationship with his daughters, Bronwen and Myfanwy, before moving on to consider how that 'fragment' of autobiography, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, acted as a catalyst for the poetry that followed.

I

Edward Thomas wrote only one book specifically for children. Taking its title from the nursery rhyme 'Sing a song of sixpence', *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds* (1915) is a series of vignettes inspired by popular songs and proverbs. It was written in close dialogue with Eleanor Farjeon, who offered advice on early drafts of the book and was ideally placed to do so, since she was engaged in writing *Nursery Rhymes of London Town* and would go on to forge a career as a children's author.<sup>1</sup> Like the earlier *Pocket Book of Songs and Poems for the Open Air* (1907), the "proverb book",<sup>1</sup> as Thomas called it, was partly a product of financial necessity. Yet it could not have been written without his extensive knowledge of forms like the nursery rhyme and the ballad, an imaginative resource which, as Richard Emeny has pointed out, stemmed from "years of travelling the English and Welsh countryside and of study and research into their folklore and songs."<sup>1</sup> Some accounts of Thomas give the impression of a man who was old before his time and, to his acquaintances, the very idea of his writing a children's book would have seemed absurd. But as Emeny suggests:

[T]o his friends, its publication would have been less surprising. Accounts by James Guthrie, for instance, in the *Sussex Magazine* of September 1939, show a Thomas who enjoyed the company of children whether he was singing old songs to them, swimming with them in the sea off the Sussex coast, or cycling and walking with them. [...] It may well be that his self-consciousness with adults contributed towards his pleasure in the company of children: their demands were different to those of adults and it was easier to be natural with them.<sup>1</sup>

If that final observation sounds somewhat trite, it remains the case that, while Thomas married and succeeded in forging a series of enduring friendships, the only relationships that came close to matching the intensity of his feelings for the natural world were those he held with his two young daughters, Bronwen and Myfanwy. When Bronwen was four, her father entered the following note in a file marked 'Projects':

Bronwen's vivacity in talking, laughing, running, merely looking at you w[ith] wise eyes, or throwing her head right back so as to thicken her white neck in abandonment of laughing – her life is like a flame burning straight [as] dry wood so that one wonders how it can last – the joy of the flame tearing through obstacles, careless, unconscious, determined, vivacious – She flames along as she runs, her laugh is a flame, her eye is a flame and we must [marvel] at it.<sup>1</sup> Reading this passage leaves one in no doubt that Bronwen complemented Thomas "in a way neither his son nor his wife could",<sup>1</sup> for her beauty and exuberance reflected the hunger and depth of response to life that he felt himself, yet could all too rarely express. The language Thomas uses to describe Bronwen's personality is, unmistakably, that of sacrament – it brings to mind Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnet 'As kingfishers' catch fire, dragonflies draw flame' – and this notion of Thomas's daughters as sources of creative fire is made manifest in those poems where they take on the role of muse. Like his friend Walter de la Mare, Thomas regarded children as instinctively creative beings. In *Feminine Influence on the Poets*, he writes with characteristic passion on the poetry of John Clare, arguing that:

The magic of words is due to their living freely among things, and no man knows how they came together in just that order when a beautiful thing is made like 'Full fathom five'. And so it is that children often make phrases that are poetry, though they still more produce it in their



acts and half-suggested thoughts; and that grown men with dictionaries are as murderous of words as entomologists of butterflies.<sup>1</sup>

What makes this passage so striking is Thomas's conviction that poetry isn't merely a matter of language. Rather, it is something drawn from *life*, and it is the intensity of the poet's engagement with life – something in the nature of his engagement with life – that draws words to him. Hence Thomas's sense of the poet being 'chosen' by words. Children are the living embodiment of this aesthetic, in that they are capable of producing poetry without so much as putting pen to paper.

In that wonderful poem 'The Brook' (which, like 'Snow' and 'Old Man', evolved from the imaginative interplay between Thomas and Myfanwy) it is as if watching the child at play has enabled the narrator to enter the same attentive mode of being and, as the poem progresses, his consciousness starts to merge with the outward scene in a manner reminiscent of Keats's 'chameleon poet'.<sup>1</sup> This immersion in the spirit of the brook is at its most conspicuous when the narrator identifies with the insects and birds that populate it, including a butterfly which hovers nearby:

I was divided between him and the gleam,  
The motion, and the voices, of the stream,  
The waters running frizzled over gravel,  
That never vanish and for ever travel.  
A grey flycatcher silent on a fence  
And I sat as if we had been there since  
The horseman and the horse lying beneath  
The fir-tree-covered barrow on the heath,  
The horseman and the horse with silver shoes,  
Galloped the downs last. All that I could lose  
I lost. And then the child's voice raised the dead.  
'No one's been here before' was what she said  
And what I felt, yet never should have found  
A word for, while I gathered sight and sound.

Here, the child's burst of speech stuns the narrator with its intensity and accuracy: it has, in short, the force of poetry. One notes how the caesura that precedes Myfanwy's remark (which Thomas took down word for word in one of his field notebooks)<sup>1</sup> ensures that her words are released under maximum pressure, as they work to express the narrator's sense of having stepped outside the bounds of time and mortality; death's prospect having been raised earlier in the poem by the allusion to Shakespeare's famous elegy "Fear no more the heat o' the sun", since "Golden lads and girls all must, / As chimney-sweepers, come to dust." Thus conceived, Myfanwy is an agent of the divine, whose words and deeds are capable of 'raising the dead', including the mysterious horseman and his steed with the silver shoes. If this reference is ultimately indebted to Thomas's knowledge of local folklore, then the presence of the horse also serves to evoke the spirit of Pegasus, that classical symbol of poetic inspiration. It is fitting, then, that Myfanwy should stand amid waters "[t]hat never vanish", since according to myth, the sacred spring of the Muses was created when Pegasus struck the side of Mount Helicon with his hoof and, by the end of the poem, she has taken on the mantle of those much celebrated daughters of Zeus and Memnon. (Mnemosyne).

## II

The emergence of psychoanalysis at the dawn of the twentieth century gave a new force and urgency to Romantic conceptions of childhood, due to the overwhelming emphasis that psychoanalytic theory places upon the earliest events of one's life. And if meeting Robert Frost in the autumn of 1913 gave Edward Thomas the courage to pursue his true calling, then it also served to strengthen the conviction, evolving from his conversations with the young psychoanalyst Godwin Baynes, that the key to unlocking his potential as a writer lay in his ability to harness his past. Any success was dependent upon Thomas's prodigious powers of recall and his willingness to make the same kind of imaginative returns to childhood that Wordsworth achieved when writing *The Prelude*; a feat which Frost triumphantly emulates in

what, for me, is his greatest poem, 'Birches'. During the winter of 1913, not long after Thomas first became acquainted with Frost, he took a major step in that direction with his writing of *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*.<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Eleanor Farjeon, he was characteristically self-effacing about the book's potential, describing it as [...] the briefest quietest carefullest account of virtually everything I can remember up to the age of 8. I don't trust myself to build up the self of which these things were true. I scarcely allow myself any reflection or explanation. [...] I am trying to be true to the facts. [...] My object at present is daily to focus on some period & get in all that relates to it, allowing one thing to follow the other that suggested it. It's very lean but I feel the shape of the sentences & alter continually with some unseen end in view.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas's reticence is understandable due to the intimate nature of the project. But there is a clear contradiction between the simplicity of his professed aim – to set down the bare facts about his childhood – and the manner in which he had begun to “feel the shape of the sentences”. Far from being a dry record of events, the process of writing the autobiography was allowing Thomas's own distinctive personality to emerge, which had hitherto been buried under a mountain of commissioned prose. As Edna Longley suggests, in his letter to Farjeon,

Thomas identifies therapeutic recall with stylistic breakthrough. And he describes a prose that anticipates his poetic strategies: close focus, little comment, no unitary 'self', sound and image taking the lead.<sup>1</sup>

Longley's reference to the sound of Thomas's writing is worth dwelling on here. For *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* is significant not just because of what it tells us about the events of those years, but because of the light it sheds upon his relationship with those artistic forms most closely associated with childhood, and that list includes song. At the start of the book, Thomas reveals that his earliest memories are of his mother, Mary, and her sister singing:

When I penetrate backward into my childhood I come perhaps sooner than many people to impassable night. A sweet darkness enfolds with a faint blessing my life up to the age of about four. [...] The songs, first of my mother, then of her younger sister, I can hear not only afar off behind the veil but on this side of it also. I was, I should think, a very still listener whom the music flowed through and filled to the exclusion of all thought and of all sensation except of blissful easy fullness, so that too early or too sudden ceasing would have meant pangs of expectant emptiness.<sup>1</sup>

The exact nature of the songs Mary Thomas sang to her children is not disclosed, but it is highly likely that they were lullabies, a form renowned for its soothing vowel music. This worked its way into the aural memory of her son, and it makes itself felt in one of his most exquisite lyrics 'Sowing'. There, it is a mark of Thomas's originality that, at first glance, the poem isn't recognisable as a lullaby, largely because he dispenses with the traditional verse and chorus form that was still favoured by contemporaries like de la Mare. Instead, the poem gradually attains the status of a lullaby through its gentle yet insistent rhythm, soft vowels and slow burning atmospheric power. "It was", says the narrator,

[...] the perfect day  
For sowing; just  
As sweet and dry was the ground  
As tobacco-dust.

I tasted deep the hour  
Between the far  
Owl's chuckling first soft cry  
And the first star.<sup>1</sup>

Like tobacco, the heady atmosphere of 'Sowing' demands to be inhaled and savoured, to the extent that the reader may experience the same feeling of "blissful easy fullness" that

characterises Thomas's earliest memories. The softness of the owl's call echoes that of an infant at peace, while the appearance of the first star serves to sustain those connotations of unity between humankind and the wider universe. As for the narrator, he inhabits a heightened state of sensory awareness which is so powerful that it pushes against the boundaries of time:

A long stretched hour it was;  
Nothing undone  
Remained; the early seeds  
All safely sown.

And now, hark at the rain,  
Windless and light,  
Half a kiss, half a tear,  
Saying good-night.

