

Wandsworth

The Past is a strange land, most strange.

Edward Thomas, *Parting*

Distance: 6.3km / 3.9 miles leisurely walking

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapter 2 London to Guildford

Refreshments: All along Battersea route

Map: OS Explorer 161 London South

1. The walk starts from Clapham Junction station; if arriving by train, leave the station by the St John's main entrance and turn left to the crossroads and on to the junction of Lavender Hill and St John's Hill.



Clapham Junction



Lavender Hill 1888

Up to the early 19th century, Battersea was essentially a largely rural district. The coach road from London to Portsmouth ran down, slightly to the south, of what is now Lavender Hill. In the 17th century Wandsworth village was a refuge for persecuted Huguenots who fled France after Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. They established in the village, among other resourceful industrial projects, the cultivation asparagus and lavender – hence the street name of Lavender Hill. Other such names in the area are the former Lavender Lodge with its 500-foot garden on St John's Rd (gone by 1913), Lavender Gardens and Lavender Sweep. To the west of the north side of the Common is Huguenot Place and a Huguenot burial ground, known as Mount Nod cemetery.

In *The Icknield Way* Thomas created the character of the Oxford-educated A.A.

Bishopstone, the head of a vagrant family which perishes in tragic misery. In the deceased man's diary which Thomas 'finds' he reads various statements of a philosophical nature and quotations from many sources, often mirroring, unsurprisingly, his own thinking. At one point he has Bishopstone write, "*The road northwards out of Arundel leads to Heaven*"; to which he had added, "*So does Lavender Hill.*". Given Thomas's warm recollection of his youthful years in



The Falcon 1801



Bolingbroke family mansion,
Battersea

Battersea, this has the ring of a very personal conviction.²

Development came with the construction of the railway in 1838 and of its associated interchange in 1863. Around the junction grew railway-related industries and the workforce slum housing. Civic amenities, more genteel housing and a regional shopping district were created to the south of Lavender Hill. Green spaces such as Wandsworth Common were saved from development.

Reckoned at 6,000 in 1840, the Battersea population increased 28-fold by the time Thomas wrote *In Pursuit of Spring*. In the latter he shows little fondness for Clapham Junction and its impersonal multitudes surging around on their shopping, business or leisure concerns: *I am not fond of crowds... The crowd that I dislike most is the crowd near Clapham Junction on a Saturday afternoon. Though born and bred a Clapham Junction man, I have become indifferently so. Perhaps I ought to call my feeling fear: alarm comes first, followed rapidly by dislike.... It is a disintegrated crowd, rather suspicious and shy perhaps, where few know, or could guess much about, the others.*³

Helen, perhaps with warmer feelings, remembers that Clapham Junction was often a stage on her homeward journeys with Edward after their courting walks in places like Wimbledon and Merton.

Falcon Rd was a main thoroughfare, leading to crossroads and the junction of Lavender Hill and St John's Hill off to the right. The latter would have led to the Unitarian Chapel, attended by the Thomas family – reluctantly by Edward – and the private John's Hill House School he attended after Board School. The Falcon Inn on the left, built as a hotel and pub in 1882, was preceded by an inn dating back to 1733 and possibly much earlier. It had been by the Falcon Brook (previously named the Hydeburn brook) and faced the former turnpike road.

Until 1733 the Battersea Manor was held by the St Johns of Lydiard Tregoze in Wiltshire. They became Viscounts Bolingbroke, whose armorial bearings carried falcon wings which probably explains the name Falcon Rd and that of the pub.

2. Walk down Falcon Rd.

² *The Icknield Way*, Constable 1916 Ch IX Streatley to Sparsholt p245

³ *In Pursuit of Spring*, Thomas Nelson 1914 (IPOS) Ch 6 The Avon, the Biss, the Frome



Arding & Hobbs 1908

3. Cross St John's Hill at the traffic lights and go down St. John's Rd.



St. John's Rd c 1910



Northcote Rd 1907

4. Cross Battersea Rise and on to Northcote Rd

5. Continue down Northcote Rd and, seventh on the right, turn up Wakehurst Rd), taking the short walk up to number 49 on the right.¹

The St John and Bolingbroke family are commemorated by the names of various streets in the Wandsworth area. In his *A Literary Pilgrim in England*, Thomas notes that William Blake married Catherine Boucher of Battersea, and quotes Blake's reference to the area as '*the pleasant village of the St. John's*'.

