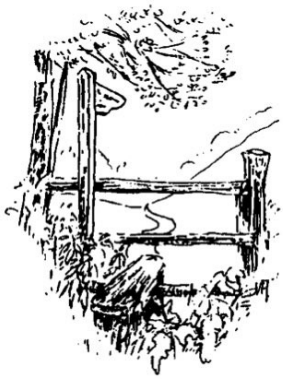
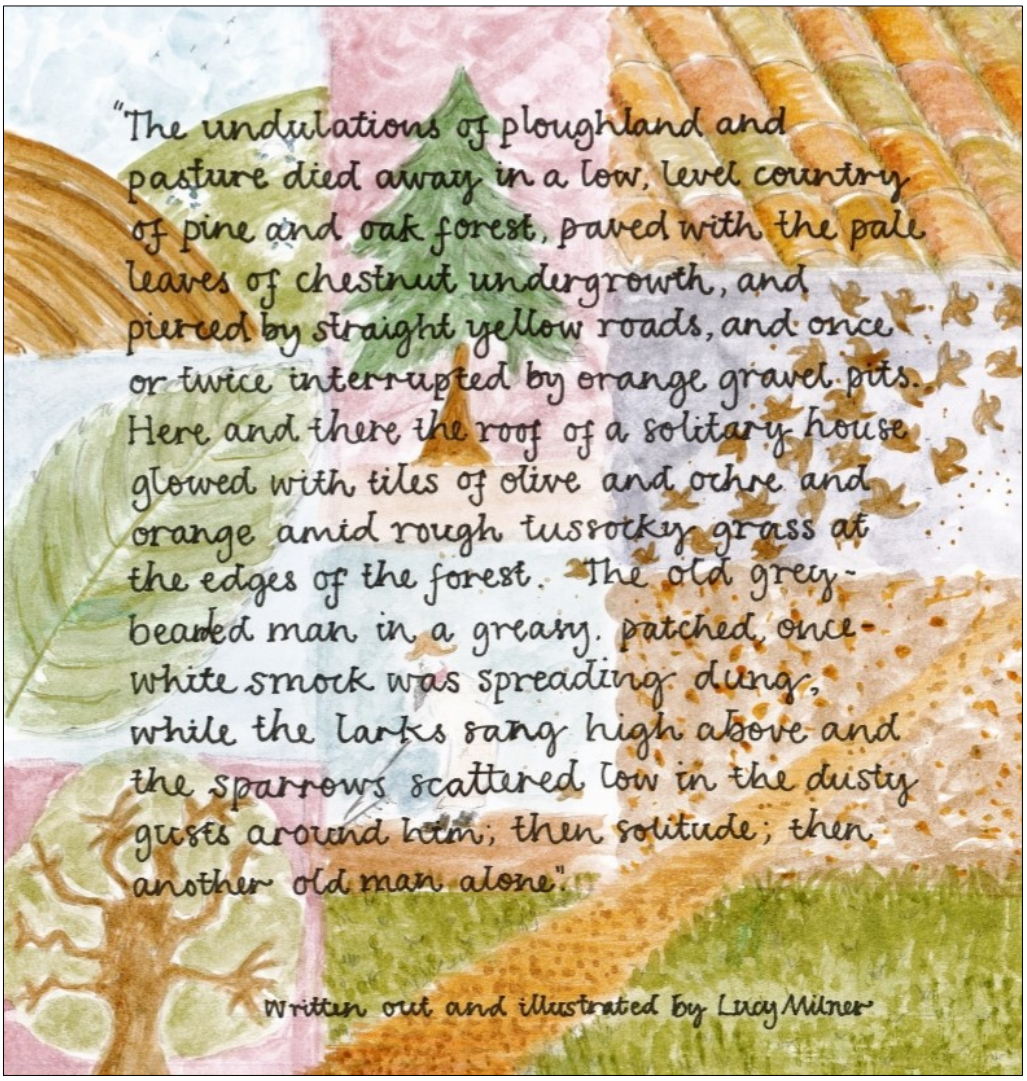
THE EDWARD THOMAS FELLOWSHIP



Newsletter 89 January 2023



From 'Winter Music' in 'Light and Twilight' by Edward Thomas (1911). Published by Laurel Books.

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Thanks as always are due to those providing reports, articles and information for the newsletter. Please send any for future newsletters, by post or email, to the editor's address above.

Table of Contents

Title **Page no.**

Chair's welcome and report …… 3

The Edward Thomas Study Centre at Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery …….. 5

The Edward Thomas Birthday Walk 2023 ……. 6

The world première of a song cycle based on 15 poems by Edward Thomas …… 8

The Woodland Life by Edna Longley …… 8

Transcript of a talk on Edward Thomas's The Woodland Life by Nick Denton …… 12

Edward Thomas by Guy Cuthbertson ……. 16

Edward Thomas in Sussex by James Guthrie ……. 22

A Letter – Meeting with Robert Frost ……. 25

Edward Thomas and Robert Frost – two friends, two poets, two poems …… 26

Robert Frost: A poet for whom life and war were trials by existence by Jim Dubinsky 28

Robert Frost by Margaret Keeping …….. 32

Ingatestone Pedallers Social Cycling Group - Edward Thomas and Essex: 1915-1916 34

Edward Thomas's Field Note Book 42 Poem by Nick Denton…… 39

Addenda to Autobiography Holograph Notebook 1V transcribed by Ben Mackay … 43

Edward Thomas's First School by Ben Logan …….. 48

Book Reviews …….. 50

Chair's Welcome and Report

Seasonal greetings from the Edward Thomas Fellowship membership committee, and best wishes to you all for the new year.

This year's seasonal photograph comes from 2019, courtesy of Fellowship committee member Mike Cope, and shows the Shoulder of Mutton at Steep wearing a white coat following a flurry of snow in February.

As I sit here in sub-zero temperatures (outside, not inside, fortunately) I thought this would be an appropriate image to share – and apologies if you have already read this bit in the pre-Christmas eBulletin!

Mind you, I find the new cover design for our Newsletters by Lucy Milner, a great granddaughter of Edward Thomas, to be quite warming and welcoming on a cold winter's day. I hope everyone likes this re-designed cover, which is something your Committee has been talking about for a while – any thoughts you may have would be appreciated and in the meantime my thanks go to Lucy and the editorial team for the work they have put into this creation.

Looking back on 2022

Well, when I look back to this time last year I see I commented that 2021 had been worse for so many of us than 2020 and found myself looking forward to 2022 with a degree of hope.

Sadly, other people had different ideas and Russia's invasion of the Ukraine in February dashed any hopes of a sustained recovery from the ravages of Covid and we now find ourselves mired in a 'winter of discontent' on economic, financial and health fronts. Am I alone in hoping for an outbreak of common-sense – and a fairness in approach – from all sides?

It was also a 'difficult' year due to the lingering effects of the pandemic (Covid has not gone away) and the understandable reluctance of people to meet in moderate or large numbers. We have seen a gradual easing of this 'reluctance' in the last few months.

Amidst all this, your Committee have tried to be active and delivered the annual Birthday Walk and AGM in March and the Literary Festival (more about this later) in October.

Sadly, we were not able to bring you a June Study Day in 2022 but are planning an expanded programme in 2023 with gatherings in July, August/September and October.

The Study Centre at Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery is attracting more visitors as awareness grows and we are hoping to establish some affiliation and partnership arrangements with local universities, which will generate further interest.

Looking forward and some dates for your diary

The 2023 Annual Birthday Walk will take place on Sunday 5 March, starting in the morning at Bedales School – details will be available in due course on the website and in an early Spring eBulletin.

This year there is thought there may be two walks – the usual, more strenuous, walk up to the Memorial Stone and an alternative walk around the village of Steep for those who prefer something a little less 'adventurous'.

This second walk would need a 'leader', and this is still a 'work in progress'.

We are also hoping to have the whole day based at Bedales. If so, this would mean returning to Bedales for the picnic lunch and then having an afternoon talk before the AGM and the ever-popular tea and cake from the ladies of All Saints Church, Steep – all at Bedales School.

The day before, on Saturday 4 March, for those travelling longer distances and wishing to make a full weekend trip to East Hampshire, the Edward Thomas Study Centre at Petersfield Museum will be open from 10 am until 4 pm. In addition, your Committee propose to revive the 'tradition' of the Fellowship Dinner during the Saturday evening.

As an alternative in the evening, the Friends of Steep Church (FOSC) are proposing an evening of poetry and music at All Saints Church, Steep, which will feature some Edward Thomas work, but not be focused on it as was last year.

On Saturday 15 July there will be a Study Day in Oxford which will include a talk and visits, to be confirmed, to Lincoln College and the Edward Thomas Archive. Further details will follow in an eBulletin and will also be published on the Fellowship's website – www.edward-thomas-fellowship-org.uk.

Two further events are currently being planned for 2023 – a Walk and Talk in the Epping Forest area where Edward Thomas was based with the Artists Rifles in 1915/16 (late August/early September) and a Study day and walk in early October in Petersfield (as there will be no Festival this year).

An important reminder about notices and reports for the Fellowship's Annual General Meeting

The AGM in 2023 will take place on Sunday 5 March following the Annual Birthday Walk.

As before, these notices and other papers will now be sent in late February by email to all Members registered to accept electronic communications from the Fellowship. If you are not registered you will not receive advance copies of these documents, which will include the annual accounts, although there will be copies available at the AGM itself.

If you are able and willing to receive electronic communications from the Fellowship (and we do not share personal information with any third parties other than MailChimp who are our email communication partners) please complete the Consent Form available on the Fellowship website.

If you have been receiving Members eBulletins you are already registered to receive the AGM papers.

As with any such consent given, you may cancel it at any time.

Obviously, everything planned throughout 2023 is subject to prevailing Covid or other restrictions prevailing at the time. In the meantime, please take care, stay safe and best wishes for 2023.

And finally …

Just as I was closing this introduction, the Fellowship received news of a kind and generous legacy left to the Fellowship by the recently deceased Member Malcolm Porteous.

Malcolm was a long-standing member who had been unable to join many of our events of late as he lived in Scotland with his father, whom he had cared for over many years.