Ostensibly, the feeling of fulfilment that emanates from the poem has little to do with parenthood and more to do with a satisfying day's labour. Yet the connotations of fecundity and nurture tell a different story. The claim that the early seeds have all been "safely sown" suggests that an entire stage in life has been put to bed rather than merely a single day, while the blessing that the elements confer in the final lines evokes the kind of tender benediction which one would normally bestow on a child before sleep, in a manner that is entirely in keeping with the dreamy mood of the piece. By the end of 'Sowing', the narrator has become once more that "still listener whom the music flowed through" and the poem is a fine example of what Frost meant when he talked about the potency of the "hearing imagination" (which he claimed to value even more than the "seeing imagination").<sup>1</sup> In his autobiography, Thomas says of his mother:

I cannot see her but I can summon up her presence. [...] Her singing at fall of night, especially if we were alone together, soothed and fascinated me, as though it had been divine, at once the mightiest and the softest sound in the world.<sup>1</sup>

An equally illuminating parallel can be drawn with Blake's lullaby 'A Cradle Song'. There, the infant sleeps "While o'er thee thy mother weep".<sup>1</sup> Those tears are tears of joy, since "Excess of joy weeps".<sup>1</sup> But this strain of feeling is clearly quite different from the kind of full bodied ecstasy recalled by Frost in 'Birches' [for instance], because it is wrested from the duress that is attendant upon parenthood. Here the confluence with 'Sowing' can be felt, with Blake's poem providing a timely reminder of the dual purpose of the lullaby, which serves as a salve for the singer as well as the child to whom the song is sung. In this light, 'Sowing' can be seen as a lullaby that Thomas composed to soothe himself, with a graceful sonic movement that reflects the therapeutic nature of the task the narrator has performed.

**S.J. Perry, University of Hull**

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## **Edward Thomas and Green Studies**

*Based on a talk given to the Friends of the Dymock Poets on 22 March 2014.*

I want to assess how far the discipline of green studies has appreciated Edward Thomas, and how it might now proceed to appreciate him, given that he clearly anticipated its concerns.

First, then, we need a definition of 'green studies' (a term always used as a singular). Put briefly, it is the UK version of the discipline known in the USA as 'ecocriticism', which is an abbreviation of 'ecological literary criticism'. The idea is to explore the relation between

literature and nature: in particular, the literary representation of nature and, just as importantly, the power of literature to inspire its readers to act in defence of nature. Where Marxist criticism focuses on class, feminist criticism on gender, and postcolonial studies on race, green studies is concerned with the theme of the fate of the Earth itself – one which contains, as it were, those other themes.

To appreciate the significance of green studies, we need to be aware that prior to its emergence in the later twentieth century a dominant trend in that academic area known as the humanities was simply to privilege culture over nature. One might say that the very word ‘humanities’ indicates the anthropocentric, or human-centred, focus of the enterprise; but it was mainly in the mid-twentieth century that the idea of nature as nothing more than a human construct took hold. Language created reality, culture created nature, words created the world. Though this way of thinking goes back as far as Plato, it was comparatively recently that wholesale ‘cultural constructionism’ took hold in the fields of philosophy, literary studies and (inevitably) cultural studies. Its accompanying refrain, always delivered with an air of self-congratulation, was ‘There is no such thing as nature.’

This phenomenon is something I challenge in my general introduction to *The Green Studies Reader*, where I refer to ‘the semiotic fallacy’: that is, the privileging of the ‘sign’ (word) over the ‘referent’ (thing), to the extent of denying the independent existence of the latter. In that same introduction, however, I try to point out that exposing the fallacy does not mean we resort to a crude realism: we have to bear in mind how language gives human shape and significance to the natural world which surrounds and contains the human world. What is needed is to see ‘nature’ as a site of struggle: both actual and imaginary, both ecological and ideological. It exists in its own right, over and above what we choose to say about it; but at the same time, it is open to interpretation, and its human meaning emerges in the course of the claims we make about it. ‘Green studies debates “Nature” in order to defend nature.’[1]

To indicate the possibility that Thomas was something of a prophet of green studies, let me begin by quoting his own definition of nature, given in the course of a letter to his friend Walter de la Mare in 1908, shortly after the publication of Thomas’s book *Richard Jefferies*:

You ask me to define Nature. I used it [in *Richard Jefferies*] vulgarly for all that is not man, perhaps because man contemplates it so, as outside himself, and has a sort of belief that nature is only a house, furniture etc round about him. It is not my belief and I don’t oppose Nature to Man. Quite the contrary. Man seems to me a very little part of Nature and the part I enjoy least. But civilization has estranged us superficially from Nature, and towns make it possible for a man to live as if a millionaire could really provide all the necessities of life, food, drink, clothes, vehicles etc., and then a tombstone.[2]

Here let me add this remarkable observation, prompted by Thomas’s visit to Salisbury Plain:

[It] makes us feel the age of the earth, the greatness of Time, Space, and Nature; the littleness of man even in an aeroplane, the fact that the earth does not belong to man, but man to the earth. And this feeling, or some variety of it, for most men is accompanied by melancholy.[3]

Paraphrasing Thomas, we may say that he puts humanity in its place. To use David Abrams’ terminology, he situates it in the larger context of the ‘more-than-human’ world of nature.[4] In so doing, he challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that came to a head with the cultural constructionism to which I alluded above.

My task here, however, is less to itemise each and every way that Thomas foresaw the agenda of green studies (though we will return to this issue) than to consider how green studies has understood him. In this context, it goes without saying – though let me say it anyway! – that we are all immensely indebted to the scholarly work of Edna Longley, who in the course of

collecting and annotating Thomas's poetry and prose has demonstrated how amenable he is to an ecological reading. Here she reflects on the poetry:

Few poets can match Thomas's historical imagination. In fact, his post--Darwinian approach to 'the mystery of the past' is ultimately 'eco-historical'... Of all the ways in which Thomas's poetry anticipates ideas that help us to read it, his ecological vision may be the most inclusive. Taken together, his poetry and prose pioneer 'ecocriticism'. [5]

Elsewhere she reflects: 'Thomas's ultimately unifying idea is that of being an "inhabitant" or "citizen of the Earth".' [6] What I like especially about this latter remark is that Longley actually uses Thomas's own phrasing. It occurs in his study of George Meredith, an extract of which Longley includes in her selection of Thomas's prose. She is surely right to draw attention to his wording, which I myself would interpret as Thomas's way of reminding us that human culture (as suggested by 'citizen') can only make sense when seen in the context of more-than-human nature (as suggested by 'Earth'). Before proceeding, let me provide the context for the phrase, to emphasise how seriously, how reverentially, Thomas spoke of 'Earth':

Nature to him [George Meredith] was not merely a cause of sensuous pleasure, nor, on the other hand, an inhuman enchantress; neither was she both together. When he spoke of Earth, he meant more than most mean who speak of God. He meant that power which in the open air, in poetry, in the company of noble men and women, prompted, strengthened, and could fulfil, the desire of a man to make himself, not a transitory member of parochial species, but a citizen of the Earth ...' [7]

It is hard to realise that that way of thinking was expounded a hundred years ago rather than twenty, or even less. It is certainly a point of view that green studies is obliged to take seriously.

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If green studies had a pioneer, it was undoubtedly Raymond Williams. Though largely associated with a Marxist account of literature and with the rise of cultural studies, he it was who developed in his later years a much greener worldview which became known as 'socialist ecology'. The key work is *The Country and the City*. An ambitious survey of poetry and fiction over several centuries, including the twentieth, it charts the problematical relationship between urban and rural experience. Williams regards the genre of 'pastoral' as particularly important, because it is there that we witness the idealisation of the countryside, usually undertaken by writers removed from rural reality. As such, it is a falsification, which allows readers to enter into an idyllic world, with complete disregard for the harsh experience of those actually engaged in tilling the soil. Worse still, this pastoral ideal serves to mystify the real foundations of history and class struggle.

It would be gratifying to report that Williams, so important as a founding figure for green studies, recognises Thomas's importance as an ecological writer in the relevant section of *The Country and the City*. Unfortunately, he does not. Firstly, he dismisses the Georgian school of poetry: 'The self-regarding patriotism of the high English imperialist period found this sweetest and most insidious of its forms in a version of the rural past.' Secondly, he takes Thomas to be simply offering his own version of the Georgian evasion of history and of the reality of the land. Thirdly, he ignores the vast body of Thomas's writing, and takes that admittedly rather peculiar poem 'Lob' as representative. In doing so, he fails to do him justice. Consider this dismissive account:

... a working man become 'my ancient' and then the casual figure of a dream of England, in which rural labour and rural revolt, foreign wars and internal dynastic wars, history, legend

and literature, are indiscriminately enfolded into a single emotional gesture. Lob or Lud, immemorial peasant or yeoman or labourer: the figure was now fixed and its name was Old England ...[8]

I would not want to claim 'Lob' to be one of Thomas's best works, but the point is that Williams is taking full advantage of its ambiguity in order to dismiss a body of work that, as a whole, mystifies neither England nor the history of its people, but rather encourages the reader to consider both in a larger perspective – such as was indicated above by Edna Longley.

Williams goes on to quote the second verse of another poem by another poet, namely Thomas Hardy's famous lyric, 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"', in order to demonstrate its superiority to anything his successor and admirer Edward Thomas ever wrote. We will recall the opening, with its 'man harrowing clods' and its 'old horse that stumbles and nods'. Then comes the verse which Williams quotes:

Only thin smoke without flame  
From the heaps of couch-grass;  
Yet this will go onward the same  
Though Dynasties pass.

His point in praising Hardy here is to dismiss Thomas and his peers: 'That is the feeling of the persistence of land work through what seem the distant accidents of political history. But the Georgian version used rural England as an image for its own internal feelings and ideas.' [9] (258) Williams overlooks the fact that it was Thomas more than any of his contemporaries who admired Hardy's poetry and who learnt how one might incorporate the stuff of rural life in seemingly slight lyrics.

We should also note that, in invoking Hardy, Williams fails even to refer to a poem of Thomas's that really does seek to incorporate the harsh realities of the day. I mean 'As the team's head-brass', of course. We recall how the poet first sets the scene:

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn  
The lovers disappeared into the wood.  
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm  
That strewed the angle of the fallow, and  
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square  
Of charlock. ...

That plough is not merely a feature in the scene, however. In time, we hear the ploughman speak, as he enters into conversation with the poet:

'... Only two teams work on the farm this year.  
One of my mates is dead. The second day  
In France they killed him. It was back in March,  
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if  
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'

Finally, the poet stands back again to survey the scene:

... Then  
The lovers came out of the wood again:  
The horses started and for the last time  
I watched the clods crumble and topple over  
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team. (123-4)

The idea that Thomas ignores actuality and opts for archetypal meaning, divorced from history, cannot withstand even a cursory reading of the poem. Here we are put in touch with the world of human labour; here we have not a solipsistic meditation, but the presentation of a genuine dialogue between poet and agricultural labourer; here we register the impact of history – not only the effects of the decline of agriculture in the England of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the consequences for those remaining to work the land, but also the trauma of the Great War. Nor should we forget the reminder of how different lives run concurrently, the lovers pursuing their love in parallel with the poet and ploughman, each seeking to make sense of the land and its history. No wonder Hardy admired Thomas so much, and no wonder Thomas saw himself as working in continuity with the great master. How Williams could overlook such continuity remains a mystery.