The mention of Lydiard Tregoze, brings to mind Thomas's intense love for Wiltshire. He compiled *The Woodland Life* in 1897⁴, collected from previously-published articles, his nature diaries and notebooks. He moves through the seasons, describing their changes with delicate and minute observations. Chapter 2, describing Spring, is entitled *Lydiard Tregoze* and recounts its meadows, pools, fields and coppices which he had explored in his visits to Swindon relatives. Displaying his extensive knowledge, in this chapter alone he comments on twenty-five flower types, plus fungi, moss and lichen, ten tree species, the animals rabbit, dog and ferret, and eleven types of bird. Later, in the *South Country* he wrote, with his deep curiosity about names (so evident in *In Pursuit of Spring*), *if only those poems which are place-names could be translated at last, the pretty, the odd, the romantic, the racy names of copse and field and lane and house*.⁵ He creates a list of them and in this lyrical litany is the St John family estate of Lydiard Tregoze. The frontage of Debenhams across Lavender Hill declares its origins as Arding & Hobbs. This was the company's flagship emporium, built in 1884 and remodelled after a fire in 1909. The owners had shrewdly anticipated high profits from the rapid retail and domestic developments that would follow on from the building of Clapham Junction. The store would have been familiar to Wandsworth residents like the Thomas family.

Walking down these streets, a view of the late Victorian houses can be gained by looking up above the shop fronts. Croosh Alley on the left gives a partial glimpse into a past world with its setts, courtyard and bordering trees. The Victorian shops were established to meet the needs of the local population. A directory of 1893 lists a great variety touching on all aspects

¹ As a further example of gentrification, the current house price for this property is £1,300,00. 61 Shelgate Rd is valued at £2,525,000, 13 Rusham Rd at £3,282,000 and 6 Patten Rd at £3,474,000

⁴ *The Woodland Life*, Blackwood, 1897

⁵ *The South Country*, Dent, 1932 edition Ch IX, p153



49 Wakehurst Rd, BM

6. Return to the junction with Northcote Rd and cross it to go up the other half of Wakehurst Rd

of life – dining rooms, builders, warehouses, cheesemongers, grocers, butchers and greengrocers. There was even a sculptor and an umbrella manufacturer as well as a ‘medieval smiths’. Businesses relating to the near-defunct farming in the area include corn merchants and dairymen⁶. In the past couple of decades, the area has been extensively gentrified, the shops showing the pervasive influence of prevailing consumer fashions. Currently there are wine shops, a homeopathic practice, abundant outlets for coffee or for chic items, eating places, hair stylists and quick food joints. The shops gradually give way to domestic terraces.

Thomas, in his *Childhood* notes, says that one winter there were *playing grounds of the hills of snow lining Northcote Road, the principal street...*⁷. This runs to the south in a shallow valley, flanked by parallel roads which rise gently on either side.

Edward had been born to Philip Henry and Mary Thomas in lodgings at 10 Upper Lansdowne Rd North (now 14 Lansdowne Gardens)⁸. They moved to 2 Tremorvah Villas, when Edward was 2 and with his younger brother Ernest, a modest semi-detached brick house soon after redesignated as 49 Wakehurst Rd. He wrote of this Wandsworth home, *Our street like three or four others parallel to it was in two halves, running straight up the opposite sides of a slight valley, along the bottom of which ran the principal street of mixed shops and private houses. Our house was low down in the half which ran up westwards to Bolingbroke Grove, the eastern boundary of Wandsworth Common. These little semi-detached one-storied pale brick houses in unbroken lines on both sides of the street had each, even when they were new, something distinguishing them and preventing monotony. The people in them made them different. In addition, some were beginning to be draped in creepers. Some gates stood open, some were shut. One had bushes in the garden, another had flowers, another nothing but dark trodden gravel. The house above ours, in the next pair, was presumably meant for a doctor, and*

⁶ Neal's Farm stood on the west side of the railway, Burntwood and Springfield farms lay on ET's ride down Burntwood Lane

⁷ CET Ch 1 Infancy

⁸ This is located to the right of Wandsworth Rd nearer Vauxhall Bridge



Bellville School, BM

7. Turn left long Webb's Rd where the houses are larger and have a less confined air than in Wakehurst Rd. After a line of shops on the right, cross and turn right up Shelgate Rd. Walk up to 61.