I met him at the Centenary Study Day in 2017 and others may recall having met him at the most recent weekend in the Cartmel area – somewhere that was much easier for him to get to.

Past Chair of the Fellowship Richard Emeny summed Malcolm up wonderfully by describing this gift from him as being "an astonishingly generous legacy from a nice and generous man".

Thank you Malcolm.

Jeremy Mitchell, Chair of the Edward Thomas Fellowship

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The Edward Thomas Study Centre at Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery

The Edward Thomas Study Centre at Petersfield Museum has now been open for just over 15 months, and we have certainly seen an uplift in engagement and public interest.

In the last three months we have had over 200 visitors (helped by the Literary Festival, which we estimate somewhere around 75 visitors over that weekend) and in the year to date there have been 440 visitors. This doesn't include other visitors that have been taken around on other days by members of the Museum team.

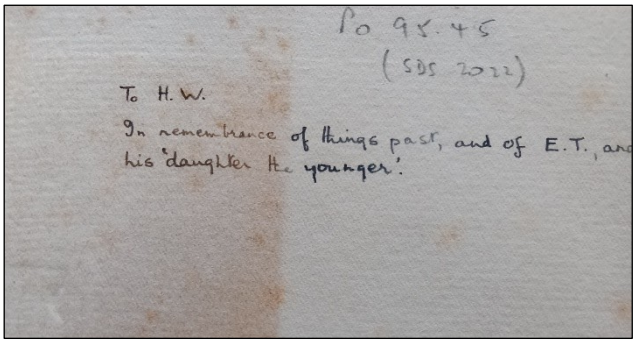
I have previously mentioned the young poet Ellora Sutton, who has now completed what turned out to be a successful 'poet-in-residence' stint at the Museum (now known as 'Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery'. So much so that, with new project grant funding from Arts Council England, she will be coming back in the new year for another three-month stint.

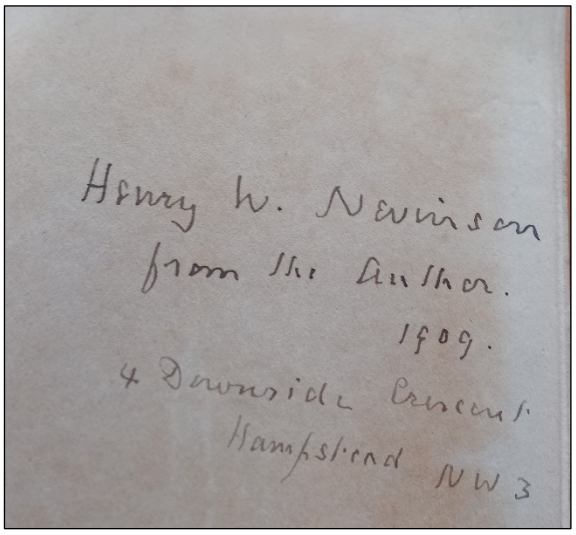
I edited and published, through the Museum, a small book based on her work, *Three Months in Petersfield,* which is on sale in the Museum shop. Ellora is, to my mind and many others, a talented

young poet and read well at the Literary Festival – we are delighted to have her with us and that she has embraced the work of both Edward and Helen so much.

We have recently received the first edition copy of the Poems of Rupert Brooke from the Honresfield Library collection recently acquired by the Friends of the National Library, and have also used money from the Purchase Fund account, which is now somewhat depleted, to acquire one book with a Henry Williamson connection and one with a Henry Nevinson connection.

The first is a copy of *Collected Poems* which was inscribed by Walter de la Mare "To H.W. In remembrance of things past, and of E.T., and his 'daughter the younger'."





The other is a copy of *Richard Jefferies:His Life and Work* which is inscribed "Henry W. Nevinson from the author. 1909'.

The latter book was probably purchased at a premium price of £650 but I was able to secure a grant of £550 from the Friends of the National Library so the cost to the Fellowship was only £100!

Also, I am not convinced the first part of the inscription isn't in Thomas's hand.

I have also recently added a copy of the Sussex Gazette from, rather poignantly, September 1939, as it contains an article about ET by James Guthrie, which you will find elsewhere in this Newsletter.

Incidentally, if you are planning a visit to the Study Centre please allow time to visit the Museum and Art Gallery, it really is excellent value for money and tells a lot more than just the 10,000 year story of Petersfield and the surrounding area.

Jeremy Mitchell, Chair, Edward Thomas Fellowship and Keeper of the Edward Thomas Study Centre

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The Edward Thomas Birthday Walk 2023

The Edward Thomas Birthday Walk will take place at 10:30 am on Sunday 5th March 2023.

Participants should assemble in the car park of Bedales School, Church Road, Steep, GU32 2DG at 10:15am for a safety briefing. The walk (a fairly strenuous 5 ½ miler) will start at 10:30 am prompt and will include a visit to the memorial stone on the Shoulder of Mutton Hill and the Red House.

Members of the Fellowship will read appropriate poems and prose during the walk. There will also be opportunity for participants to volunteer for a reading.

We would also advise walkers to read the Health and Safety procedure on the Edward Thomas Fellowship website. Please wear suitable clothing and footwear (walking boots or sturdy trainers).

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

The location of our lunch stop is yet to be determined. **Please bring your own packed lunch and a drink.** We also hope to include an afternoon talk before the AGM this year.

Parking and toilet facilities will be available at Bedales School throughout the day.

Further details will be sent out nearer the time via an eBulletin.

Mike Cope
(Walk leader)

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Membership Subscriptions

A reminder that membership subscriptions for 2023 are now due.

If you are unsure whether your membership subscription payments are up-to-date, please contact the membership secretary Nick Denton (see above for contact details).

Thank you for your continued support.

Nick Denton

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World Premiere of a song cycle based on 15 poems by Edward Thomas

The Fellowship has received notice, in a letter from John Middleton, of the following forthcoming musical event. John writes:

'I'm a member of the Central Composer's Alliance and I have written a song cycle based on 15 of Edward Thomas's poems. This cycle is due for a premiere performance in Loughborough in March and I hope it will be of interest as an event for the ET Fellowship. Apart from studying the poems, I've read a lot around Thomas' life and I hope I've done some justice to his words'.

What follows are a few extracts from an article John recently wrote for the Quorn Village Life magazine. Quorn is the village on the outskirts of Loughborough where he lives.

'The poet's landscape is the English countryside with its trees, wild flowers, birds and the elements, but where people are missing. A single ploughman, whose mate has been killed 'over there' makes the poet feel guilty. Aspen trees observe an empty crossroads. A private, who used to sleep off his drinking on the downs, now sleeps forever in France. Against such morbid preoccupations, there are very beautiful passages in which the poet seems to connect with the mystical essence of things, such as 'the air that has washed the eyes of the stars'. But then it's back to earth and the 'old wars'.

The 15 poems in the cycle are:

1. The Trumpet
2. The Signpost
3. When First
4. Beauty
5. The Glory
6. The Word
7. Aspens
8. The Cherry Trees
9. Rain
10. In Memoriam
11. As the Team's Head-brass
12. A Private
13. The Owl
14. The Dark Forest
15. Lights Out

John concludes his article:

'Lyndon Gardner sang the demanding lead roles in three previous productions of my choral/operatic works, the last being 'The Word' in 2018, also at the Trinity Methodist Hall. I wrote this song cycle for him, and have also had the privilege of Anthony Wilson, the well-known local operatic répétiteur, playing the piano part.

Tickets will be available from Trinity Methodist Hall nearer the date. The proceeds will be donated to charity'.

The event will take place on Friday 17th March 2023 at 7.30pm at Trinity Methodist Hall, Royland Road, Loughborough, LE11 2EH.

We hope news of this event will be of interest to many Fellowship members and, if so, that you will be able to attend.

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ARTICLES

Our first two articles complete the commemoration, begun in Newsletter 88, of the 125th anniversary of the publication of Edward Thomas's first book, The Woodland Life. We are most grateful to Edna Longley and Nick Denton for what follows.

The Woodland Life by Edna Longley

There are several reasons why *The Woodland Life*, published in 1897, provided an excellent headline or motif for the 2022 Edward Thomas Festival. As Thomas's first book, it both reveals his early influences and contains prophetic traces of the poet he would become. Again, the book's very title

prefigures a central presence and symbolism in his poetry – all those trees, copses, combes, woods and forests – while suggesting the ecological vision of which Thomas was a literary pioneer: not only the natural history of woodlands, but 'habitat' in a larger sense, life lived as what Thomas would later call 'an inhabitant of the earth'. There is a link with the end of his poem 'The Chalk-Pit', where one of the speakers says: 'imperfect friends, we men/ And trees, since time began; and nevertheless/ Between us still we breed a mystery.'

Although broadly unified in approach and style, *The Woodland Life* brings together a selection from the essays which Thomas had contributed to various journals: essays on 'Autumn Woods', 'Winds of Winter', 'A Surrey Woodland'. Even before he went to Oxford University, he was already an embryonic freelance writer, a man of letters – or teenager of letters. A rare parallel to Thomas's precocity is *Diary of a Young Naturalist* (2020) by the Northern Irish writer, Dara McAnulty. Indeed, *The Woodland Life* ends with diary-notes on which the essays are based. This 'Diary in English Fields and Woods' (about a third of the text) is more than an Appendix. Another key to the book's genesis is its inscription 'to the memory of James Ashcroft Noble', Helen Thomas's father. Noble had been a writer and editor, a quintessential Victorian man of letters, and a key mentor for Thomas in the mid-1890s. Thomas was also then beginning to write essays with a more personal, meditative or narrative aspect, such as those collected in *Horae Solitariae* (1902); in 1899 he published his first literary-critical article, 'The Frontiers of English Prose'; and in 1900 his first poetry review: thus commencing his career as a reviewer in general, and especially as an influential reviewer of poetry. Thomas's poetry criticism is important not only to his own eventual poems, but also to our whole understanding of 'modern poetry' after 1900. So, as an aspiring author and literary journalist, the young Edward Thomas had several strings to his bow, all of which would resonate in his poetry. But *The Woodland Life* marks the fact that 'Nature Writing', or what Thomas called 'country books', would be the primary genre of his creative prose.