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If Williams represented the central assessment of Thomas's work within green studies, mine would be a disappointing venture. Fortunately, we find a rather more positive account when we turn to the work of Jonathan Bate – even though it may not be one with which we want wholly to concur. In his *Romantic Ecology* (1991), he puts forward the idea of a Romantic environmental tradition, originating with Wordsworth and eventually including Edward Thomas. By way of a rejoinder to Raymond Williams, Bate defends pastoral as a potentially radical force, given that it rests on a positive view of the countryside and involves a critique of the given urban hierarchy. In Wordsworth's hands, muses Bate, it involves advocacy of rural community and democracy as well as sympathy with the surrounding world of nature. Thomas he sees as taking up the Wordsworthian baton:

For Thomas, as for Wordsworth, pastoral was not a myth but a psychological necessity, an underpinning of the self, a way of connecting the self to the environment. . In literature as in life, connection with the external world is dependent on what [John] Clare called 'The Eternity of Nature', dependent on the survival of the daisy and the return of the swallow.' [10]

But the connection which Bate is most keen to trace is that between Wordsworth's 'Poems on the Naming of Places' and Thomas's 'Household Poems', written for his wife and children – the latter being directly inspired by the earlier sequence. It is the sense of locality and the need to name, know and revere particular places that unites Wordsworth and Thomas most particularly.

Now, while fully acknowledging Bate's contribution to our understanding of Thomas in relation to the poetic canon, I would demur as to the choice of predecessor. To my mind, Thomas's vision has far more in common with another Romantic poet, namely John Keats. For one thing, Thomas wrote his own short study of Keats; for another, several of his own poems seem to have been inspired by Keats – 'Melancholy', for instance, clearly deriving from the famous 'Ode on Melancholy'. But let me make my case briefly by first quoting from one of Keats's letters:

I lay awake last night—listening to the Rain with a sense of being drown'd and rotted like a grain of wheat — There is a continual courtesy between the Heavens and the Earth. — the heavens rain down their unwelcomeness, and the Earth sends it up again to be returned to morrow.[11]

Now compare this with Thomas's reflections from his prose work *The Icknield Way* (1913):

I am alone in the dark still night, and my ear listens to the rain piping in the gutters and roaring softly in the trees of the world. Even so will the rain fall darkly upon the grass over

the grave when my ears can hear it no more... Now there is neither life nor death, but only the rain... the rain falls for ever and I am melting into it. Black and monotonously sounding is the midnight and solitude of the rain. In a little while or in an age — for it is all one — I shall know the full truth of the words I used to love, I knew not why, in my days of nature, in the days before the rain: ‘Blessed are the dead that the rain rains on.’[12]

Though at one point in this passage Thomas complains that he does not feel himself to be ‘a part of nature’, that wording is surely meant to indicate his sense of isolation. Otherwise, his reflections echo those of Keats. Indeed, I would say that despite his complaint, the mood that both writers share is that of desiring to merge with the more-than-human world and to have done with the burden of individual identity. In other words, the desire for union with nature and the desire for death are entertained concurrently. What both involve is a process of what we might call un-selfing.

Here are three further statements from Keats’s letters, in which we see that the readiness to merge with nature is part and parcel of his thinking about what constitutes great literature:

I scarcely remember counting upon any happiness – I look not for it if it be not in the present hour – nothing startles me beyond the moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights — or if a sparrow come before my window I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel.

... it struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously. I mean negative capability: that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

... as to the poetical character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a member — that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime, which is a thing per se and stands alone), it is not itself — it has no self — it is everything and nothing — it has no character — it enjoys light and shade — it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated.[13]

We note, pace Bate, the repudiation of the Wordsworthian aesthetic in that last quotation: unfair as the judgement no doubt is, Keats rejects his predecessor’s way of depicting nature because, instead of celebrating nature in all its variety and wonder, it always seems to return to a celebration of his own magisterial soul. As to the second quotation, it would be tempting here to expound upon that profound and endlessly fruitful phrase, ‘negative capability’, but suffice it to say that the impulse behind it – to cease to exist as an individual and to be at one with that which lies beyond the ego – is clearly bound up with that readiness to identify with the sparrow in the first quotation. As to its literary manifestation, we might refer to this, probably the most famous stanza of one of his most famous poems, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath;  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!  
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
To thy high requiem become a sod.[14]



Now let us turn back to Thomas. We quoted him above, pondering the wet weather in the course of one of his prose works. Here is the complementary poem, 'Rain':

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain  
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me  
Remembering again that I shall die  
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks  
For washing me cleaner than I have been  
Since I was born into this solitude.  
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:  
But here I pray that none whom once I loved  
Is dying to-night or lying still awake  
Solitary, listening to the rain,  
Either in pain or thus in sympathy  
Helpless among the living and the dead,  
Like a cold water among broken reeds,  
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,  
Like me who have no love which this wild rain  
Has not dissolved except the love of death,  
If love it be towards what is perfect and  
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint. (105)

Specifically, the phrase 'love of death' comes directly from Keats; in general, the mood of the poem and the disposition of the poet are so thoroughly Keatsian that it is hard to see how any green-minded critic could think that Wordsworth was Thomas's mentor.

Aware that we have traced this connection at some length, let me draw this phase of our discussion to a close by quoting from Thomas's short but inspiring study, *Keats* (written late 1913; published 1916). Here he defends his poetic hero from the charge of weakness and self-indulgence. With Lord Byron's dismissive comments in mind, Thomas is emphatic in his riposte to such hostile misunderstandings of the kind of genius that he himself admired so much, and to which (I would suggest) he was himself so close in spirit:

These last months of dissolution coupled with the most obvious qualities of his earlier poems have given colour to the belief that Keats was an invertebrate, one to be 'snuffed out by an article'. He was himself the first discoverer of that 'morbidity of temperament'. That he did discover it, that he had a wonderful self-knowledge — not mere self-analysis — calm and penetrating, never coldly submissive, is a proof that it was not the whole truth. The morbidity was the occasional overbalancing of his intense sympathy, his greatest passive power.[15]

Here it seems appropriate to quote from a poem of Thomas which might itself be misconstrued as an expression of morbidity, when it is in fact an affirmation of a willingness to accept one's own contingency and to acknowledge the absolute emptiness that contains the apparent fullness of all our lives. In 'Old Man' the poet ponders the plant, then the name of the plant, the relation between word and thing which thinking about the plant prompts, then the personal memories associated with the plant ... and then makes a final leap of consciousness:

Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.  
I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,  
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try  
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,  
Always in vain. I cannot like the scent,

Yet I would rather give up others more sweet,  
 With no meaning, than this bitter one.  
 I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray  
 And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;  
 Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait  
 For what I should, yet never can, remember;  
 No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush  
 Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,  
 Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;  
 Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end. (36-7)

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If Bate's choice of precursor for Thomas in Romantic Ecology is open to question, a more promising perspective might seem to be provided in his later study in 'ecopoetics', *The Song of the Earth* (2000). Here the dominant figure is not the English Romantic poet Wordsworth but the twentieth-century German thinker Martin Heidegger. Let us consider briefly how Bate's attempt to trace an affinity between philosopher and poet works out. I will necessarily have to simplify matters. Heidegger was a notoriously obscure thinker, who coined an esoteric vocabulary, the meaning of which is still contentious today. Here I offer my own summation rather than convey the full extent of Bate's exploration of Heideggerian thought.

It is the later Heidegger who matters most to those engaged in green studies. His preoccupation is with the nature of poetic 'dwelling'. It is through language, and above all through the intense language of lyric poetry, that humanity learns reverence for earthly things, for it is in so doing that it achieves a revelation of earthly things. These 'things' include 'rocks and stones and trees' (here I invoke Wordsworth); but they also include those artefacts and tools which are created by traditional craft, which in turn expresses 'care' for the Earth. Heidegger is anxious to distinguish these artefacts and tools from the objects churned out in processes of mass production. To appreciate a tree, to appreciate a tool: this is to effect an 'unconcealing' of the 'Being' of things. 'Being' for Heidegger is rather like 'Brahman' in Hinduism, the 'Tao' in Taoism, and the 'Buddha-mind' in Buddhism: that is, it is the divine source underlying the natural world which we see all around us. Poetry matters, because the poet is the 'guardian of Being', the 'shepherd of Being': it is through poetry that we align ourselves with nature, and with the spirit that sustains it.

So, then, we have complementary forces in Heidegger's thought: language and 'Being', poetry and nature, logos (word) and oikos (Earth, understood as our true home). The question arises for Bate that, if it is through the former that humanity apprehends the latter, does that mean that humanity is always separated from the source it seeks? Are we condemned only to know oikos in terms of logos, rather than to find final reconciliation with it? His answer, on behalf of Heidegger, is as follows: 'If mortals dwell in that they save the earth and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth.' [16]

It is in the final pages of his book that Bate attempts a Heideggerian reading of Thomas. Given that the philosopher speaks so much of 'dwelling', he chooses one of the poems which Thomas entitled 'Home': in this case, the second one ('Often I had gone...'). The first one is about difficulty of finding home; this one is about arriving there. 'Home' 1 is a poem of restlessness; 'Home' 2 is a poem of dwelling.

Here are two key passages from Thomas's poem. First, the setting of the scene in the opening lines:

Often I had gone this way before  
 But now it seemed I never could be

And never had been anywhere else;  
'Twas home; one nationality  
We had, I and the birds that sang,  
One memory. ...

Thomas imagines – or rather, is convinced – that the birds are welcoming him back. Their insouciant song tells him that they are no more heedful of the fact that the day is closing than is he. Thus Thomas proceeds to his final reflection: this time, not on the countryside itself nor on the birds, but on the work being carried out by a rural workman who lives close by:

... Then past his dark white cottage front  
A labourer went along, his tread  
Slow, half with weariness, half with ease;  
And, through the silence, from his shed  
The sound of sawing rounded all  
That silence said. (81-2)

If I may summarise Bate's reading, he notes in particular that the poet, the birds and the natural environment all speak the same language: all is one. Into this idyllic setting is introduced the sound of the labourer's sawing, but this is not an intrusion: his work does not represent mindless technology, but rather a necessary craft, since humans must dwell locally and plant, then fell, trees to survive. The silence of nature is 'rounded off' by the human act. Bate sees the poem as enacting exactly what Heidegger means by 'dwelling'. Though the words of the text are haunted by the split between subject and object, as asserted by the early-modern philosopher Descartes, the poem allows us to experience, if only momentarily, what it might be like to dwell poetically upon the Earth.

There are, however, some problems in invoking Heidegger in order to celebrate a poem by Thomas. Most obviously, but still debatably, there is the undeniably fascist element in his thinking. As a member of the Nazi party in the 1930s, Heidegger was subscribing to the same cult of the Aryan peasant and rural craft as was officially sanctioned by Hitler and Goebbels in their pursuit of German nationalism. Here is not the place to enter into the ongoing debate about Heidegger's politics, but my instinct is that Edward Thomas would have found them uncongenial and, had he lived, would have repudiated them. Even though he loved the English countryside, and though he fought for England in the Great War, his own aim was to be 'a citizen of the Earth', not a narrow nationalist (no matter how sophisticated).