61 Shelgate Rd, BM

possessed a coach house which almost looked as if it belonged to us. That was our outward distinction. Inside from the front door to the back of the house there was as long a passage as possible, the rooms opening out of it. The staircase ran up to a room with an opaque glass window in the door, a second room and two others connected by a door. The rooms downstairs I hardly remember at all.... The passage was a playground when it was too wet or too dark to be out of doors. Here, when I had at any rate one brother – probably three or four years old when I was five or six – who could run, we two raced up and down the passage to be pounced upon by the servant out of a doorway and swallowed up in her arms with laughter. Upstairs the room with the glass door was at long intervals occupied by a visitor, such as my father's uncle James or my mother's sister, and I think cards were played there... I and at least one brother slept in one of the two connected bedrooms.⁹

On the right, looming above all else, is the redbrick pile of Bellville School. This was Edward Thomas's first school. It is a substantial three-storeyed block, still retaining a large asphalt playground with its original London brick wall as in Thomas's day (*In the hard asphalt playground we played rounders and egg-cap and games with tops, marbles and cherry stones.*¹⁰). Of his joining the school he says, *Then I entered the lowest class of a large suburban board school...* Here began a lifelong preoccupation and love of maps, reaching into his life as an army instructor in Hare Hall, Essex: *What I most enjoyed was doing maps of Great Britain and Ireland, inking in the coast lines with red, and marking the mountain ranges with thin parallel strokes arranged herringbone fashion. I never tired of the indentations of the western coasts, especially of Scotland. The line of the Hebrides I think I actually loved.*¹¹

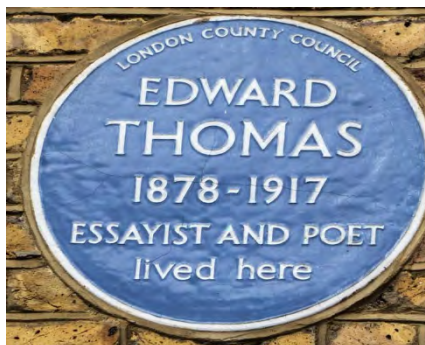
Looking at the school's large windows it is easy to imagine Thomas's statement: *We were huddled close together in great lofty rooms with big windows and big maps and on Mondays a smell of carbolic soap.*

Thomas graduated from the Infants to the Junior section in 1886, staying till early 1889. His father, solicitous for his elder son's future, then moved

⁹ CET Ch 1 Infancy

¹⁰ CET Ch 2 First Schooldays

¹¹ CET Ch 1 Infancy



Helen with Mervyn

8. Carry on up to Leathwaite Rd, turn right and go back down Wakehurst Rd and up to Bolingbroke Grove and Wandsworth Common.



Bolingbroke Grove



Wandsworth Common

him to the private St John's Hill House School, from where he went, aged 12, to Battersea Grammar School and, at 15, to St Pauls, London.

From 1888 this was the second Thomas family home in the area. It bears a blue plaque. *While we were in [Wakehurst Rd] my mother presented me with four brothers at intervals of two years... Being thus seven in family we move to a large house in one of the roads parallel to the old one... the new house had charm. Its size allowed an empty room for us to play in, and a box room...[which] was dark and housed a wooden box containing inexhaustible treasures... chiefly old books, old magazines, old photographs of unknown people.*¹² So the ever-growing family had moved to this three-storeyed terraced house for its greater space and it was the birthplace of the youngest boy Julian, his favourite among his brothers. Julian was to accompany Edward on some of his cycling explorations for *In Pursuit of Spring*. Edward's first writings as a teenage author were completed here, consisting of articles springing from his observations of the natural world, some curated into his first book *The Woodland Life*. Such early writing mentions nature rambles on Wandsworth Common as well as in Wimbledon, Richmond, Merton and Swindon. It was from this house that Edward courted Helen, visiting her father James Ashcroft Noble at The Grove, Wandsworth, and later at Patten Rd. From here, too, he went up to Lincoln College, Oxford and it remained home until he and Helen married and moved to Earsfield and later to 7 Nightingale Parade. Before that, in this home in January 1900, Mervyn was born up in the dormered attic which the recently married couple had made their own, half study and sitting room, half bedroom. Helen describes the scene vividly at the end of *As it was*.