What kind of Nature Writing do we find in this first book? Thomas's brief memoir 'How I Began' (1913) describes the 'manner' of *The Woodland Life* as 'largely founded on' Richard Jefferies's *Amateur Poacher*, Charles Kingsley's *Prose Idylls*, and the newspaper columns of a topographical writer, Francis Knight. These three models cover a stylistic range from concrete observation to Kingsley's more 'idyllic' tendency and Jefferies's visionary moments. Thomas goes on to mention other influences: 'tones supplied also by Shelley and Keats, and later on by Ruskin, De Quincey, [Walter] Pater and Sir Thomas Browne.' Jefferies was probably Thomas's most significant formative influence – although there is a case for Shelley too. But we can see that his literary ambition encompassed more than 'country books' as ordinarily understood. He was also interested in elaborate prose writers like Browne, writers with qualities we might term 'poetic'. Indeed, Thomas believed that poetry and prose were drawing closer together at the end of the nineteenth century, and he was already passionate about poetry. In *Beautiful Wales* he writes of his alter ego, Morgan Rhys, that: 'at

the age of sixteen or seventeen, poetry [had given] him a second world in which he thenceforth moved with a rapture' not often 'observe[d] in the religious'. 'How I Began' is ironical about what Thomas sees as the pretentiousness of his early style, its distance from speech. Now a more mature prose-writer, unwittingly clearing the stylistic ground for his poetry, he had become obsessed by the relation between speech and literature. This made him particularly hard on his youthful attraction to the writings of Walter Pater: writings that had influenced the art-for-art's-sake doctrine of the 1890s. In 1913, too, Thomas published a mainly negative book on Pater, in which he calls Pater's prose-style 'exquisitely unnatural'. But this is a case of a disciple rejecting a former master. When Thomas 'began', he was susceptible to the Aestheticism which Pater had helped to promote. Indeed, despite its earthy subject-matter, *The Woodland Life* has stylistic and structural features that we might associate with the 1890s. In some ways, it's an 'exquisitely unnatural' Nature book. Even the Diary-notes are hardly artless. Overall, the beauty of Nature, the aesthetics of Nature, is to the fore. Correspondingly, Thomas's sentences are carefully sculpted, his adjectives deliberately posed. His favourite adjective for flora and fauna is 'brilliant'. He calls blue sky 'the unsullied azure', moles 'velvety burrowers', birds of prey 'feathered marauders'. Flowers 'prank the sward'. 'Autumn's many-coloured vesture gains a new opulence of splendour'. Violets are 'palest and loveliest wildings of the season'. Contrast violets as evoked in Thomas's poem for his elder daughter: 'Each year's first violets, white and lonely'.

When *The Woodland Life* appeared, 'country books' were a burgeoning genre. Thomas knew that to write such books was to enter a competitive market. Besides being deeply acquainted with the entire pastoral tradition from the Classics to the Romantics to Thoreau and Jefferies, he found himself reviewing many new works; including, as he lamented, 'several thousand volumes annually of verse up to their neck in the country'. By the early twentieth century, reaction against urbanisation had created a massive vogue for experiencing the countryside, and for writing about that experience. In an essay of 1908 Thomas complained that 'country books' were even colonising other genres: 'No class of books', he said, 'is now exempt from announcements of our affection for the country'. Perhaps we would now say 'affection for the planet' – a good thing, of course, but often routine rather than formative or structural. Thomas's critical thinking about country books is as significant as his thinking about poetry. In this essay he ultimately proposes that the aim of modern authors should be to 'show, in verse or prose, the inseparableness of Nature and Man'. For Thomas, the only contemporary writer who really achieved this aim was W. H. Hudson. He thought that Hudson succeeded in combining the naturalist with the artist, and in writing ecologically as 'an inhabitant of the earth'.

For all its mannerism, *The Woodland Life* may have brought something fresh to Nature Writing, something that anticipates Thomas's poetry. Thus the overall effect is oddly immersive. As compared with his later 'country books' (such as *The South Country*), the prose is rarely discursive, almost always evocative, hovering on the brink of lyric intensity. And, perhaps owing to Thomas's reading of

Keats as well as his concern with natural beauty, *The Woodland Life* anticipates his poetry in its sensory spectrum, its close focus on Nature's colours, movement, sounds – the 'wood music' of birds and weather.

We also find anticipations of specific poems. A passage about the flight of pewits contains the kernel of 'Two Pewits'. Autumn leaves fall 'one by one' as in Thomas's poem 'October'. 'A Wiltshire Molecatcher', the only chapter that depicts rural life and work, is Thomas's first attempt at 'Lob', his icon of Englishness. A stranger augury is that the Diary entries can resemble miniature free-verse poems or haiku: 'Cole-tits play in the dense foliage, with sweet callings like fairy-bells'; 'Fieldfares crowding with their racketing cries to the hips in the hedges.' I will end by quoting a Diary entry and Thomas's poem 'Bright Clouds', written twenty years later. 'Bright Clouds' turns an impression, recorded when Thomas was seventeen, into an image for war as he awaits active service. This is the diary-entry: 'Blackthorn steeped in blossom now. Reeds piercing the ripples of the brook, with twin blades curving and meeting like calipers.' The poem, with its brief vivid lines, might be seen as an apotheosis of the 'Diary':

Bright clouds of may
Shade half the pond.
Beyond,
All but one bay
Of emerald
Tall reeds
Like criss-cross bayonets
Where a bird once called
Lies bright as the sun.
No one heeds.
The light wind frets
And drifts the scum
Of may-blossom.
Till the moorhen calls
Again
Naught's to be done
By birds or men.
Still the may falls.

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Transcript of a talk on "Edward Thomas's The Woodland Life and his field note books" at the introductory session of the 3rd Edward Thomas Literary Festival by Nick Denton, Edward Thomas Fellowship Committee Member.

The year that *The Woodland Life* covers was an exciting one for Edward Thomas, full of potential and promise, and increasingly fruitful. He had left St Paul's school at the end of the spring term of 1895, aged 17, ostensibly to take the Civil Service exams at his father's insistence. In fact he was determined to be a writer. He had already written a number of articles for the children's magazine Young Days. But his attempt to get a 5 year apprenticeship in the North Wiltshire Herald - his hero Richard Jefferies' newspaper - had been turned down by his father in March.

In April he walked from London via Hungerford to Savernake Forest and then on to Swindon, where his paternal grandmother and aunt and uncle lived, and where he had spent many summer holidays. He was there for much of the summer exploring the Wiltshire countryside, before returning to London in August. He returned again to Wiltshire the following February 1896 for another six weeks.

In between these visits he met and fell in love with Helen, his future wife, and daughter of his mentor (and the dedicatee of *The Woodland Life*), James Ashcroft Noble, and made several journeys out of London. Some of these he wrote about for magazines such as the Speaker, New Age and Globe. Later these pieces were brought together in The Woodland Life. All were based on daily jottings in his Field Note Books.

Between 1894 and 1915 Thomas filled over 100 notebooks with his outdoor observations of nature and scenery on his walks. Most seem to have survived and can be found in the Berg Collection in New York. Although some have been explored in depth, most have never been transcribed in full - a task I am currently undertaking and have done nearly half, some of which are already available at the Edward Thomas Study Centre.

The Woodland Life published in 1897 draws mainly on his notebooks from April 1895 to March 1896 - five in total. Thomas interwove his notes between the essays and the diary at the end, occasionally repeating, often drawing on notes from the same day for both essays and diary.

Confusingly the first three pieces - the Sweet of the Year, Lydiard Tregose and A Wiltshire Molecatcher were drawn from the second Wiltshire trip he made in the early spring of 1896 while the later pieces came from the previous autumn and winter of 1895/6 on his walks into Surrey.

His notebooks at the time fall into three main groups, somewhat complicated but understandable for a young man starting out, keen to establish himself as a writer, overflowing with ideas and inspiration, and already a very proficient naturalist. They are all field notes but may have had somewhat different purposes.

There is also one single volume from 1894 which is a comparison between his own seasonal observations, day by day through the year and Gilbert White's in the *Natural History of Selborne* over a century before.

Although he drew on all five of the notebooks that year for *The Woodland Life*, one stands out in particular as its precursor - Vol iv of the Field Notes. This seems to be a fair copy of one of the natural history notebooks, but expanded to include much new material, some of which he used in his Woodland Life essays about his expeditions in Surrey during the winter of 1895/6.

It's interspersed with poems by Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Browning, Tennyson, Chaucer and Spenser, written in Thomas's best hand. In an extended entry in January 1896 Thomas also wrote a paeon to the early signs of spring in the style of Richard Jefferies.

The notebooks identify some of the locations that ET was writing about, which are not always clear in *The Woodland Life*. So in Wiltshire as well as Lydiard Tregose and Coate, where Jefferies had been brought up outside Swindon, there are the old castles of Liddington and Burderop and Ladder Hill, and Wilton Waters beyond Savernake.

There is also more detail of where he went on his expeditions when at home between the Commons in London. He often visited Wimbledon Common and Merton via the River Wandle and went to Richmond Park on a number of occasions including two in early 1896 with Helen Noble. The previous month he went on two longer walks to Woodmansterne and Chipstead, and to Sutton, Banstead, Tadworth and Box Hill, exploring the woods, and fields, commons and byways of what was then very rural Surrey. He also had got to know the South Downs on a holiday in Eastbourne the previous August, and he wrote of his exploration of them in more detail in his notebook than in The Woodland Life diary.

The notebooks are remarkably consistent over the 20 years that ET was writing them. It was a daily habit he'd acquired young, influenced by Jefferies, as he described in the autobiography of his childhood. There are notes about the flights and calls and songs of rooks and jackdaws, pewits (lapwings) and wood pigeons, blackbirds, robins and thrushes.

He describes the colours of trees, flowers and other vegetation, the first Celandine, the last ragwort, the arrival of the chiffchaff, the first complete song of the chaffinch, the first and last cuckoo, swallow and swift, spring growth in winter, remnants of summer flowers in late autumn, the gradations of a sunset, the skyscapes and landscapes and how they interacted and were affected by the seasons, time of day and weather - all featured regularly in his notebooks throughout these twenty years.