Again, we have to recognise that, for all Heidegger's talk of the need to serve and guard 'Being', there is a strongly anthropocentric quality to his thinking. After all, in emphasising the primacy of poetic dwelling he is implicitly privileging the human world as offering special access to the truth of the Earth. Human beings are unique, and uniquely gifted, in this respect: it is not a capacity granted to birds and other beings. Lastly, it is ironic that Thomas the impoverished, practising poet would most likely disagreed with Heidegger the privileged professor about the status of poetry: for Heidegger, it was the answer to everything; for Thomas, who did not build up the confidence to start writing verse until he was 36, it was just one discipline that might help us appreciate the natural order.

To elaborate briefly on just one of those points: as far as nationalism is concerned, Thomas's understanding, as indicated by the fourth line of 'Home', is that an England that does not include the birds is not a proper nation. Nor should we overlook the subtle way that, in his prose, he ponders the interplay of locality and the land as a whole:

[A]ll ideas of England are developed, spun out, from such a centre [ie, a specific place] into something large or infinite, solid or airy, according to each man's nature and capacity; that England is a system of vast circumferences circling round the minute neighbouring points of home.[17]

Here I might mention a work that, though not strictly a contribution to green studies, is an excellent guide to the whole question of nation, landscape and ideology: Roger Ebbatson's *An Imaginary England* (2005). Ebbatson manages to demonstrate that the natural world is always open to conflicting interpretations, without subscribing to a reductive 'cultural constructionism'. In his discussion of Thomas, he addresses the way that he persistently repudiates the 'official' idea of England and sets out the grounds for an alternative idea of England. A stimulus to this discussion is this, Thomas's remarkable statement about the need to view a place as an imaginative challenge not a definable location:

This is not the South Country which measures about two hundred miles from the east to the west and fifty from north to south. In some ways, it is incomparably larger than any country that has ever mapped, since upon nothing less than the infinite can the spirit disport itself.[18]

Ebbatson is interested in the way Thomas defamiliarises cultural stereotypes of rural nostalgia, suggesting a much more unsettled land: 'Indeed a national sense of identity or a settled Englishness is radically undermined by the darkness Thomas detected within himself in his almost hallucinatory degree of self-consciousness and division ...' Hence his fascination with outsiders and the dispossessed: 'The nomadic wanderers who haunt Thomas's texts, as figures for the poet, represent an otherness antithetical to settlement and modernity through their investment in libertarian displacement and cultural authenticity.' (Ebbatson p 171) Hence too his sense of his own contingency, reflected in the restless, unfinished quality of his art: 'Edward Thomas's poems are clearly characterised ... by a sense of incompleteness, unsettlement and resistance to the centralising forces of an increasingly administered culture.' [19] (p 173) None of this, we might add, marks him down as the spiritual companion of one Martin Heidegger.

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Where, then, does Thomas stand vis-à-vis green studies? My own instinct is that to appreciate fully his significance as an ecologically-oriented writer, we need to invoke a green theorist who – paradoxically – never actually wrote about him. I refer to the late American thinker, Theodore Roszak.

Before explaining Roszak's position, let me provide another quotation from a prose work of Thomas's which we have already cited, *The South Country* (1909). In a chapter on

'History and the Parish', he reflects:

The eye that sees the things of today, and the ear that hears, the mind that contemplates or dreams, is itself an instrument of an antiquity equal to whatever it is called upon to apprehend. We are not merely twentieth-century Londoners or Kentish men or Welshmen... And of these many folds in our nature the face of the earth reminds us, and perhaps, even where there are no more marks visible upon the land than there were in Eden, we are aware of the passing of time in ways too difficult and strange for the explanation of historian and zoologist and philosopher.[20]

We sense here that long perspective which preoccupied Thomas throughout his adult life, both as poet and prose writer: he always insists on putting humanity in its place, within a

larger context, both spatially and temporally. Here it is time, and specifically the time of evolution, which concerns him. Elsewhere, he frequently reflects on how humanity must find accommodation with the larger space of nature – as in the letter to De La Mare with which we began.

Here we might remind ourselves of the closing two verses of one of his most strikingly stark poems about the insufficiency of humanity and the necessity for it to learn how to follow the rhythm of the Earth upon which it depends. 'I never saw that land before' ends as follows:

I neither expected anything  
Nor yet remembered: but some goal  
I touched then; and if I could sing  
What would not even whisper my soul  
As I went on my journeying,

I should use, as the trees and birds did,  
A language not to be betrayed;  
And what was hid should still be hid  
Excepting from those like me made  
Who answer when such whispers bid. (120)

Such privilege as Thomas here claims for the poet is that of understanding the need for service, not the advantage of mastery or of superior knowledge. In learning how to use 'A language not to be betrayed' he is simply familiarising himself with the wisdom of the more-than-human world. If asked to sum up Thomas's position, I would do so as follows. Nature is that larger culture which contains the narrow sphere of human culture, and into which human beings may have occasional insights if they purge themselves of their arrogant anthropocentrism.

Roszak's work is also about the wisdom of humility. Here let me summarise the principles of the discipline which he founded, and which he called 'ecopsychology'. In essence, he is saying that humanity has become increasingly divorced from nature, that 'person' has been detached from 'planet'. Our conscious human actions are destroying the Earth, but most of the time we ignore the fact, so it is left to the 'ecological unconscious' to register the catastrophe. Manifestations include illness, anxiety, mental disturbance. In short, ecopsychology is the study of our ability to register pain at what we are doing to the Earth. It aims to bridge the longstanding gulf between person and planet, mind and nature. The title of Roszak's key work on this subject, *The Voice of the Earth* (1992) speaks of the need to regain a 'transactional bond' with nature: a bond which was severed with modernity and the myth of progress.[21]

In light of Roszak's work, we might see Thomas as environmental prophet. Firstly, he laments the decline of rural life, and in particular the collapse of English agriculture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Secondly, he laments the urbanisation and homogenisation of civilisation: he looks to marginal groups for his vision of 'England'. Thirdly, he sees the war as a representative act of collective violence – against nature as well as humanity itself. Fourthly, and most importantly, he registers the pain of modernity in his own mental anguish, which he manages to depersonalise in the act of writing.

I would like to stress that last point. With Thomas, we are concerned with more than individual pathology. The mental anguish which he endured – often finding expression in attempted suicide, as we know from the diaries – is the result of his extreme sensitivity to the damage done by humanity in the name of technological advancement.

Let me end by quoting some lines from some poems to which we have not yet referred, by way of bringing our survey to an end. Please think of what I said above about Roszak and Thomas when reading them. For instance, in 'The Mill Water', human labour is seen as one small part of the workings of the Earth:

All thoughts begin or end upon this sound,  
Only the idle foam  
Of water falling  
Changelessly calling,  
Where once men had a work-place and a home. (98)

Again, in 'The Mountain Chapel', the wind's voice which is heard across the graveyard adjacent to the sacred building speaks with an authority to which we know we must submit:

'Tis but a moment since man's birth,  
And in another moment more  
Man lies in earth For ever; but I am the same  
Now, and shall be, even as I was  
Before he came;  
Till there is nothing I shall be.' ...

When Gods were young  
This wind was old. (43)

Even in that most familiar of his poems, 'Adlestrop', the comings and goings of humanity, the power of the train engine: these are put in place by the larger context of nature:

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Farther and farther, all the birds  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. (51)

Though the counties are precisely named, and to that extent humanised, the effect is of an endless movement outwards into a more comprehensive sphere of existence. It is this sphere which provides solace for the tormented soul, all too aware of the breaking of the bond with nature, in 'Beauty':

This heart, some fraction of me, happily  
Floats through a window even now to a tree  
Down in the misting, dim-lit, quiet vale;  
Not like a pewit that returns to wail  
For something it has lost, but like a dove  
That slants unswerving to its home and love.  
There I find my rest, and through the dusk air  
Flies what yet lives in me. Beauty is there. (58)

Finally, we might read the full text of 'The Word', a meditation on how human endeavours relate to the processes of the Earth, how human culture relates to the larger culture of Earth, and how human language relates to the voice of the Earth. It is a poem about how to learn to be 'a citizen of the Earth', how to find peace by acknowledging the green world that

surrounds us as our only true home, and which speaks a language beyond our own limited vocabulary:

There are so many things I have forgot,  
That once were much to me, or that were not,  
All lost, as is a childless woman's child  
And its child's children, in the undefiled  
Abyss of what can never be again.  
I have forgot, too, names of the mighty men  
That fought and lost or won in the old wars,  
Of kings and fiends and gods, and most of the stars.  
Some things I have forgot that I forget.  
But lesser things there are, remembered yet,  
Than all the others. One name that I have not —  
Though 'tis an empty thingless name — forgot  
Never can die because Spring after Spring  
Some thrushes learn to say it as they sing.  
There is always one at midday saying it clear  
And tart — the name, only the name I hear.  
While perhaps I am thinking of the elder scent  
That is like food, or while I am content  
With the wild rose scent that is like memory,  
This name suddenly is cried out to me  
From somewhere in the bushes by a bird  
Over and over again, a pure thrush word. (93)

## Laurence Coupe

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- [3] Edward Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring* (London: Thomas Nelson & Son, 1914), p 12.
- [4] See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Random House, 1966).
- [5] Edna Longley, 'Introduction', *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems* (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2008) p 22. All poems of Thomas quoted here will be taken from this volume.
- [6] Edna Longley, 'Introduction', *A Language not to be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981), p xix.
- [7] Edward Thomas, *A Literary Pilgrim in England* (London: Methuen, 1917), p 52.
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- [18] Thomas, *The South Country*, p 8.
- [19] Roger Ebbatson, *An Imaginary England: Literature and Landscape 1840-1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp 170, 171, 173.
- [20] Thomas, *The South Country*, pp 151-2.
- [21] Theodore Roszak, *The Voice Of The Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1992; 2nd ed 2001), p 81.

Laurence Coupe is the founding editor of the journal *Green Letters* and editor of *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2000). Other books include *Myth* (Routledge, 1997; 2nd ed. 2009), *Marina Warner* (Northcote House, 2006), *Beat Sound, Beat Vision: The Beat Spirit and Popular Song* (MUP, 2007), and *Kenneth Burke: From Myth to Ecology* (Parlor Press, 2013).

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### **Distinctively Modern: The Poetry of Edward Thomas**

Rhys Tranter in conversation with Prof. Katie Gramich, prior to the conference she co-organized to celebrate the life and work of poet Edward Thomas in 2017.

**In April 2017, Cardiff University will be hosting a conference to celebrate the Welsh writer Edward Thomas. Can you say a little bit about the timing of the conference? Do you think it's time for a reevaluation of Thomas' life and work?**

Edward Thomas died in the Battle of Arras at Easter 1917, so the conference at Cardiff University in April 2017 is a centenary conference to commemorate a distinctive and unusual



writer whose life was cut short in the First World War. Thomas wrote all of his poetry in the last two years of his life – between December 1914 and December 1916 – prompted to do so partly by his friendship with the American poet, Robert Frost, whom he met in the summer of 1913, and partly by the new and pressing circumstances of the war. It is so sad to think that only six of his poems were published in his lifetime – a small pamphlet under the pseudonym ‘Edward Eastaway’ in 1916.