The Common can be glimpsed in the distance. Bolingbroke House, an old red brick three-storey mansion in what was called Five Houses Lane, was on the left at the end of Wakehurst Rd. It became a hospital for the artisanal and middle classes in 1880 (it still houses Bolingbroke Medical Centre) and the greater part became, in 2012, Bolingbroke Academy.

Thomas was aware as a lad, of the ever-increasing housing and civic developments,

¹² CET Ch 4 Books and School friends



Three Island Pond, Wandsworth Common

9. Cross Bolingbroke Grove on to Wandsworth Common, taking the path left, parallel to the railway line. Walk down the path running next to Bolingbroke Grove.

10. Follow the path off to the left. Cross over the grass on to a broader path along a copse of silver birch on the left. Veer right on to the broad path which runs straight towards the railway bridge ahead. Cross this and go through the alleyway lying ahead between the houses. This emerges on Baskerville Rd.

devouring boyhood haunts and semi-rural land. Though greatly interested in houses, homes and buildings, real and imagined, he had an ambivalent relationship with London's relentless growth which colonised some of these childhood-cherished places; on the other hand, his home streets *were a playground almost equal to the Common.*¹³

On Bolingbroke Grove he remembers vividly being a smaller hanger-on of a swelling army of scores of older Board School boys hurling stones at the nearby grammar school students and armed with *wooden swords and pikes, or daggers, shields, pistols, bows, arrows and with horns and trumpets*, splitting into groups and hunting each other among the front gardens or pretending to be *Sioux, Mohicans, or Hurons*. Clearly, unlike today's parentally-supervised activities, Thomas enjoyed adult-free exploits, so necessary for working through hazards and risks, discovering small joys, creating a bank of treasured childhood memories.

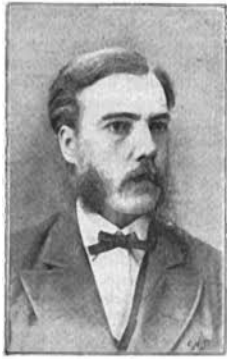
Disraeli's 1875 Public Health Act enabled councils and pressure groups such as the Commons Preservation Society (one of the first environmental bodies and very active in Wandsworth) to raise funding for the development of previous common land into recreational spaces for the urban population. In 1871 the Wandsworth Common Act prompted the purchase of land from Lord Spencer not only for the park but for building plots.¹⁴ Subsequent legislation, such as the 1881 Open Spaces Act, confirmed this trend.

The Common exercised a powerful influence on Thomas. The first stirrings of interest in the natural world began here, it was the crucible of his passionate curiosity about plants, trees and birdlife – all of which he shared with his brothers, with Helen and, later, with his children. It was an emotional firewall between a land that he loved and the erosion of urban sprawl. He writes with relish of the games and activities, such as fishing, smoking, hoop bowling and day-long explorations: *The Common... offered many*

¹³ CET Ch 2 First schooldays

¹⁴ Spencer Park with its middle-class homes lies north of the Common. Frederick St John, 2nd Viscount Bolingbroke, 3rd Viscount St John (1732 – 1787) married Lady Diana Spencer of the Marlborough family. It was not a happy marriage and was dissolved but it links the landowners around Wandsworth Common.

11. Walk left. Patten Rd is on the right; walk down to No. 6.



James Ashcroft Noble (1844-1896)



Helen Thomas



6 Patten Rd, BM

12. Retrace your steps to Baskerville Rd and walk to the right.

*temptations to more irregular games and aimless roving. For it was an uneven piece of never cultivated gravelly land. Several ponds of irregular shape and size, varying with rainfall, had been hollowed out, perhaps by old gravel diggings. It was marshy in other places... A railway ran across the Common in a deep bushy cutting, and this I supposed to be a natural valley and had somehow peopled it with unseen foxes. The long mounds of earth now overgrown with grass and gorse heaped up at my side of the cutting from which they had been taken were 'hills' to us, who wore steep yellow paths by running up and down them.*¹⁵ Children experience

a place where they can rove, alone or with other youngsters, as somehow 'their own.' In *The Happy go Lucky Morgans*,¹⁶ (created in large part out of the writer's personal memories and feelings) Arthur must surely be referring possessively to Wandsworth Common as *Our Country*, which Arthur/Edward Thomas enjoyed along with *Richmond Park, or Wimbledon Common, all to ourselves*.