Reading the notes he wrote in 1895, one could be reading ones he wrote twenty years later, though his younger self does show occasional doubt when identifying flowers or wondering why birds are behaving in a particular way.

The style of the notebooks does not have the ornateness or exquisitely unnatural style of some of his earlier prose work, that Edna Longley spoken of in her introductory talk. As befitting observations in the field, they are simple, direct descriptions more akin to the later poetry.

To pursue Edna's analogy they provide the unsculpted raw material for his country books - besides *The Woodland Life*, also *The South Country*, *The Icknield Way* and *In Pursuit of Spring* - and also from late 1914 for many of his poems (eg *Lob, A Private, The Gypsy, The Penny Whistle, November, Ambition, Beauty*, *The Chalk Pit* and many more). As with *The Woodland Life* they also provide clues to the specific places that inspired his poems.

In conclusion I would like to illustrate this continuity with one of Thomas's poems, *It was upon,* that drew specifically on one of the notebooks that he had used for *The Woodland Life* (Field Note Book 2), linking his first published work with one of his last poems.

On 5th July 1895 in *The Woodland Life* he wrote of hearing the yellowhammer still singing. In his notebook he specified this to be "from ash opposite Wide Waters" Wide Waters is almost certainly Wilton Water, a reservoir for the Kennet & Avon canal at its highest point, east of Savernake Forest. It's a beautiful spot which he visited on at least two occasions - with the fishing possibly an additional attraction – and an easy train ride from Swindon in those days.

In a previous entry he links Wide Waters to a favourite stile looking over meadows tinted with red by the sorrel flowers - almost a copper hue. That summer in Wiltshire he had also discovered that Lattermath was the local dialect word for Aftermath, the second mowing, which left the country looking so green.

In *It was upon*, written in June 1916, looking back to that time, "after the interval/Of a score years", he wrote in the first verse:

“It was upon a July evening
At a stile I stood, looking along a path
Over the country by a second Spring
Drenched perfect green again. “The lattermath
Will be a fine one.” So the stranger said,
A wandering man. Albeit I stood at rest,
Flushed with desire I was. The earth outspread,
Like meadows of the future, I possessed.”

Here’s the encapsulation of what Thomas felt about this annus mirabalis - the year of *The Woodland Life* - looking back 20 years from the bleakness and horrors of the war.

After note

Edna Longley, who gave the opening talk at the Festival, came up with a wonderful insight while listening to this talk, which would have made the perfect conclusion. It struck her that the writing of *It was upon* in 1916 must have been for Thomas an aftermath or lattermath, a second or late harvesting of something he had observed twenty years before when still a youth. It’s such a perceptive and lovely thought - and could be extend to many of his other poems which were the aftermath of other observations jotted down in field note books and harvested often many years later (see article on FNB42 in this issue).

More on the original inspiration and context for *It was upon* can be found on the Edward Thomas Poetry Places website at

https://www.edwardthomaspoetryplaces.com/post/it-was-upon

A picture of Peter Lemon, local farmer and Nick Denton at the likely site of the favourite stile, close to Wilton Waters that Edward Thomas was remembering in *It was Upon*. Picture courtesy of Susie Brew of Pewsey Vale Tourism Partnership - www.visitpewseyvale.co.uk

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Edward Thomas and the Mundays of East Meon

We are grateful to Guy Cuthbertson for the following article, which is an extract from the talk he gave at the Edward Thomas Literary Festival: 'Edward Thomas on "the Simple Life": The Philosopher of Wayland's Smithy and the Mundays of East Meon'.

https://www.petersfieldmuseum.co.uk/whats-on/edward-thomas-on-simple-life-philosopher-waylands-smithy-and-mundays-east-meon

That talk, in turn, was a version of the inaugural professorial lecture that Guy gave on 3 March 2022, which can be viewed on YouTube:

https://youtu.be/X1EqSdrItB4

In a remarkable section in *The Icknield Way* (1913), Edward Thomas considers what we might call 'the simple life'. Walter de la Mare said of Thomas that 'To live in content a "simple life" was perhaps what he desired most of the world, but no man can have less respected the cant phrase'.[1] The term 'the simple life' was a familiar one at the time, popular with journalists (Thomas says that 'a column about "the simple life" would be printed in a newspaper').[2] In *The Icknield Way* Thomas took the sad story of the Mundays of East Meon and turned it into an exploration of the simple life, a portrait of the desire to live without wealth or greed, and the desire to live in close connection to the natural world.

Let's go back to 1909. Sometime during the week of 17 March 1909, Edward Thomas must have read the local paper, *The Hants and Sussex News*, which was published in his local town, Petersfield. There, on page 8, among the usual chaff of a local paper – adverts for chicken feed and cutlery, and reports on the council for this or the board of that – there was an article about the terrible circumstances of the Munday family nearby, at Upper Barns.[3] Thomas later quoted from the article in *The Icknield Way*, and the article inspired a section of that book. The headline was 'Suffering Children at Eastmeon, Parental Neglect, Severe Sentences'; and told of how John and Susan Munday and their relations John and Georgina Dawson ended up in Petersfield Police Court accused of wilfully neglecting their children, causing them unnecessary suffering.[4] Thomas knew Upper Barns, west of Butser Hill and on the way down Hyden Hill towards East Meon. He loved 'the broad elephantine back of Butser Hill', likening it to Ararat, 'though' he says 'my unfaithful eyes fail to imagine the ark'.[5] Thomas said the barn was almost 'restored to nature',[6] like a good simple lifer; and the wind there expressed the simple lifer's ideal, 'the pure joy of free, active life contented with itself'.[7]

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[1] Walter de la Mare, *Private View* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 115.

[2] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 234.

[3] 'Suffering Children at Eastmeon', *The Hants and Sussex News* (17 March 1909), p. 8.

[4] Petersfield Police Court, along with the station and cells the Mundays were in, is now part of Petersfield Museum, along with the Edward Thomas Study Centre.

[5] 'I have more than once caught myself thinking of the broad elephantine back of Butser Hill heaving up, spotted with gorse but treeless, between Petersfield and Portsmouth, as Ararat, though my unfaithful eyes fail to imagine the ark.' Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 9.

[6] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 241.

[7] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 240.

Newspaper stories between 10 and 31 March fleshed out the tragedy. Thomas certainly saw the paper on 31 March. He knew the whole story. It had been a wild night at the very end of 1908 when John Munday arrived at South Farm with his pregnant wife, and their three children. Susan was from a Romany family according to census records (which gave them the profession of 'Gipsy Hawker'), and her son Charles had been born in a dilapidated gipsy caravan where the rain came through the roof. Their circumstances had not improved a year later when the Mundays turned up at South Farm and asked farmer George Atkinson for work and somewhere to stay. They ended up at the draughty barn that was 'full of holes' at Upper Barns.[8] 'Munday said he had many times been in far worse places'.[9] Upper Barns was pretty much as remote as anywhere in Hampshire could be, an isolated, uninhabited spot sitting a mile away from its farm – it was a couple of hilly miles away from East Meon and it was half a dozen miles to Petersfield. It still feels remote today.

My wife Caroline and I, and Morris the dog, visited Upper Barns last year. It was all beautiful, late on a sunny, late-summer day – half five in September, not a soul about, the new barns beneath the old trees, the red tractor put to bed for the night, a bonfire smoking gently somewhere down the lane. It was reminiscent of several Thomas poems, especially the magical 'Tall Nettles', where

> Tall nettles cover up, as they have done
> These many springs, the rusty harrow, the plough
> Long worn out, and the roller made of stone[10]

But it was hard to imagine the Mundays. As Edward Thomas said, 'There were no ghosts, or so it seemed'.[11]

But back in 1908, it was a cold Christmas. They all slept on straw. Cattle shared the yard. There was no toilet or kitchen, no furniture; they had one blanket and one quilt; and the only water was the pond where the cows drank. The Mundays tried to get a cottage in the village but 'people did not care about letting them in', so the baby, Herbert Sidney, was born in the barn. The Nativity story rather haunts the newspaper reports.

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[8] 'Neglected Child's Death', *The Hants and Sussex News* (31 March 1909), p. 8.

[9] 'Neglected Child's Death', *The Hants and Sussex News* (31 March 1909), p. 8.

[10] Edward Thomas, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2008), p. 119.

[11] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 241.

At the end of January 1909, Edward Thomas's biography of Richard Jefferies was published. It was Jefferies, one of Thomas's heroes, who had declared 'Let us be always out of doors among trees and grass, and rain and wind and sun. […] Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind.'[12] Nonetheless, Thomas reflected that he then spent the first three months of 1909 'sitting close up to the fire all the time writing all sorts of things'.[13] The Mundays though were cold and struggling. Thomas probably walked past their barn on 15 February, when he left his fire and went on a walk 'over Downs thro Clanfield to Westbourne'.[14] Perhaps he even met John Munday, later writing in *The Icknield Way* that

> I remember a pale, shuffling man carrying a child who begged from me monotonously as I came down the hill in mist a little before dark. I had given him something without exactly realizing that he was a man, so frail, subdued, and weak-voiced had he been – a creation of the mist quite in harmony with the hour.[15]

In late February, the Mundays were joined at Upper Barns by John Dawson, Susan Munday's brother, a recent resident of the Workhouse, and he brought his wife and three of their children. When Dawson's daughter Georgina became ill with pneumonia, he took Georgina 'in a box on wheels' over the six hilly miles to the Petersfield, and the authorities were stirred into action at last. That was Wednesday 3 March, which was Edward Thomas's 31st birthday. When the NSPCC visited Upper Barns with a policeman on the Thursday, when 'snow was lying on the ground all round', they were shocked by the conditions the two families were living in. The children all seemed to be very unwell, cold, dirty and verminous. The two Munday girls had measles as well. The Mundays' son Charles was the worst off, not only very verminous – after all, they all slept on the same straw in the barn – but also suffering from pneumonia, with a rash, a swollen face and 'one eye closed completely'.[16]

The children were taken to the Petersfield Infirmary, and the four adults were arrested. They were placed on remand for a week, the men sent to prison, and the women to the Workhouse. Georgina Dawson said she did not want to be separated from her husband and then collapsed with an epileptic

[12] Richard Jefferies, *The Amateur Poacher* (London: Smith, Elder, 1905), p. 240.