Edward Thomas in military uniform. Source: Special Collections of the Arts and Social Studies, Cardiff University.

Thomas wasn't a trench poet, like Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon – he didn't have time to be because he was killed very soon after arriving at the front line. His poetry is very different from theirs and has a haunting, subtle, understated character much admired by many readers, especially by other poets! But in recent years, a great deal more critical attention has been given to the much more substantial body of prose work that Thomas wrote before finding his voice as a poet. He wrote a great variety of books – nature writing, topographical works, travel books, biographies, a novel, literary criticism and history, and many, many book

reviews. When he turned to poetry, Thomas tended to repudiate his earlier work in prose, referring disparagingly to it as ‘hack work’, but when you actually go back and read it you can easily find the voice of that latterly brilliant poet hidden in the prose writer. He was an independent-minded and incisive critic but, more than anything, he was a walker and a lover of nature. This is why contemporary nature writers like Robert MacFarlane have championed him in their works, resurrecting Thomas as an ecological writer, a pathfinder, a man who speaks eloquently to our contemporary times.

### **What makes Cardiff University the ideal venue for this conference?**

Cardiff University holds a very extensive Edward Thomas archive in the Special Collections of the Arts and Social Studies library. Most of Thomas’s major scholars and biographers have visited our archive at some point in their research, so it will be something of a homecoming for them, we hope. South Wales itself was an important place for Thomas. Both of his parents were Welsh, though he himself was born and raised in London. Thomas had many relatives still living in rural Wales, and visited them often; he wrote about the country and people in a lovely illustrated book entitled *Beautiful Wales*, first published in 1905, and refers to Welsh landscapes and mythology in a number of poems, such as ‘Roads’ and ‘The Mountain Chapel’. In his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans*, he recounts Welsh legends and also ruminates on what it means to be a displaced Welshman, living in the English metropolis. Indeed, you could say that some of Thomas’s characteristic melancholy could have something to do with what he referred to as his ‘accidental Cockney nativity’ – he longed for a homeland but could never quite find it. It’s no accident that there are 3 Thomas poems entitled ‘Home’ and all of them are fundamentally about not having one. This is one of the characteristics of his writing that makes him seem to us so quintessentially ‘modern’ – you could say that he’s a deracinated modern man before the Modernists discovered deracination!

### **What is it about Thomas’ work that appeals to you?**

F. R. Leavis was very astute when it comes to Edward Thomas’s work. In his 1936 book *New Bearings in English Poetry* (where he famously champions T. S. Eliot as The Poet of Modernity) Leavis refuses to condemn Thomas as a Georgian writer of pretty verses. On the contrary, Leavis says, ‘only a very superficial classification could associate Edward Thomas with ... the Georgians at all. He was a very original poet who devoted great technical subtlety to the expression of a distinctively modern sensibility...Edward Thomas’s [poems] seem to happen. It is only when the complete effect has been registered in the reader’s mind that the inevitability and the exquisite economy become apparent. A characteristic poem of his has the air of being a random jotting down of chance impressions and sensations, the record of a moment of relaxed and undirected consciousness. The diction and movement are those of quiet, ruminative speech. But the unobtrusive signs accumulate, and finally one is aware that the outward scene is accessory to an inner theatre.’[1] Spot-on, Frank, is all I can say!

So what was this ‘distinctively modern sensibility’ that Leavis perceived in Thomas? One aspect of it was his lack of certainty, his ‘homelessness’, as I’ve suggested. There is also something uniquely fragile and vulnerable about Thomas’s first-person speakers. Their words seem constantly shadowed by something they cannot quite articulate; Thomas dramatizes that frustration we all feel sometimes with not being able to say just what we mean or feel. ‘I cannot bite the day to the core’, as he puts it in one poem, ‘The Glory’. And Thomas’s poems are emphatically first-person poems: his work is *personal* in a new, more inward, more unsettling way. The first-person speaker who appears again and again in Thomas’s poems is a lonely traveller, a solitary, a misfit, constantly meditating on things and failing to reach satisfactory conclusions. Even Thomas’s rhythms and metre often have a certain laconic inconclusiveness about them. This is what I like about Thomas – he is more than capable of being lyrical, but it is when he is deliberately unlyrical, mulling things over in a characteristic blank verse form, that he creates a unique atmosphere of Edward Thomas-ness, if I can put it

that way. He is one of those poets who seem to be constantly whispering in your ear, like the susurrating trees in his poem, 'Aspens'.

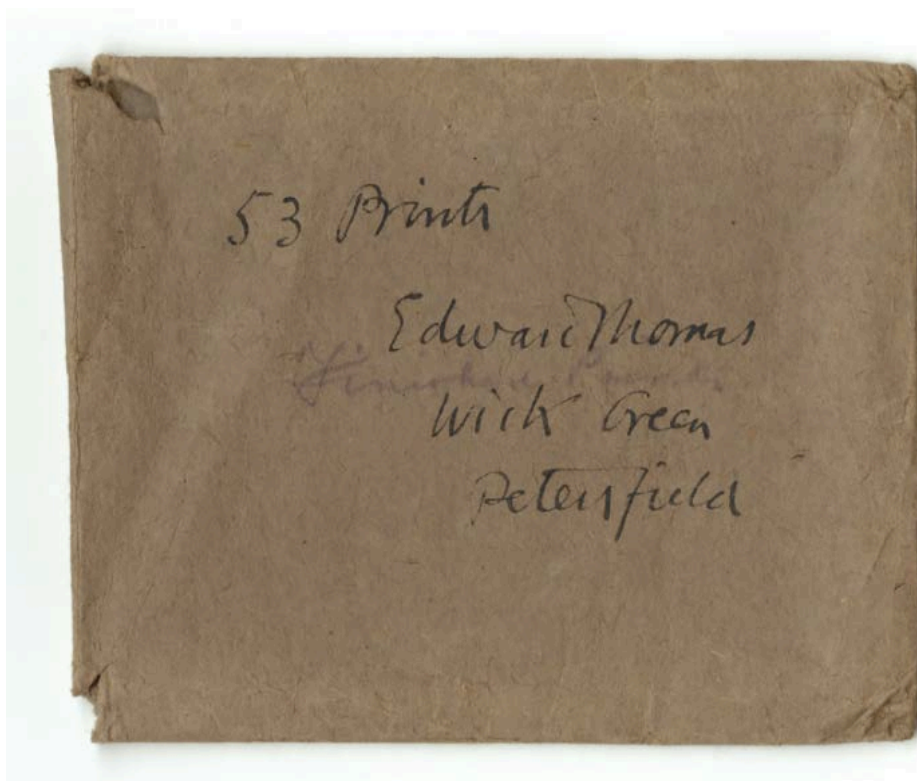
**In what ways do you think Edward Thomas can still speak to contemporary readers, or influence contemporary writing?**

All his poems were written while he was still in Britain, either before he joined up in July 1915 or while he was in army training camps in the south of England before being posted to France. Nevertheless, arguably the war overshadows all of his poetry, even when he is ostensibly focusing on an aspect of Nature, such as a bird or a tree. His sense of the fragility of Nature, as well as its beauty, is in a sense intensified by the knowledge of the war and exacerbated by a growing knowledge of his own fragility and mortality. I think that undercurrent of knowledge of the worst is something that can resonate with us today – that fear, that frustration, that angst. And yet, when all's said and done, many of Thomas's poems are just downright beautiful – the mysterious 'Old Man', for instance, or the poignant 'As the Team's Head Brass'.

**FOOTNOTES**

[1] F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1967; original ed. 1932) pp. 61-4.

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An envelope from Cardiff University's Edward Thomas archive in the Special Collections of the Arts and Social Studies Library <https://scolarcardiff.wordpress.com/2016/04/08/in-pursuit/>

[In July 2018 I found a letter from Julian Thomas inside ESP Haynes' copy of *In Pursuit of Spring* in the Tim Wilton-Steer collection which sheds further light on these photos: "E. took a large number of photographs which the publisher would not use ..".Ed.]

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*Newsletter 79* (August 2017) included a report on the walk to Llyn y Fan Fach as part of the Cardiff conference, including photos. Here Myddfai resident and Fellowship member, Mary MacGregor, recounts the legend and considers its power in reminding us that very often it was women who collected medicinal plants, but that they were forbidden to practice as physicians.

### **The legend of the Lady of the Lake**

The legend of the lady of Llyn y Fan Fach has many of the same attributes as other water myths. This story goes that a widow sent her son to watch their cattle as they grazed near the lake. One day, a lady rose out of the lake and he fell in love with her. He courted her with gifts of bread: first it was overbaked, then underbaked. With his mother's help, however, he took the lady bread that was just right. At their next meeting the lady rose from the lake with her father and sister who looked exactly like her. The father told the young man that he could marry his daughter as long as he was able to pick the right one. The lady discreetly moved her foot and the youth picked her correctly. The father then warned the youth that if he touched his daughter in anger three times, his daughter would return to the lake, taking her dowry of cattle with her.

The couple married, setting up home at a farm called Esgair Llaethdy (The Dairy on the Ridge) about a mile from Myddfai. This farm is still a working farm today. For many years the couple lived happily, the lady bearing three sons. As well as helping with the cattle, the lady of the lake had become knowledgeable about the plants that grew on the slopes of the Fans. She learned about their healing properties; she became skilled in knowing when to pick the plants and how to pick them. All her knowledge she passed on to her sons.

And then came three occasions when she behaved inappropriately such as laughing at a funeral and crying at a wedding to which the husband responded by tapping her with his gloves. The final straw came when she kept her husband waiting when they were going to a christening. He tapped her a third time. She took the cattle and returned with them to the lake leaving no trace except for the furrows made by the plough as the oxen dragged it into the depths of the lake.

This legend became attached to Riwallon, physician to the Lord Rhys in the thirteenth century. Rhiwallon had three sons who were also physicians. Their cures, with instructions for their use were written in a manuscript which is contained in the Red Book of Hergest (now belonging to Jesus College, Oxford and kept at the Bodleian Library). The connection with Myddfai to a medical tradition is given credence by a survey in 1317, which showed that certain free tenants of Myddfai were expected to provide a doctor for the Lord of Llandoverly. It is a connection that continues as strong as ever to this day.

Legends are powerful, tapping into our subconscious. For me, however, the power of this legend lies in reminding us that it was women who collected the medicinal plants. It was a skilled job but not as highly regarded as the skill of the physician. In the Middle Ages women were fined £2 and/or imprisoned for a year if discovered practising as physicians.