The young Edward and Helen often strolled the Common and she writes it was here, walking in early Spring, while *walking on the Common, very happy, talking of what we had been reading, what doing, what thinking, walking as usual hand in hand*, she became aware her affection for Edward had become love. On parting, it was sealed with their first kiss.¹⁷

Thomas says Bolingbroke Grove. was lined with *venerable elms*¹⁸ – not now, though; it is bordered with ash, chestnut oak and acer trees. The path leads to a pond with small islands, edged by willows and alive with mallards, geese and the occasional heron (plus a warning not to feed them, thus encouraging rats). The areas of uncut grass have allowed a rich variety of wildflowers and shrubs to thrive and it is easy to understand why Thomas was so excited by the Common and all he found in it.

This section of the walk has taken us on the route Edward Thomas would have walked to see his mentor James Ashcroft Noble, a Liberal journalist, critic and writer and, subsequently, to call on

¹⁵ CET Ch 1 Infancy

¹⁶ THGLM Ch XX The Poet's spring at Lydiard Constantine

¹⁷ Helen Thomas, *As it Was*, (AIW) Ch 2

¹⁸ *IPOS*, Ch 2 London to Guildford

13. Turn left and walk through another alleyway back to the Common. Walk right, alongside the pond on the left.



14. The path will take you to Bellevue Rd and The Hope on the opposite side. This road links Burntwood Lane down on the right and Nightingale Lane just over the railway bridge on the left.



The Hope, BM

15. Turn left towards the railway bridge onto Nightingale Lane. Cross the bridge and the end of Bolkingbroke Grove and, two roads up on the left, is Rusham Rd. Walk up and on the right-hand side and at the corner with Sudbrooke Rd is 13 (now 12) Rusham Rd or Rusham Gate.

Helen. He first visited Noble (and Helen) at 15 The Grove, Wandsworth¹⁹ to the east of this location. The family had moved there from Liverpool in 1892. His visits to 6 Patten Rd followed on. The latter is a wider street than those of the Thomas homes, indicating wealthier residents. They are spacious, semi-detached residences with pillared porches, fretted gable ends and ornate plaster embellishments; each has a basement, two storeys and an attic as well as generous gardens. Helen says this home was in *a better neighbourhood* [than 15 The Grove] *with a garden carved out of an old cherry orchard with several fruit trees.*²⁰ At the time of writing there are two cherry trees in the front garden. W G Tarrant, the hymnologist, writer and minister of the Wandsworth Unitarian Chapel attended by Noble, had asked the latter to help young Edward work on his writings in preparation for possible publication. Helen says this *shy and constrained* lad responded to the *genial kindness and interest* of her father between whom there developed a fondness. From 1895, several of Edward's articles were accepted by a weekly paper of which Noble was co-editor and in the *Globe*. Under his guidance, *The Woodland Life* was prepared for publication in 1897 which, Noble having died in 1896, he *inscribed to the memory of James Ashcroft Noble*.

In November 1895, Noble wrote to Thomas, *I think that when you get to know my Helen she might make a very nice friend for you. She is a few months older than you, but she is in many ways younger than her years, and she loves Nature and beautiful things just as you do,*

¹⁹ Kedrun Laurie: ETF Newsletter 53, Jan 2005, writes: *Their first London house was 15 The Grove, Wandsworth (now St Ann's Hill), 'a little new villa in a row'. The terrace was called Agincourt Villas: it consisted of 22 houses, probably those for which a local builder submitted plans in 1892. Number 15 was eventually renumbered as number 37, and appears to have been destroyed by a V1 flying bomb on the 16th-17th July 1944.*

²⁰ AIW, Ch 1



*though in some ways she is not as clever as the others [her sisters Irene, Susan and Mary]*²¹

One day, Noble said to the youth, “*Here’s Helen dying for the country, and a good walker; why don’t you take her and show her some of the places you know?*” ... *It was from this house that we set off for our first walk to Merton.*²²

The walks continued throughout their life together.