[13] Edward Thomas, *Selected Letters*, ed. R. George Thomas (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 53.

[14] Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, NLW MS 22908B Diary 1909, p. 14.

[15] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 237.

[16] 'Neglected Child's Death', *The Hants and Sussex News* (31 March 1909), p. 8.

seizure. A week later, the Mundays were given four months hard labour each. The Dawsons two months. By the time the newspaper article of 17 March appeared, the Mundays' young son Charles had died, on the 15th.

Just a few miles away, at Berryfield Cottage, where Thomas's own children had been ill that week, although only with chicken pox, the newspaper story caught Thomas's eye. He would turn it into a story about the pursuit of the simple life, changing John Munday's name to Arthur Aubrey Bishopstone. Significantly, Thomas makes Bishopstone a university graduate. Bishopstone, with a second-class degree from Oxford, presumably had the opportunity to be something else – he chose the simple life. Whereas the Mundays and Dawsons had no university education and lived the life they were born into. Thomas recalls going to the barn, soon after the authorities had removed the Bishopstones from it, and he says that he found there Bishopstone's notebook:

> I stirred the bed with my stick, meaning to set fire to it. An old coat was concealed beneath it, and out of the pocket fell a book.[17]

That book – a kind of patchy diary – described Bishopstone's progress through university and to the barn. The year after leaving Oxford University, Bishopstone wrote 'Sell all thou hast and follow Me.' In the same year came the words: 'I possess my working clothes and a Greek testament. I earn 14s. a week.'[18] Bishopstone opted for rural poverty. He soon happily declares that 'I possess everything, but in the world's sense nothing but my name'.[19] Bishopstone wants to lose even his name:

> if I could lose that I should be a better citizen, not of the world, but of the universe of eternity. […] why should I have a name? – unless, indeed, there were a name which described me as a poem describes an emotion. I will be nameless. I will no longer condemn myself to this title of A. A. B.[20]

It is a story of a man's delight in owning nothing and living at one with nature; and it is

[17] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 246.

[18] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 243.

[19] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), pp. 245-6.

[20] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 246.

simultaneously a cautionary tale.

Bishopstone does delight in the life. Everything is transfigured. He writes, 'It is cold, yes, but the frost is one of the angels'.[21] Bishopstone echoes his hero Shelley there,[22] and the notebook contains a quotation from 'Ode to the West Wind', 'Make me thy lyre even as the forest is.'[23] We do not know whether John Munday saw the world with Shelley's eyes. It seems unlikely. With these literary quotations and references to his reading, from Shelley, Blake, the Bible and elsewhere, Thomas suggests that Bishopstone's reading helps him to find that happiness in his new life; but at the same time the Bishopstone story reveals some of Thomas's scepticism about formal education. It is studying for a degree that drives Bishopstone to the edge – university gives him brain fever, and he reacts against it by taking to the land.

The simple life was often seen as a cure, a way of recovering from ill-health – of the body but especially of the mind, such as Bishopstone's brain fever. But the fate of the Bishopstones is hardly something to aspire to, anymore than one would desire to be the Mundays. It's particularly sad that Bishopstone's choices should have had such an impact on his family. Thomas notes that, 'If they had been given to considering such matters', Bishopstone's unfortunate family 'would have said that he ought to have lived solitary and let his hair grow in Wayland's Smithy instead of marrying and begetting seven children, of whom only two were able to die in infancy'.[24] Thomas uses the story of Arthur Aubrey Bishopstone in order to think about sacrifice and the life that could stand in contrast to, or as an antidote to, modernity. But behind it there is that tragic story of the Mundays, who seemingly were never consciously rejecting a university education or a professional life, and were simply trying to work and stay alive.

Guy Cuthbertson

December 2022

[21] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 247.

[22] P.B. Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind': 'Angels of rain and lightning' (l. 18).

[23] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 243. P.B. Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind', l. 57.

[24] Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 247.

Edward Thomas in Sussex by James Guthrie - edited by Jeremy Mitchell

The following article is taken from The Sussex County Magazine of September 1939, a copy of which I have recently been able to add to the collection in the Edward Thomas Study Centre at Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery.

I think these recollections from Thomas's great friend James Guthrie are quite revelatory, particularly his references to Edward Thomas and his relationship with children, something we often overlook. In particular, I am reminded of the photograph taken in Steep in 1914 of Edward, Myfanwy and Tommy Dodd, a neighbour's son (P226 Edward Thomas: A Life in Pictures by Richard Emeny).

I also find the juxtaposition between the idyllic life portrayed on the cover and the hell of the forthcoming war in Europe quite disconcerting – but of course that was not so widely expected at the time.

Anyway, enough of this and on with James Guthrie's article ….

One afternoon in the summer of 1904, a tall, fair-haired young man came into my studio at Harting, and introduced himself as Edward Thomas, a friend of Gordon Bottomley. I had heard of him before and was glad to know that he lived not very far off at Steep (Ed. *in 1904 Thomas was still living in Kent so this date may be incorrect)*, a village near Petersfield, our post town. A great walker, Thomas often came across the Downs and sat for a while conversing in his quiet way over a pipe or a meal. Always a good companion and a kind friend, I have often wondered how others could think of him as melancholy or unfriendly. Perhaps he showed, as we all do, a different character to different people, or was not at his best.

An author who has his way to make, a family to keep, and his share of poor health, must needs have various moods; but these should not disguise from anyone who knew him a nature so radically sound and sociable. His gift for making and keeping friends would seem to bear this out, since his friends were of so many different kinds. It would be more difficult, indeed, to harmonise them by any means other than his affection for them.

Speaking for myself, I took much please in Thomas's liberal ideas, and regard him as one of those rare people who brought a great refinement to work and also to conversation. He would be at pains to explain what he thought about any subject which happened to come up for discussion, sometimes sharply critical, ironically doubtful, or, by contrast, warmly appreciative; but always with a fair

allowance for a different point of view. He was, in fact, a student, and, as such, more interested in the truth than in any desire to impose his own view upon others.

I used to tease him for looking at nature through books; actually, however, he had less of that tendency than many scholars of our acquaintance, and as time went on valued his own first hand observation more and more.

With an exaggerated idea that any sort of human specimen would interest him, I once took Thomas to see an old cobbler (or snobber) in the village who could prove, by means of a Bible and a battered dictionary that he was the rightful King of England. It was a cold day, and the little den in which his majesty worked smelt strongly of leather and the fumes of a paraffin stove. Having overcome the old man's suspicion that this might be a spy in the pay of the enemy, I sat expectant. Thomas, growing pale, showed no sign whatever of interest, either in the story or the old gentleman; and we escaped into the fresh air, having done nothing. A hopeful essay on funny old men and rightful heirs was thus lost to the world!

But to write of Edward Thomas as a friend of man is only part of it; for he was at his best with children. His own must have been familiar with bird and animal life and the wild flowers around their home; and he read and told many a tale to them, as only a writer can. We have often spoken of our long days on the beach, and how, swimming in a pair of borrowed pyjamas, he lost them, and found them next day full of sand. Also of how he loved to hear my small son sing "Land of my Fathers" and "Kelvin Grove", while he sat gravely by, sucking his pipe. Thomas sang too, with great solemnity and good nature, as countrymen do in the inn, songs like "The Raggle-taggle Gypsies". Towards children he had none of the condescension of the grown-up. Their interests were his for the time being, their fun his own. They felt that he was their friend, one who understood. When his daughter was teased, and shrieked, as little girls do, he would say, "Don't be so womanly, Bronwen".

After we came to live a little inland from Blake's old village, I used to meet Thomas at Chichester Cross, usually on a Saturday afternoon. We had tea in our favourite shop along with the cottage people and their market baskets, and then walked home across the fields together. I can see him still with a knapsack on his back, and a long stick in his hand, striding along at a good round pace. He must have seen many a noble landscape as he walked the country, much that was more striking than ours; but it was not his way to complain because a water-meadow was not a mountain, and he loved the winding lanes and green pastures for their own sakes and their associations. Writing from France, he said that there was no place he would sooner be walking into than our small hamlet. He was only to come once again, to say "good-bye" before going to the front.

I believe it would much surprise Edward Thomas to find himself remembered as a poet. He disliked any assumption of greatness, and once threw a drawing on the fire, because he thought it had been given in a condescending way by the artist. The cult of the open air and the "wind on the heath" he

cordially hated; but wherever he found men of simpler faith, such as W. H. Davies, and the author of the *Bettesworth Book*, no trouble was too much to make their work better known. This willing sense of friendship operated wherever his sympathy was enlisted, little as he felt he had in his power one way or another. Never forcing unlikely people upon each other, he never learned the prudential device of keeping the best for himself, or grudging what might serve a friend.

Of Thomas's prose books, those are the best which gave him the most pleasure to write; and they are very finely written and characteristic of his way of thinking. He had to produce a quantity of writing to order; but now and then books like *rest and Unrest*, and *Light and Twilight*, gave him his opportunity to do his own work in his own way. It is a mere step from these highly concentrated prose works to the poetry which is his final contribution to literature. They are the expression of moods, or, as he thought, of the one contemplative mood which belonged to him.

When a man is gone, it is our habit to turn over his things and rummage in his daily life for clues to his character. An artist is seen in his work; for into that he puts himself, and because of that he bears the slings and arrows of fortune, as few others would do with so much patience and forbearance.

Mr Masefield, in his speech at the unveiling of the Edward Thomas Memorial, referred to the "Literature of Escape"; but it is surely a poor recognition of rare gifts if they are assumed to be a kind of aberration, explained only as a glorified truancy from something more worth doing. It might, indeed, be easier, and not more difficult, to subside among the commonplace, and shirk the pains and problems of authorship. An artist like Thomas does not seek an easy way: he merely asks to be allowed to do his work, as other men do theirs, with a fair chance. We know now that he got no chance but the one he made for himself by an intense love of his craft, and, at last, by sacrificing himself for his country.

Extract taken from The Sussex County Magazine, Volume 13, September 1939, Number 9, pages 591 – 593.