**Mary MacGregor**



Community-made Myddfai Stained Glass Legends Window (2017), Myddfai Community Hall

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### **Edward Thomas's friends**

With this section we begin an occasional series on Edward and his friends with memories from Sir Ian and Lady Dorothy MacAlister. Lady Dorothy MacAlister, the widow of Edward Thomas' great friend Sir Ian MacAlister wrote this memoir in 1961 and her family have kindly donated it to the Edward Thomas Study Centre. Anna Corbett, her granddaughter and Fellowship member, has typed out the original. 'Damie' was the family's nickname for her.

#### **Damie's Memoir**

My husband had a special talent for friendship and there were many people who were important to him but of the most intimate and beloved in his life Edward Thomas was one. I have always been glad that he was at home with us on a day's "pass" from a military convalescent hospital when he read in the daily paper of the news of "Edwy's" death – the first he heard of it. They were together at St Paul's school in the History viii and at Oxford but at St Paul's my husband was only aware of him as a quite boy in the same form. Then one day at Oxford they met in someone's room and in the course of general conversation realised that they had much in common. "Mac" told me how, when they left one walked the other to his destination and then the other walked the first one back, and they went to and fro for an hour or more between ET's rooms (he was non collegiate in his first year) and Merton, talking hard and unwilling to break away.

To the itinerary thus begun, there was no check on Mac's side, though I have read that at first Edward hung back from self distrust, and, if this is correct – as it well may be – it would partly account for my husband's emphasising, when I was first to meet Edward, how shy he was and how careful one must be to start with.

Mac probably knew all about the plans, the doubts, the difficulties, the early marriage, the financial handicap, and the other details that have become familiar to students of Thomas' life and work. Thenceforward he was in touch with Edward and Helen whenever his own whereabouts allowed it, and they wrote many letters to each other, some of which are still in existence, though naturally many were destroyed when dealt with.

I do not know how many of their earlier homes Mac visited. He was in Canada from 1902 to 1904, during which period Edward had one of his worst periods, nervous depression and exhaustion and there was a suggestion that he should go out to Ottawa. Mac, and I think, some other friend or friends, saved money for the fare. But it came to nothing. I think Mac must have known Elses Farm because when they loved there Edward found quarters for WH Davies close at hand and I still have a copy of the little dark green paper bound ‘Souls Destroyer’ that Edward and other friends were selling among their circle to help WHD.

In 1907 I met Mac and entered into a relationship of meeting and corresponding and book lending which led to our engagement in the summer of 1908. He had one day brought me a little book called ‘Horae Solitaire’ which quite fascinated me. He was please that I liked it and said the author was a friend of his and told me something about him and his family. I wanted to meet him and so did another girl – Dolly White, who was engaged to William Hamilton Fyfe (a contemporary and friend of Mac’s at Merton and later a Merton don, headmaster of Christ’s hospital, Principal of Queens University Toronto and then the University of Aberdeen – a delightfully friendly, amusing and ‘live’ person). This was not long before his marriage, so I think the meeting must have been in the winter or very early spring. Mac arranged a little dinner in the basement of the “Petit Niche” a Soho restaurant well know at that time for good food at prices suitable to the young and more or less struggling. Temple Thurston had introduced it into a novel called, I think, ‘Sally Bishops’. Madame herself presided at the desk and called for Alexandre, the wine waiter, while her daughters attended to the customers. The five of us had a very pleasant evening. My impression of ET was of a remarkably handsome person with a charming smile and voice who did not say very much. No doubt the other two men made up for that and Dolly and I mostly watched and listened.

That was the first time I saw and spoke to Edward but it was the merest episode and entirely different from the next occasion in June or July 1908, very shortly after our ‘official’ engagement. This time we met for lunch as the “Brice” (?) And I became aware, as we waited outside for Edward to arrive, that Mac was definitely nervous – a phenomenon to which I was not accustomed. He told me that Edward was shy and reserved and he now reiterated this very earnestly. Of course the truth was that he was himself anxious that we would “get on” and apprehensive that some little thing might upset first impressions.

We saw Edward approaching in the distance and waited in a rather tense atmosphere. Mac need not have worried. Edward took me completely for granted as Mac’s wife-to-be and therefore a friend-to-be of himself and his family. He showed no sign of shyness and was at his friendly best.

We were married in January 1909 and Edward’s elder daughter, Bronwen, was one of the two small girls who held the train of my dress – Helen and Bronwen both enjoyed the episode.

Pretty soon I became very much preoccupied with family and “chores” and the actual course and history of my contacts I s rather vague in my memory. I mean, for instance, that I cannot say how many times Edward spent a night or nights with us or his visits to London.

I learned a bit from Mac of the difficulties that the Thomas’s faced and particularly, of the sometimes quite terrible mental distress of which Edward was a victim. Nowadays no doubt it would have been better understood and possibly more effectively dealt with – or possibly not. In any case at that time it seemed as if nothing but a sudden endowment of some kind that would leave him completely free of financial worry would do any good, and this of course was not forthcoming.

Even if it had been and he could have left to Helen's hands all the everyday bothers of living, he would still have had quite enough to contend with, considering his high standards in his work and his sense of responsibility of his family. But the absolute necessity to earn a living

from others was a never ending worry. Sometimes things were terribly bad with him and Mac used to come home thoroughly upset from a talk in town, where they often met when Edward came up for a day to see publishers or editors. We moved to Hampstead in 1912 and I remember him in our first flat, on the edge of the Heath, and in tow of the houses we moved into as the family grew.

One evening in the flat, which was high up and looked over the whole of London in the distance and the tress of Hampstead near at hand, I asked him what caused certain odd sounds that I had been hearing in the evening and the night, and being town bred, could not identify. He stood at the window and listened a few moments and said "baby owls".

Mac spent several weekends with the Thomas's. I found it difficult to leave the family but I went once with him to Berryfield Cottage. E met us at Petersfield Station with "Rags" and we walked to the little house and I looked out of the bedroom window at the green slope behind – a lovely sight to a Londoner even though I lived in Hampstead. 'Rags' was very fond of carrying walking sticks and I think it must have been on that occasion that he left his toothmarks on a stick of Mac's that we had for a long time afterwards. E never wanted another go, after Rag's death.

Looking back on the years 1908 -1914 the time seems longer than it actually was. Edward and Helen had so many ups and downs – the abortive Civil Service job which was given up after a few months, changes of houses, the birth of Ann, places for books, visits to publishers (a hated necessity), commissions, refusals, books and more books – altogether such a long list of them and so few that E really wanted to write. But he never wrote anything in which there was not something worth while – not even 'Feminin influence on the Poets' on which Helen told me, he had about the lowest opinion of any of his books, but in which I myself found openings to more than one enduring interest.

The 1914 war of course knocked them endways. Edward and my husband both, for different reasons, entered on a phase of painful suspense and indecision. Mac's whole instinct was to get into the war at once, but, in addition to health difficulties, there were serious reasons why it might not be the right decision. Edward had never been in the least military minded and had to start from fundamentals. When at last he made his final decision he asked Mac to teach him something about drill and they went together to a quiet part of Hyde Park where Mac, who had soaked himself in military things since his school days and being cadet officer at school and a volunteer at Oxford, taught him the rudimentals of formation. When at last he was definitely in the Army Mac was overjoyed to hear from him what a relief he found it to be able to cease worrying and know just where he stood and what he had to do. And I remember his returning one evening from a meeting with Edward full of excitement and pleasure on learning about the long delayed release into poetry.

I have a vivid recollection of coming into town one day to meet Mac and Edward at lunchtime and another old friend turned up unexpectedly and the group divided to walk from Conduit Street along a crowded regent Street – I think it was to Paganini's. I was with Edward, and realised acutely that I was walking along with the handsomest and most outstanding man for miles around. He himself was of course quite unaware of the interest he attracted, but I thoroughly enjoyed being escorted by this unusual looking private soldier, whose salute was so many degrees smarter and more dignified than that received from any officers we met. Not perhaps a very high minded point of view, but find I still remember the incident with pride and pleasure.

My husband eventually felt free to apply for a commission. He could not get himself graded higher than C3, which meant no overseas service. He was commissioned in 1916, so it must have been before then that Edward came to see us on what turned out to be his last visit. He

was on leave in London for a few nights before a new posting – he was not sure where – and it was arranged that he would dine with us in Hampstead and spend the evening. He was looking forward to a good talk. But that very morning a relative of my husband's came in to see him in his office and asked him point blank to feed and put him up for the night.

Mac was taken too suddenly and unawares to think up an excuse though his dealings with the man had never been intimate and we knew we were being used as a convenience. In the event our unwelcome guest completely ruined the evening being a 'small talker' of great experience and determination who knew nothing about what interested Mac and Edward and who kept control of the conversation, as all three of us were too troubled to do anything about it. I cannot remember when Mac managed to get away and accompany Edward to the "tube" - I expect he did and so managed to have a few minutes talk with him. But it was a spoiled evening that we never ceased to regret and the last time the two friends saw each other, though there may have been some letters between them after that.

As I said before, when Edward was killed at Easter 1917 Mac was convalescing at a hospital in Marylebone and was with us one morning in Hampstead when he read the name in the casualty lists. I will not try to describe the ties of their friendship – on one ever took Edward's place.

For myself I can say that he left an outstanding impression of beauty – in face and form and movement and voice and mind and the prose and poetry resulted with and from all of these.

Lady Dorothy MacAlister  
November 1961

### **Sir Ian MacAlister's memories of Edward Thomas**

[From a typescript draft of Rowland Watson's unpublished book, 'Memories of Edward Thomas' (1952) in the Edward Thomas Study Centre, copies of which are also in the University of Gloucestershire Archives and Special Collections and the Edward Thomas Collection in the Wandsworth Heritage Service, Battersea Library.– Ed.]

My long friendship with Edward Thomas was one of the most important things in an otherwise rather humdrum life. It began when we were both 19 and lasted till his death twenty years later. At school I hardly knew him, but we went up to Oxford at the same time in 1897, I to Merton and he to the rather lonely life of an "unattached" student. In October 1897 we met again in the rooms of another old Pauline. I was shy. He was even shyer and he hardly spoke at all. But when I left to go back to College he went with me and we talked till we reached the gate. Then we turned and I walked back with him to his lodgings in – I think – the Iffley Road. Then he turned and came back with me to Merton. That long talk was really the beginning. He was for a time unhappy and out of his element in Oxford and I felt that his intimate outpouring to me was something of a comfort for him. The fact that we were both shy lads was indeed a help. If I had been, as I probably became later, the self-confident and self-satisfied freshman, it would have been harder for us to come to real and comfortable intimacy. From that day until he went down three years later he was one of the big influences in my life. We talked endlessly in my rooms and in his, and we walked together in the Oxford country. While I knew more in my narrowly specialised subjects, he was far above me intellectually and in general maturity of mind, and I gained much more from him than he did from me. All that I really contributed was the comfort of knowing that he had a faithful friend whom he could trust and lean upon in bad times. For there were bad times. Moving in his first year from his "unattached" lodgings to a Scholar's rooms in Lincoln, he had exchanged his loneliness for the rather bewildering surroundings of a College life. He never quite fitted in.