16. To conclude the walk, continue up to Thurleigh Rd, and right up Montholme Rd, left on Broomwood Rd and right onto Northcote Rd and back up to Clapham Junction.



13 Rusham Rd, BM



Lloyd George home, 3 Routh Rd, BM

Thomas says of this *ornamental pond... Empty it was, and the sodden bed did not improve the look of the Common – flat by nature, flatter by recent art. The gorse was in bloom amidst a patchwork of turf, gravel and puddle.*²³ Today’s pond belies that description; much thought and care has been invested in this small two-part lake and its setting. **Continue walking right, along the avenue** lined with acacia, lime, sycamore and a variety of other trees.

Thomas gives 21 March 1913 as the starting date of his *In Pursuit of Spring* Quantock-bound journey. He first cycles along these roads flanking the Common before turning left at the

²¹ James Ashcroft Noble to Edward Thomas, 30 November 1895. National Library of Wales, 22919B, f41v, f42. Quoted with permission in the January 2005 ETF Newsletter 53 by Kedrun Laurie: *The Schooling of Helen Noble*

²² *AIW*, Ch 1 In Search of Spring

²³ *IPOS*, Ch 2 London to Guildford

bottom on to Garratt Lane, bound for South Wimbledon, Merton and the rest of his Spring pursuit. He says this stretch of road *was tame; it was at once artificial and artless, and touched with beauty only by the strong wind and by the subdued brightness due to the rain...* with its *not quite lusty grass, the hard, dull gravel, the shining puddles and sharp green buds*. He notes nostalgically at the top of Burntwood Lane *the blackbird's shrubbery, the lawn, the big elm, or oak, and the few dozen fruit trees, of one or two larger and older houses surviving... The almond, the mulberry, the apple trees in these gardens have a menaced or actually caged loveliness, as of a creature detained from some world far from ours, if they are not, as in some cases they are, the lost angels of ruined paradises*. From this road he could see the Wimbledon Electricity Works²⁴, the Lunatic Asylum,²⁵ playfields awaiting housing development and *sorry unprotected elms which have one hour of prettiness, when the leaf-buds are as big as peas on the little side sprays low down. Then on a Saturday – or a Sunday, when the path is darkened by adults in their best clothes and children come and pick the sprays in bunches instead of primroses. For there are no*

²⁴ A Local Authority project, the Durnsford Road power station in Wimbledon opened in 1899, energetically promoted by engineer William Henry Preece (1834 – 1913), a telecommunications pioneer.

²⁵ Surrey County Lunatic Asylum opened in 1841, designed for 294 patients, chiefly paupers from rural Surrey, and was remodelled in later years. Built to fashionable ideas, it was constructed along a long central corridor with wards for differently afflicted patients running at right angles; these included an Annexe for Idiot Children. It was surrounded by farmland and kitchen gardens. It was transferred to Middlesex County Council c 1889.

*primroses, no celandine, no dandelions outside the fence in Burntwood Lane.*²⁶

Three steps lead up to a fine garden embracing three sides of this impressive house and to the front door in the gable end. Thomas's parents moved here in 1902, after Edward, with Helen, had left home, and it was a source of pride to his father as an outward sign of his self-betterment and improving status.

Edward Thomas, when staying here from Steep, was visited by family and friends, Robert Frost and Eleanor Farjeon amongst them. He enjoined friends to write to him at this address and he put it at the head of many of his own letters. From this house he set off for his Quantock-bound cycle ride. While billeted here in 1915, some of his early poems were written. His War Diary poignantly records on 11 January 1917, *Said goodbye to Helen, Mervyn and Baba. Bronwen to Rusham Road.... Supper at Rusham Road with all my brothers.*²⁷ After this his father, who had a problematic relationship with his eldest son, accompanied him to the station for his last journey which took him back to the army and to France, saying, "I wish you had more belief in your cause to support you." And when Edward died, and perhaps writing with pride in his sadness at his son's death, from here he wrote to *The Times* to reveal, against Edward's wishes, that the poet Edward Eastaway was indeed Edward Thomas.

Helen stayed here for a time after Edward's death and it was here that Philip Henry Thomas died in 1920.

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²⁶ IPOS Ch 2 London to Guildford

²⁷ See *War Diary*, accompanying *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, Faber 1983 edition