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A TRIBUTE TO ROBERT FROST

On January 29th 2023 it will be sixty years to the day since the death of Edward Thomas's great friend, the poet Robert Frost. To mark this occasion you will find below a letter and two poems, all previously published in our newsletters, as well as an article by Jim Dubinsky that is followed by a short piece on Frost by Margaret Keeping. We hope you enjoy them all.

A Letter - Meeting with Robert Frost

This letter and its introduction first appeared in Newsletter 32, back in 1995.

'The following letter was written by Elizabeth Parkhurst to her father and mother, Julian and Maud Thomas, when she was a student at the University of North Carolina in 1947. She says that the letter is very youthful and enthusiastic, 'but I really meant all I wrote. 'Unfortunately the last part has been lost, what remains having come to light slipped into a book. However it is a fascinating glimpse of Robert Frost in his years of fame. Interesting too that he still assumes that Edward had been killed at Vimy Ridge.'

'Dearest Mummy, Daddy and all,

This is my Robert Frost letter. On Wednesday night I and Raymond and Charlotte sat in the auditorium among a big crowd to hear this dear old man. He talked quite at random - softly and very amusingly - he told some very funny stories on a very wide theme, namely that of 'taking liberties' as you get familiar with a person: he was startlingly funny in such a naughty, mischievous way! He makes you feel thoroughly happy through it so that your heart seems to swell up and get light. He read some of his poems - some of which he called 'editorial' and 'scientific'- which he dismissed with a brush of his hand and some mumbled remarks: they were all scoffing at cosmic rays and scientists! Then he read his lovely, earthy poems with details like:

'The board we had laid
down to walk dry
shod on
When there was water in the
cellar in Spring'

and 'The buttons poured out on her lap' and poems like 'Bereft' and 'A Time to Talk.' Do read his poems again.

Anyway - when he finished he was, of course, applauded back again. And then he said words to this effect: I believe but I can't see very well, there is a young girl in this audience - the niece of a very great friend of mine, a poet, one of the great English poets who was killed at Vimy Ridge - Edward Thomas .....and so on, while I sat with my heart pounding me to a pulp, and listened to him praising Uncle Edward until I nearly died of joy. He told of the letters Edward wrote to him while he was in the army - how he didn't mind .fighting as long as he

didn't have to hear what Parliament was saying, or hear each side blackguarding each other - and as long as he could do what they asked him to do. Then in his (Frosts) wandering, he got quite sad and said it didn't seem right to go on after that - he said he had written a poem for Edward, but he couldn't read it in public. He read 'The Road Not Taken' though, which he said Edward thought applied to Edward not Frost - meaning (as Frost said) that it was his way of facing a grief or a hard task.

Afterwards, I just had to go and be introduced, and saw him (as he said) just long enough for him to recognise a family likeness in me. We knew he was coming to lunch today, so we left him to the crowd. Today was the real meeting - he said his friendship with Edward was something very rare and that he didn't like to talk about it publicly. (He told me this when we were alone in the car for a few minutes). He stayed three hours and talked delightfully - anything anyone said suggested a funny, poignant remark. He talked affectionately of his village and the men on his farm. He loves to talk about the land. He is not an agitator - but an easy, indifferent, truthful and moderate person. By indifferent I mean he has no violent opinions about racial prejudices (his very indifference is the solution to that sort of thing), or any of the conflicts. He is quite happy, and so reassuring - like a great, kind god. He is taller than I and .fine and strong with pure white loose hair, and a brown face, strangely like Uncle Ernest's in a way, but longer with rather a long upper lip, and an upward curved mouth.

He had your letter this very day- Mummy, and sends his very best wishes. I shall be sending a photo of us both which we had taken.

When we were alone in the car he told me a lot about Edward that made me feel very.....

(remains missing)'

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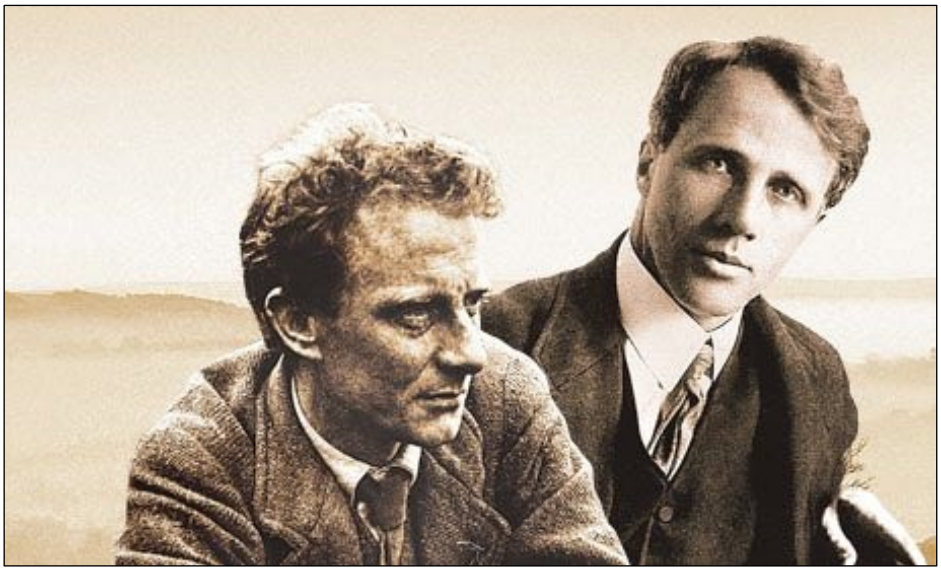
Edward Thomas and Robert Frost – two friends, two poets, two poems

The two poems alongside each other below, one by Thomas, one by Frost, shine a light on the perspective of each on the closeness of their relationship.



Edward Thomas and Robert Frost (Edward Thomas Fellowship image)

The Sun Used to Shine

The sun used to shine while we two walked
Slowly together, paused and started
Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked
As either pleased, and cheerfully parted

Each night. We never disagreed
Which gate to rest on. The to be
And the late past we gave small heed.
We turned from men or poetry

To rumours of the war remote
Only till both stood disinclined
For aught but the yellow flavorous coat
Of an apple wasps had undermined;

Or a sentry of dark betonies,
The stateliest of small flowers on earth,
At the forest verge; or crocuses
Pale purple as if they had their birth

Iris by Night

One misty evening, one another's guide
We two were groping down a Malvern side
The last wet fields and dripping hedges home.
There came a moment of confusing lights,
Such as according to belief in Rome
Were seen of old at Memphis on the heights
Before the fragments of a former sun
Could concentrate anew and rise as one.
Light was a paste of pigment in our eyes
And then there was a moon and then a scene
So watery as to seem submarine;
In which we two stood saturated, drowned.
The clover-mingled rowan on the ground
Had taken all the water it could as dew
And still the air was saturated too,
Its airy pressure turned to water weight.
Then a small rainbow like a trellis gate,
A very small moon-made prismatic bow
Stood closely over us through which to go.
And then we were vouchsafed a miracle

In sunless Hades fields. The war
Came back to mind with the moonrise
Which soldiers in the east afar
Beheld then. Nevertheless, our eyes

Could as well imagine the Crusades
Or Caesar's battles. Everything
To faintness like those rumours fade—
Like the brook's water glittering

Under the moonlight—like those walks
Now—like us two that took them, and
The fallen apples, all the talks
And silence—like memory's sand

When the tide covers it late or soon,
And other men through other flowers
In those fields under the same moon
Go talking and have easy hours.

Edward Thomas

That never yet to other two befell
And I alone of us have lived to tell.
A wonder! Bow and rainbow as it bent,
Instead of moving with us as we went
(To keep the pots of gold from being found),
It lifted from its dewy pediment
Its two mote-swimming many-colored ends
And gathered them together in a ring.
And we stood in it softly circled round
From all division time or foe can bring
In a relation of elected friends.

Robert Frost

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The following article about Robert Frost is reproduced in this Newsletter with the kind permission of the author and also of Virginia Smith, editor of The Robert Frost Review in which publication it first appeared.

Robert Frost: A poet for whom life and war were trials by existence by Jim Dubinsky

When scholars write of war poets, few consider Robert Frost. Certainly, if the definition of a war poet is one who has experienced the turmoil and vicissitudes of combat, Frost does not qualify. However, if one is willing to consider poets who offer insight into connections between war and the human condition, then Frost surely fits the bill.

Reading Frost's poems, essays, letters, and gaining insight from a range of biographical perspectives has led me to understand a key component of his personal philosophy: Robert Frost believed in the inevitability of violence. For him, violence and war were natural. He often made statements reflecting

this belief. In his private letters to his friend Louis Untermeyer, he argued that "Life is like battle" (285) and "War is the natural state of man" (373).

Frost expressed these ideas in response to what he experienced, personally as a husband, father, friend, and artist, as well as what he saw as an individual who lived through both World Wars, the Korean conflict, and the Cold War. They impacted how he understood and framed decisions those close to him made, to include his son's suicide, as I will explain later.

Named after General Robert E. Lee by his father, a Confederate sympathizer, Frost focused on ideals of gallantry and courage early in his life. In early poems such as "Trial by Existence," Frost emphasizing the importance of valor, both on earth and "in paradise":

"*Even the bravest that are slain*

Shall not dissemble their surprise

On waking to find valor reign

Even as on earth, in paradise."

This poem was collected in his first volume, A Boy's Will, which was published, along with his second volume, North of Boston, while he and his family were "living under thatch" in England for two and a half years before World War I broke out.

Even though Frost took his family back to the United States in early 1915, he remained engaged with the war and its issues, particularly through his friendship with the English poet, Edward Thomas, who was killed at the Battle of Arras in 1917.

In North of Boston, Frost includes a number of poems that address his perspectives on both the human condition and humankind's proclivity for conflict. Perhaps the most famous statement on human nature comes from "Mending Wall," a pastoral narrative focusing on a narrator who describes an encounter with a neighbor while out walking his fields.