He made some good and interesting friends in Lincoln and Balliol, the latter particularly. But he was never in any sense a typical undergraduate, if there is such a thing. He tried hard to adapt himself. He even underwent for a couple of terms the torture of the Boats. He attempted a certain number of really uncongenial activities, but he was always something of a misfit. In a sense he was too mature, though he was entirely free from any sort of pose and indeed he was modest and self-distrustful to a fault.

As soon as I came across his first Oxford work, the little “*Horae Solitariae*” volume, I was thrilled and rather overawed by its quality. I remember that even when I asked him why he did not produce verse, but he always shrugged away the suggestion. He had tried, of course, but he felt it was not yet his medium, and almost at once he had to turn to the urgent duty of earning money by his pen.

Though he was never in any sense a normal Oxford man – of course there really is no such thing – he loved the place and above all the Oxford country. As soon as he was free from the bondage of the Boats he was able to indulge his passion for walking all over the “scholar-gypsy” countryside.

His marriage helped to remove him from absorption in ordinary Oxford life. I remember when he first spoke of Helen to me and showed me the photograph that always stood in his room.

The only Don who interested him was his History Tutor, Owen Edwards. Not only because he was a great Welshman but because his personality and methods had nothing donnish about them, he was one of the few men in Oxford who really mattered to him.

His departure from Oxford at the end of his third year while I stayed on for the normal four did not separate us. He was a wonderful letter writer and I like to think that all through the bad years that followed he found some comfort in constant frank correspondence. I was too young and inexperienced to have any understanding of Melancholia. I rather doubt whether anyone can really understand it who has not been to some extent a victim of it. When that experience came to me later, and not till then, I came to realise that it was not as I used to think a matter of mood, from which he could free himself if he would just make the effort. I came to understand that it was more like a physical ailment for which there was no easy cure, and that there was really nothing to do about it but to wait for the fit to pass. And all the time his material circumstances made it almost impossible for him to avoid the onset of trouble and desperately hard to get free of it when it had him in its grip.

I have two little memories of him that may be worth recording. Unless my aged memory has let me down it was during one of our “Long Vacs” that I took him to his first theatre. I can’t remember the play. His reaction surprised me. He told me he felt it to be extraordinarily unreal. A lot of people standing on a stage in front of an audience – talking, moving- I can’t describe it. At first it did not appeal to him at all. In our Oxford days there used to be every Friday night an unaccompanied choral service at Magdalen. It was the Choir made by Dr. Varley Roberts and then unequalled in Oxford. The pure voices without the interposition of the organ were indescribably beautiful and Edward loved it. I think he refers to it in one of his writings.

Between 1901 and 1905 we were far apart, but the letters on both sides were constant. At a particularly bad time in 1905 I almost succeeded in getting him to pay a visit to me in Canada, where I was working. Back in London in 1906 I saw him regularly, at the Kentish and Hampshire cottages, and when he had to make his visits to London in search of work. All through that time I could help him very little except by understanding and friendship. He talked with a kind of grim despair about his work and the ceaseless grind of trying to make a bare living by his pen.

The Great War brought release. He soon felt that though of all men he was least fitted for soldiering, he could not keep out of it. He was desperately shy about it and the thoughts of

enlistment and the mysterious things that would follow just frightened him. I was something of a soldier myself, and I took him to a park and gave him a little elementary drill, so that he would not feel utterly foolish when he first stood up as a recruit. Then I took him down to Headquarters and he made the plunge.

All his friends know of the amazing transformation that followed. It was not merely physical, though he made a fine upright soldierly figure. It was the first time for 20 years that the burden of anxiety and responsibility had been lifted. He found to his surprise that he had marked ability in various directions that were quite novel to him. His pen was at rest except for his letters, which were constant, and then at last he was free to become the poet that he had always longed to be. His vast experience as a reader and a critic had perfected his equipment, and the poems sprang from him without fumbling or uncertain aim.

What more can I say about my friend Edward Thomas? There was no one in the least like him in my own experience. He had great physical beauty, an unforgettable voice and manner. Through all his bad times he was a perfect friend. And that can I say of Helen, for whom my love and admiration have always been unbounded? She was the perfect helpmate, without whom his life would almost certainly have been wrecked. And the three charming children? They were a material burden, of course, but they were a much greater help by their very existence.

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### **How I came to Edward Thomas**

The following are further extracts from conversations between Ian Mellor and ETF members on the Agny tour in 2017. They were each based on three questions: what is and has been your role in life? Why are you attracted to the life and work of Edward Thomas? And, if you were allowed only one poem, which would it be? The object of the first question was to show that Thomas appeals to a wide cross section of our society, the second would demonstrate the far-reaching appeal contained within his work and the third would reveal his most popular poem, the number one of so many number ones.

#### **Wendy Pegler (bookseller)**

I first heard about Edward Thomas from my mother. She loved poetry and we both read the two books by his wife Helen Thomas. I became a second hand bookseller with my husband Philip and we started collecting books by Thomas because we really liked his poetry.

FP: *She Dotes on What the Wild Birds Say.*

*Yet she has fancied blackbirds hide  
A secret, and that thrushes chide  
Because she thinks death can divide  
Her from her lover.*

#### **Penny Daniels (change management, founder/director Thinking Solutions 2000 Ltd.)**

There's lots of reason I connect with Edward Thomas. I'm not at all an expert but I have a huge love of First World War poetry. My great uncle Gerald died at the Somme aged 19. My father also loved WWI poetry. He was a code breaker in the Second World War and fought in Burma. I've done a lot of battlefield trips before including a Somme tour with Andy last November which I thought was absolutely fantastic....we read lots of poetry so I just couldn't resist coming along on this adventure. My favourite Thomas poem so far is Rain. I think it is

to the point, succinct and without undue sentiment. He seems to have had a lot of influence on other writers, even T S Eliot. The Fellowship is an opportunity to find out more. April was certainly the cruelest month for Edward Thomas.

FP: *Rain*

*If love it be towards what is perfect and  
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.*

### **David Cobb (teacher and educational writer)**

At 91 I'm the oldest member of the Fellowship and I'm here on a pilgrimage to visit Thomas' grave which I've not seen before. He has been a formative influence on me for many years and I'm now rediscovering things that I'd forgotten. A long time ago I was writing a book about English literature for use in Japanese high schools and included a poem by Edward Thomas. I hadn't any real idea who he was at that time. The poem was *Sowing*. I thought it would fit quite well with Japanese people who love plants. In fact most teachers didn't understand the material in the book and were losing face with their pupils! Things have improved a lot since then but for me now it's increasingly difficult to keep working. I'm still receiving royalties nevertheless!

FP: *This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong*

*I hate not Germans, nor grow hot  
With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.*

### **Vanessa Davis (trustee, Winchester Poetry Festival)**

I love First World War poetry and the first tour I ever joined was with the Wilfred Owen Association. Now Edward Thomas appeals to me although I should read more of his poems. He was a very tricky man and must have been difficult to live with but he wrote wonderfully and I love coming on battlefield tours. *Adlestrop* is a favourite poem of course. Also *And You Helen* is so poignant and shows how very difficult the marriage was. In this sense he reminds me of Alun Lewis, a poet of the Second World War. So yes, poetry means so much to me.....and I'm delighted to say that the Winchester Poetry Festival is happening once again this year.

FPS: *Adlestrop and As the Team's Head-Brass:*

*".....Have many gone  
From here?" "Yes." "Many lost?" "Yes, a good few....."*

### **Freddie Phillips (marketing)**

I've always been interested in the lives of writers and poets and heard a radio programme on Edward Thomas with Richard Emeny a few years ago. I love the creative potential of the written word and I think that in the end all literature defaults to poetry. Our trip to Arras was quite wonderful and yet so awful as we negotiated the pleasures of our comfortable lives and sharing alongside the horrors of those who died and lost. Both my grandfathers fought in the First World War. My father's father was killed but sadly I don't know where or when. My grandmother would point him out to me in a photograph of his regiment shown on her wall. He left five children for his wife to bring up alone. People today who think life is hard cannot understand what past generations have had to endure. I don't think my favourite Edward Thomas poem is his best, but it doesn't need to be, for me it captures the things he cared

about most in the landscape of England and the final verse offers myriad, playful opportunities to think back into its meaning for the author. I'm spending my retirement walking, hill climbing and skiing...not bad for an elderly!

FP: *For These*

*The lovely visible earth and sky and sea  
Where what the curlew needs not, the farmer tills*

**Colin Dudman (jazz musician and composer)**

As soon as I became aware of the Fellowship I knew I'd like to join because I'm very attracted to Thomas' poetry and in fact have set some of his verse to music. I find his lines resonate with my own personality and the way I write music. The occasional asymmetrical rhythms requiring three-four or five-four bars all add to the interest! I composed music to *Lights Out* for three female choristers from Lincoln Cathedral choir and we performed it there recently. Other composers have also set the poems to music, including Ivor Gurney who was also a fine poet as well. I must discover which poems of the Thomas collection inspired Gurney to set them to music.

FP: *Lights Out*

*To go into the unknown  
I must enter and leave alone  
I know not how*

**Hilary Wilton-Steer (Fellowship member)**

My husband Tim was a devotee of Edward Thomas and collected a huge number of works by him or written about him. It was almost organic; although we're not sure exactly when it all began, Thomas became a presence in our lives. What began as a small collection on one bookshelf became almost 1000 volumes before Tim died in June 2011. It's recognised as one of the finest collection of Edward Thomas' works in existence. Later on, in order to help me decide what to do, I contacted Richard Emeny and other members of the Fellowship. They have been actively looking for a home for the poet so now my husband's collection is part of the Edward Thomas Study Centre in Petersfield Museum, in Hampshire. The Centre is still a work in progress. We hoped it would be open in time for the centenary of Thomas' death but it should be open soon<sup>v</sup>. Eventually it should be a study and learning centre for schools and academics and also a home for the Fellowship. You might say that I've been an attachment to my husband's devotion to Thomas but the Fellowship are lovely people and I've really enjoyed the annual walks over the last 30 years. Tim had always wanted to join a tour like this and would be jumping for joy if he were here now. Thomas is increasingly accepted as a key figure in the world of poetry. There was a programme about him on Radio 4 recently and his poems are now studied at GCSE and A level.

FP: *Tall Nettles*

*I like the dust on the nettles, never lost  
Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.*

**Peter Carrington-Porter (civil servant HMRC)**

Why Edward Thomas? We need to go back 41 years to when I was writing my thesis on Thomas as part of my English degree at Oxford University. Thomas was not on the syllabus but I discovered him and his reflections and moods seemed to chime with mine, especially the way he caught the timbre of the English language and combined it with the English countryside: a kind of hopeful melancholy! My tutor had suggested I meet a fellow undergraduate a year ahead of me. His name was Andrew Motion, later to become poet-laureate. I've followed Thomas' work ever since and joined the Fellowship when I retired. I don't associate him with war poetry, maybe because he was older than many others when he joined the war. I'm not sure if it's right to say that he captures an essence of Englishness because he's essentially Welsh, but that's how it is for me.

FP: *Rain*

*Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:  
But here I pray that none whom once I loved  
Is dying tonight or lying still awake*

**David Kerslake (teacher of history, Membership Secretary: Edward Thomas Fellowship)**

About 20 years ago I went into a bookshop in Hay-on-Wye and found a new series of poets' works, the Wordsworth Editions. They were only a pound each! As a history teacher I was familiar with Owen and Sassoon but not Edward Thomas. The picture in the book I looked at was of him in uniform so I bought it. I'd never really liked poetry before but I was hooked by Thomas immediately. The one that caught my attention was *The Owl*. The last two lines describe his perfect contentment at the end of a day's walk but then his conscience is pricked by the owl's voice and he remembers all those other people who are less fortunate than him. He cares about them although they have never met. For me this is the salvation for mankind. If we can all do that then we have some hope for the future. If we can't then we have none. And as a writer, I think Thomas became more comfortable in his own skin once he began writing poetry; it was a kind of therapy for him

FP: *The Owl*

*Speaking for all who lay under the stars,  
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.*

**Roland Maxted (teacher of religion and philosophy)**

I am here to remember my great uncle, Edward Thomas. My maternal grandfather was Edward's youngest brother, Julian. I brought my family here in 2009 to visit Edward's grave and I was very keen to return for the centenary of his death. The poem I choose is the one I shall read tomorrow at Edward's grave. I feel I'm representing my large family of six brothers and sisters, and our mother Elizabeth who sadly died in July last year. She would have loved to be here. Thomas cannot really be labelled as a war poet, in fact it's hard to label him at all. References to the war in his poetry are on the whole incidental. But the feeling of loss for the young men of Britain is palpable, as is the impact of the war on the countryside.

FP: *The Owl*

*.....telling me plain what I escaped  
And others could not.....*

**Sophie Milner (second year undergraduate, University of East Anglia and great great grand daughter of Edward Thomas)**

It feels very humbling to be here, that so many people are so interested in a relative of mine. I feel very honoured to touch the same ground where he died. It is hard to imagine how it was, with the weather so beautiful today. I remember one of his poems from GCSE and although I didn't take English at A-level, a lot of my friends did and told me about their teacher who was very interested in his poetry. We gave the teacher a cutting of old man from Edward's house; I've never seen someone so happy! *Sowing* is my favourite poem. I read it at my grandad's memorial service.

FP: *Sowing*

*I tasted deep the hour  
Between the far  
Owl's chuckling first soft cry  
And the first star.*

**Geoff Taylor (modern art exhibitor, poet)**

My passion is writing poetry and Edward Thomas has always been a massive influence, through meetings in Dymock<sup>v</sup> and reading the anthologies. His love of the countryside and feel for the landscapes is what makes his work so attractive for me. And he writes about much more than war. I've brought some of my poems with me to show those who may be interested – they have a rambling prose style, a bit like Edward Thomas!

*Hard to think on Armageddon o'er this champaign land,  
The copse are full and still now; maize crops amazingly stand.*

.....  
*Suppose I'd better go boys, charabanc'll be waiting to leave,  
What we can't think of to say boys, we'll wipe away in our sleeve.*

(from *Monologue at a Great War Cemetery*)

FP: *The Other*

*He goes: I follow: no release  
Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease*

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**Book Review**

**EDWARD THOMAS AND WALES**, edited with an Introduction, Chronology and Afterword by Jeff Towns. Wales in the Poetry of Edward Thomas, an essay by Dr Andrew Webb. Parthian Cardigan.

I was apprehensive about this book, because I do not like defining writers, or claiming them, by national labels. In Thomas's case it seemed doubly inappropriate, as he found such labels unpleasing, and often inaccurate. One thinks for instance of his dislike of Stratford-Upon-Avon and its Shakespeare industry, as well as the 'Hardy Country' in Dorset. Such dislike

was also one of the reasons for his reluctance to specify names and people in most of his books, other than biographical ones. Most important, such labels are inclined to diminish their subjects, making them seem less as a writer, artist or whatever. They become more parochial. Thomas is an internationally recognised writer and should be celebrated as such.

Were my fears justified? I am sorry to say that they were. In fact, I didn't quite 'get' the book at all. It is divided into sections: Introduction, Selected Extracts, Lecture by Dr Andrew Webb, Chronology, Afterword, Three Appendices and a bibliography. The Selected Extracts is the most useful part of the book, especially for those who find access to Thomas's prose books difficult. It is the belief that Thomas's Welshness has been 'overlooked' as Towns (five-eighths a Welshman apparently) states in his Afterword that is difficult to credit. Professor R. George Thomas was a proud Welshman and Thomas's Welshness is explicit in his biography and in many of the articles that he wrote. All the recent biographies cover this aspect of Thomas's life and work. Indeed, Towns quotes from Jean Moorcroft-Wilson's 2015 biography, in which she emphasises the point, though her book is omitted from the Chronology for some reason. In my own book Wales is mentioned as having an 'almost total absence', which seems a bit rich in view of the account of Thomas's Welsh heredity and a discussion of one of his 'Welsh' essays. It also includes a picture labelled 'Dulce Domum' of the Marendaz farm in Wales, which speaks for itself.

Thomas was of largely Welsh ancestry and visited his relatives and friends there as often as he could. He was born and bred a Londoner and lived in the Home Counties. He visited his Welsh grandmother in Swindon and loved Wiltshire, his favourite county. All these influences affect his writing strongly. Writers generally write about what and where they know and Thomas was no different in that respect. An avid note maker, he plundered his experiences at all these places for use in his writing. He was fascinated by folklore and folk songs from anywhere in the British Isles, including Wales.

Towns takes time to explain that he finds nationalism distasteful and does not seek to claim Thomas for Wales, yet that seems to be what he is doing by trawling through the works to uncover any reference to that country, some of which are a little far-fetched. For instance, is it relevant to highlight that a letter to E. S. P. Haynes was sent from Laugharne?

The Afterword is curious, being largely an account of Towns' work as a bookseller with especial reference to Thomas. I found this interesting, but of little relevance to the book's title. Similarly, it was nice to see Stephen Lushington's article about his family's connection with the Thomas family and his father's (Thomas's C.O.) account of him, but it seems irrelevant to the book. Alun John, another proud Welshman, whose article in the *Anglo-Welsh Review* of 1967, is not enthusiastic about Thomas's work is dismissed as churlish, presumably because he took a different view to this book's thesis.

There are several errors and strange omissions: we are told of Gwili's first meeting with Thomas, but not that they were related, albeit distantly. Mr Thomas, Edward's father did not move from Wales to London: he moved with his parents to Swindon where he taught after leaving school, subsequently taking the Civil Service entrance examination, which he passed at the Executive grade. He worked in the Board of Trade, not as stated. The Chronology and the Afterword in particular contain such examples.

Dr Webb's lecture is much more interesting. At times he too seems to be sweeping Thomas's work for Welsh references, but he is more restrained and his analysis of Thomas's use, and probable use, of old Welsh verse forms and rhythms is particularly interesting. While this has been occasionally commented on before, Dr Webb's study of it is a welcome collation of the evidence.

I had hoped to enjoy this book, and possibly others will find it much more useful than me, but it seemed something of a mishmash of different topics. All readers of Thomas know of his debt to Wales, after all he wrote *Beautiful Wales* and *Celtic Stories*, two books explicitly about that country; to add this book seems superfluous.

Richard Emeny, November 2018

## Corrections

The following corrections to 'The Wandsworth Ramble' article in Newsletter 80 have been brought to our attention. In Section 4: the Thomas family moved to 2 Tremorvah Villa[s] in Wakehurst Road (not 1) and this address was redesignated soon afterwards as 49 Wakehurst Road. In Section 5: Edward Thomas left Belleville Road School in early 1889. In Section 6: should be The Grove, Wandsworth (not Balham) and in Section 10 : the Nobles moved to London in 1893. Thanks to Richard Purver for these corrections.

## Notices and Events

Nick Dear's play '**The Dark Earth and the Light Sky**' was rebroadcast on BBC R4 on the 15<sup>th</sup> September 2018. This is a moving exploration of the years leading up to the death of poet Edward Thomas and his close relationships with Robert Frost and Eleanor Farjeon, as well as his marriage to Helen.

The short film '**Home to the Hangars**' (Dir. A. D. Cooper) was selected for screenings in numerous film festivals internationally and won the Making a New World Special Category prize in the 2018 Imperial War Museum Short Film Festival Home. The film will be showing at the Dorking Film Festival on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2019.

**They Walked and Talked.** A DVD with poems written by the Dymock Poets recited & filmed through the year in places where The Poets walked and talked. "- a witness that underlines the importance of preservation, both of place and reputation" Sean Street. If you would like a copy please send your name and address, plus a cheque for 11 GBP (10 GBP +1 GBP p&p) payable to Cate Luck to Cate Luck, 21 Bath Gate Place, Cirencester GL& 1ZJ.

BBC Radio 3 Words and Music, **Walks in Two Worlds.** An exploration of different worlds in text and music read by Alexandra Gilbreath & Neil Pearson including Edward Thomas' The Combe. Broadcast on 28 December 2018.

'**Edward Thomas: The Journey to War**', The Radio Cymru programme broadcast in November 2017 was a finalist for the New York Festivals International Awards, 2018.

'**Thaw**' was one of six *Poems on the Underground* from November until mid-December 2018. The poems mark the centenary of the Armistice of November 1918, and also look towards the future – the wars that followed 'the war to end war', and the instinct of each new generation to hope for a renewal of life (<https://poetrysociety.org.uk/product/poems-on-the-underground-100-set-of-six-posters>).

Sir Andrew Motion, Council for the Protection of Rural England vice president and former Poet Laureate, whose works include *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (2010: Hogarth Press ), wrote on Edward Thomas and Hampshire in a CPRE magazine item entitled ' The landscapes they left behind'. Here is an excerpt: "Like Wordsworth, whom he so much admired, Thomas uses local names, scenes, flora and fauna not only to realise the countryside itself, but also to describe a sensibility and state of mind. Thomas is at once rooted and rambling. This is what makes him so modern, and capable of speaking to us so clearly a century after his death. He knows what it means to be in place, as well as displaced.

<https://www.cpre.org.uk/magazine/features/item/4996-the-landscapes-they-left-behind>

A Concert of Remembrance on the 10<sup>th</sup> November by the Froxfield Choir in St Peter's Church, High Cross, Froxfield included new settings of Out in the Dark and The Trumpet by Mike Orchard. <https://musicinportsmouth.co.uk/noticeboard/review-of-froxfield-choirs-remembrance-concert/>