The poem's opening lines speak to the violence that attends the change of season from winter to spring. Most poets focus on the beauty and rebirth that accompany this transition. Not so in this poem. Here we open to forces of nature that work to tear down walls:

"*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,*

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,

And spills the upper boulders in the sun"

The poet shifts focus to signs of spring among humans: hunters and their yelping dogs. The picture Frost paints is one rich with conflict, and the focal point of that conflict is the wall itself, an unnatural

but seemingly necessary boundary between neighbors, who are clearly different: “He is all pine and I am apple orchard.”

That difference between the neighbors leads the narrator to imagine a potential result stemming from the difference, an image that is at the heart of the poem: the neighbor as an “old-stone savage armed,” who “moves in darkness.”

This poem, by examining boundaries between neighbors, even those whose only difference is the type of trees on their land (pine vs. apple), delineates an essential conundrum that can be extended to tribes or nations. While on one hand, we often wonder why walls are needed, or as the narrator says, “Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offence,” in the end, particularly after imagining his neighbor as a “savage armed,” the narrator concludes by explaining why walls are essential: “Good fences make good neighbors.”

While “Mending Wall” might be seen as a reflection on the differences between people (and therefore) nations that occasionally lead to conflict, poems such as “The Black Cottage,” also included in North of Boston, focus on the pain and loss caused by war, particularly for those who are not the combatants. Similar to the “Ruined Cottage” by Wordsworth, both poems tell stories of women whose family members go off to war and do not return.

“*Said Margaret, ‘for I knew it was his hand*

That placed it there, and on that very day

By one, a stranger, from my husband sent,

The tidings came that he had joined a troop

Of soldiers going to a distant land.

He left me thus—Poor Man! he had not heart

To take a farewell of me, and he feared

That I should follow with my babes, and sink

Beneath the misery of a soldier’s life.’

This tale did Margaret tell with many tears:”

In “The Black Cottage,” the focus is on the American Civil War, and the story is about one who “fell at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg.” The bleakness of the cottage highlights the emptiness of the lives of those left behind, those who strive to make sense of loss they experience, often resorting to pondering the causes that led to the conflict and wishing they were in a “desert” with nothing to “covet” or “think it worth / The pains of conquering to force change on.”

While Frost is not a traditional war poet, he thought and wrote about war, its causes, and its costs, costs he felt deeply and tried to articulate in poems such as "Not to Keep," first published in the Yale Review in 1917 and later in New Hampshire. This poem focuses on the perspective of a young wife who experiences the joy of having her wounded husband return home to heal, as well as the deep, existential fear of knowing that his stay is temporary.

"*. . . The same*

Grim giving to do over for them both.

She dared no more than ask him with her eyes

How was it with him for a second trial.

And with his eyes he asked her not to ask.

They had given him back to her, but not to keep."

Frost's poems focused not only on the personal but also on the public. In "A Soldier," one of several poems in honor of his friend Edward Thomas (another "To E.T."), Frost creates what is almost a hymn to the anonymous soldier who is portrayed as a

"*. . . fallen lance that lies as hurled,*

That lies unlifted now, come dew, come rust."

The soldier as lance, an image out of place in the modern technological warfare of WWI, hearkens back to Frost's reflections on valor. In this poem, Frost recognizes both the anonymity of the individual soldier, who died by the hundreds of thousands in World War I, as well as the overall uselessness and lack of utility of those deaths with the focus on "unlifted" and "rust."

However, perhaps because "A Soldier" is published in 1928 (in the volume West-Running Brook), over a decade after "Not to Keep" first appeared, Frost is able to transcend the personal, taking us from the loss of life to the life of the spirit. The poem, a sonnet, concludes with the immediate discomfort we face as these lances descend to earth and make us "cringe for metal-point on stone." The poem encourages us see not only how an "obstacle . . . checked / And tripped the body," but also to see how it "shot the spirit / Further than target ever showed or shone."

In "A Soldier," as he does so often in his poetry, Frost offers a duality of perspectives. War brings pain, loss, death, ruin, and rust. But it also provides a means for some eternal worth. And perhaps this poem, though written before his son Carol committed suicide in 1940, offers some clarity to Frost's comments on that suicide: "Two things are for sure: he was driven distracted by life and he was perfectly brave. I wish he could have been a soldier and died fighting Germany."

War poetry is an expansive and not so rigidly-defined sub-genre. No one would or should try to compare Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" or "Arms and the Boy" or Brian Turner's "At Lowe's Home Improvement Center" or "The Hurt Locker" with any of the poems I've mentioned here. Owen's and Turner's poems fall into a separate category. But if we wonder about the conflicts we've endured and are enduring, as well as the human costs of and underlying reasons for those conflicts—the "something there is that" sends both ground swells under walls each spring and injured fathers back into battle—Frost's poems offer perspectives worth considering.

Author's bio

James Dubinsky, an associate professor of English at Virginia Tech College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. He is also the founding director of the Department of English's Professional Writing Program and was instrumental in helping to shape the first liberal arts PhD at Virginia Tech (in rhetoric and writing). He is the founding director of the Center for Student Engagement and Community Partnerships (now VT-Engage) and the lead faculty member in the Veterans in Society initiative, for which he organized and/or chaired three national conferences on Veterans in Society. Jim's research interests include civic engagement, the scholarship of teaching, and policy issues related to veterans. He has been honored with awards for teaching, scholarship, and outreach.

Edited by Jeremy Mitchell, Chair, the Edward Thomas Fellowship

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Robert Frost by Margaret Keeping

We are very familiar with the Robert Frost of Ledbury years, the friendship with Edward Thomas, the walking and talking that was so significant to both, as the poems above illustrate. But Elizabeth's letter and two poems that Frost wrote later shows how grave a loss Thomas's death continued to be for him: the sonnet, 'A Soldier', with its conclusion,

'But this we know, the obstacle that checked

And tripped the body, shot the spirit on

Further than target ever showed or shone.'

And ….

To E.T.

I slumbered with your poems on my breast
Spread open as I dropped them half-read through
Like dove wings on a figure on a tomb
To see, if in a dream they brought of you,

I might not have the chance I missed in life
Through some delay, and call you to your face
First soldier, and then poet, and then both,
Who died a soldier-poet of your race.

I meant, you meant, that nothing should remain
Unsaid between us, brother, and this remained—
And one thing more that was not then to say:
The Victory for what it lost and gained.

You went to meet the shell's embrace of fire
On Vimy Ridge; and when you fell that day
The war seemed over more for you than me,
But now for me than you—the other way.

How over, though, for even me who knew
The foe thrust back unsafe beyond the Rhine,
If I was not to speak of it to you
And see you pleased once more with words of mine?

Frost became a university teacher for the rest of his life, chiefly at Amhurst. For decades he taught at the Vermont summer school that he had urged on Edward Thomas as part of a promising future.
An internationally known poet and cultural ambassador, he was awarded numerous honorary degrees, and when in 1957 he attended both Oxford and Cambridge to receive theirs, he took the opportunity to return to Ledington and to walk the field between Little Iddens and Oldfields.

Robert Frost survived four of his six children, outlived his wife Elinor who died in 1938, had a son die of suicide and had to commit one of his daughters to a mental hospital. Many of his poems concern grief and loss. In his eighties, asked what he had learned about life he replied, 'In three words… it goes on.' Frost kept on living and being America's most famous poet of the 20th century and in the States is arguably the

most quoted poet since Shakespeare, especially in the form of short aphorisms,
like 'The best way out is always through' and my favourite from The Death of the Hired Man,
'Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.'

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[25]

"As far as a man in a day could ride,"

Ingatestone Pedallers Social Cycling Group Edward Thomas and Essex: 1915-1916

A short article in Newsletter 87 (January 2022) explained our project to create a series of five circular cycle routes, with guides and maps, based on several of the Essex place names, farms, and houses in the Thomas "Household poems", written between March and April 1916. We had started following these routes in 2014, and they were finally completed in Spring 2022, when we rode the "Rochetts" and "Childerditch" trails. Since January 2022 we also re-ran our other three; "Shellow", "Tye" and "Pickerells". Following on from Thomas's own residence in Essex (in old Essex-in-London Havering Borough now) it may be useful to explain his poetic influence on Essex poetry collections, where he is often joined by John Clare, who spent a short time at the asylum in High Beech. Thomas's place in Essex literary history is special, as following his decision to enlist in 1915, Essex would prove to be central to his development as a poet and the war that would kill him. His role as a map-reading instructor also ties in so well with our attempts to create meaningful and interesting cycle rides based on some of his poems. What would Edward have made of them I wonder?

My own attachment to his poetry goes back to my later school days in Ingatestone. I purchased the old R. S. Thomas Faber Selected Poems and then the Walter de la Mare Collected Poems. Later, I

[25] Arras tourism car, Cooley Spring, in the cavalcade during the Tour de France in Essex (July 2014): R W Fletcher

would purchase Gant's *Edward Thomas on the Countryside* (Faber 1977). I cycled over to South Weald in my teens to fish in the lake with a school friend. I would even venture further beyond to my uncle and aunt's house in Collier Row, Romford; just in the lee of Hainault Forest. Ironically, they would later move nearer to me at Margaretting Tye in the late 1980s, a smaller cycle ride of a few miles, with of course the Thomas poetic connection. My old neighbour in my current flat was, according to writer James Wentworth Day, who lived here in Ingatestone, a great, great nephew of Richard Jefferies, which he never denied and he did have a Swindon background and accent to back that up! (I knew who Jefferies was as we had read *Bevis* at school). During my school days I had also cycled extensively around the nearby "Shellow" and "Pickerells" country. Having published the first "Shellow" cycle map in 2021, Ingatestone Pedallers are working on the next four routes which we hope will add to the interest in "Edward Thomas and Essex". Points of interest in these five routes are as follows: Edward Thomas – Shellow" (Published December 2021)

[26]

Based on the area of Skreens Park and Shellow Bowells, which lie between the villages of Roxwell and Willingale, a village with two churches in one churchyard. Part of the route travelling from Roxwell to Willingale was used in the Essex section of Le Tour de France 2014, which I watched at Cooley Spring near Roxwell. This might sound like an Australian water hole but a "Spring" in this part of Essex means a managed, usually coppiced, plantation. Just up the road near Shellow is a "Hangman's Spring"! (See "If I were to own" - Merfyn)

[26] Shellow Bowells Church, now a house (June 2020) / Pandemic artwork, Willingale (June 2020): R W Fletcher

"Edward Thomas – Pickerells" (Publication due in 2023)

[27]

Pickerells is a large farm estate and now farming equipment supplier site on the B184 Chipping Ongar – Gt Dunmow road very close to the route here. You will find some rather isolated spots in surprisingly pretty country in the upper valley of the River Roding which you can cross and re-cross several times. Strange to reflect, as you cycle through quiet fields, that this river meets the Thames at Barking, passing on its way near Chigwell, a TFL Underground Station named "Roding Valley." When we did the ride this year, we did a short detour to redundant Berners Roding Church, "off-Roding" of sorts I suppose. There are eight Roding villages in all, a quiet area just some 20 or so miles from Central London"! (See "If I were to own" - Merfyn)

"Edward Thomas – Rochetts" (Publication due in 2023)


[28]

Rochetts, a rather run-down looking farm now, appears in "If I were to own" but the area of this route is centred directly on Weald Park, which has connections to "What shall I give". Rochetts, on a busy bit of lane now, may not be much to look at but Weald Country Park can be crowded with visitors today, many on their dog walking exercises. Certainly not the training of the Artists' Rifles. This

[27] Junction near Pickerells (June 2022) / Unexpected Cottage, Birds Green (July 2020): R W Fletcher
[28] Border of Essex and Havering over the M25 / Essex County Council Weald Country Park (February 2022: R W Fletcher

area is very close to Junction 28 Brook Street of the M25 now, the border between post 1965 Essex and the London Borough of Havering. We first tried this route in early Spring 2022.
(See "If I were to own" – Merfyn /" What shall I give" - Myfanwy)

"Edward Thomas – Childerditch" (Publication due in 2023)

[29]

Based around the area close to Edna Hall Clarke's "Great House", near Warley on Upminster Common. All places here are familiar in the Great and Little Warley and Childerditch areas. "Roses" is here and Cockridden Farm a short way off on the A128. Little Warley and Childerditch are a short distance from Ingrave, further up the A128 nearer Brentwood, where Vaughan Williams collected the folk song "Bushes and Briars" in 1903.

"Pyrgo" was an old house dating back to Elizabethan times just over the motorway in Havering, now a park. The two brooks here are now mostly surrounded by housing and they run down into the Beam and Ingrebourne Valleys through country parks, exiting into the Thames between Dagenham and Rainham. We also first tried this route, later in Spring 2022. (See "If I should ever by chance" – Bronwen / "What shall I give" – Myfanwy)

[29] Old Childerditch school house / Essex Regiment Chapel at Warley, Brentwood (May 2022): R W Fletcher

"Edward Thomas – Tye" (Publication due in 2023)

 [30]

The most local route to Ingatestone & Fryerning Parish and villages and well known to local cyclists as the road through the Tye forms part of Sustrans National Cycle Network Route 13. Of course, Margaretting Tye, an outlying part of Margaretting village, is noted in one of the most often quoted "Household Poems" in Essex.

Probably not so well known, but interesting in the light of Helen Thomas's later involvement, is the WW1 connection with Ivor Gurney, who was based around Chelmsford with the Gloucestershire Regiment between April 1915 and January 1916 and at one time the regiment was camped just up the hill from the Tye on Galleywood Common. Martins Farm, probably that referred to in "If I were to own", is now an empty Grade 2 listed building with associated outhouses which cannot have changed much since 1915-16. It is within 100 yards or so of the Tye and The White Hart pub. (See "If I were to own – Merfyn)

The "Shellow", "Pickerells" and "Tye" routes all have large sections of Sustrans NCN routes on them. Part of Route 1, coming from Harlow towards Chelmsford, goes across the first two rides. This links up beyond Harlow with sections either down to London or up to Cambridge. Route 13 passes directly through the Tye, from Galleywood to Stock via Tye Green. Route 13 begins in London and ends in Norfolk if you thinking of trying it! The areas discussed are well served with Public Rights of Way and the "Essex Way" Long Distance Footpath goes through "Shellow" and "Pickerells". This starts in Epping and ends in Harwich.

All our rides generally start in Market Place, High Street, Ingatestone, on the B1002, off the A12 trunk road. This is a short pedal from Greater Anglia Ingatestone Station, with a fast and regular service from London Liverpool Street, some 30 minutes, and out beyond to East Anglia. Our hope is that this project will prove popular and help educate both Essex residents and visitors about Thomas and his writings.

[30] Village noticeboard Margaretting Tye (March 2022) / Martins Farm at the Tye (June 2022): R W Fletcher

Robert Fletcher/Organiser Ingatestone Pedallers
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December 2022

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Thanks are due to committee member Nick Denton for the following article which is based upon Thomas's Field Note Book 42, held at The Berg Library in New York.

Field Note Book 42 (FNB 42) by Nick Denton

FNB 42 is a typical example of an Edward Thomas Field Note Book. It is a diary of his observations of the natural and wider world around him at Steep and on his walks, between February and May 1910. As in other notebooks, he wrote a lot about the landscapes, skies and cloudscapes, weather and time of day and their interactions. Towards the back of FNB42, again as in other field note books, he jotted down ideas ("subjects") for future prose pieces. Many of these did not reach fruition but some, together with a few of his daily observations, became the basis of poems he wrote between 1914-16, sometimes many years after he had originally jotted them down.

FNB 42 covers the spring of 1910 following the move from Berryfield Cottage, their first home in Steep, to the Red House on top of Ashford Hangers in late 1909. During this period ET was gaining a fuller appreciation of the astonishing view from the new house. He already knew the view well, as he had been using part of a storage hut (the Bee-House) as a study for several months, which was adjacent to the site where the new house was being built. Now he could enjoy the view every day at any hour throughout the seasons.

The note book is full of hope and appreciation of beauty at every turn - very different from his later negative perceptions of the Red House as expressed in his poems *Wind and Mist* and *The New House.*

The Rother valley, stretching out to the east with the South Downs marching behind, is still a breathtaking view from the top of the hangers. The constant variety on display was an endless source of fascination and diversion for him.

Walks

FNB42 includes a number of local walks. In his first entry on 12th February he walked over to Butser Hill and along the Downs above East Meon. He spotted thrushes, larks, yellowhammers and corn bunting and a hare "visible below running along dark path clear in the pale grass".

A few days later he was walking on the borders of the Up Park estate in the woods below Lady Holt and met some woodcutters, felling ash and with a good fire. They asked him about his dog (Rags, the terrier), who was hunting and he told them that the dog had hunted rabbits for 10 years and caught two. They invited him to have tea out of their billy can which he declined but shared their fire. There was talk of Lord Leconfield of Petworth who was hunting at Up Park that day. According to the men the Lord had a habit of swearing when he hit a pheasant "Got you, you b——!" And when he missed a rabbit. They also told him the old story of a smuggling gang who had thrown a witness into a well close by, premising the story with "Perhaps you haven't read history" (Thomas had read history at Oxford). He then describes each of the men's physical appearance in detail before concluding primly "The first 2 [men] very loose sexually in speech".

For most of the rest of the notebook, his observations are about the sublime view from house and study above Ashford Hangers. Two particular sets of notes stand out as they are the antecedents of two fine poems five years later.

Ambition

The first is a note of an early morning view on 3rd March, after frost at night, when jackdaws soar and float and green woodpeckers shout long and loud. He goes on "How lovely at 8 the white fields - dark woods - little houses sending the mist of pearly smoke & lighted low above dark trees & white earth - all looks new born & fair". He had written in previous notebooks of the wintery view of the Rother valley with the smoke of the train between Midhurst and Petersfield hanging like a vertebrae behind it. The March note prompted him to consider this view and what it inspired in him as a subject. At the end of his notebook where he jotted down ideas for future pieces he wrote:

"Man looks at 7 o'clock world of misty vale dark woods, dim pale misty hills beyond & a train roaring across leaving a vertebrate long pure cloud behind in still silent air - while larks sing above frosty field into the pale blue — & he feels his life before him - what he will do - what he

would like to do - for a moment with ambition & power to achieve, so great is the beauty & calm beneath him, as if a lovely conquerable world which he can fill with life, since he is the only force & life in it of which he is for the moment aware."

So written in this 1910 notebook is a summary, indeed a more expansive explanation, of his poem *Ambition*, which he wrote five years later.

Beauty

Another note in April gave rise to another poem, where the magnificent view from the new house is also prominent. On 8th April 1910 at 5.30 pm he wrote:

"Cloudy late aft(*ernoon*) of a warmish N windy day - the vale Eastward is smoky dark, but Petersfield & mounded trees nearby catches the soft gold from a blue gilt edged pane in the West - and it seems to dream, be blest & yet is unconscious of it like an angelic blessed sky & blackbirds sing alone calmly & slowly & sweet.

"In 1/4 hr afterwards the sun was setting huge clear & scarlet in a dulled cloudy sky."

Later in the notebook he had jotted down as a subject for a piece what he had felt a few minutes before this note, which became the basis of the poem *Beauty*:

"Beauty 5.15pm 8 iv 10

"I sit at tea table (*in the kitchen of the Red House*) tired angry ill at ease with children talking about me & yet I see beauty in the dim-lit quiet vale with its brown misting trees, its white gables & its gentle curving downs just visible. I see it all far away & lovely & something - some little thing —- flies to it & is happy while I am sad & sick & weary. Late light coming from low gap in a misted & yellowish clouded sky."

He took other elements of *Beauty* from elsewhere in the notebook. The pewit "that returns to wail/For something it had lost" was from an adjacent note to his original one on 8th April. He had written "A pewit wheels in the misty wind - I think even so shall I return & wail about places".

The Manor Farm

The returning dove in Beauty may have been inspired by a walk to the remote hamlet of Priors Dean which he did on a number of occasions after they moved into the Red House. There he saw white pigeons on the steep tiled roofs of the barn and was reminded of his youth when he had kept pigeons and doves in London. These walks in 1910, two of which are noted in FNB42, inspired one of his earliest poems, *The Manor Farm* written on Christmas Eve 1914. The main inspiration was from a visit to the farm on a warm February day (noted in a previous note book) but in April he walked there with his family, when the farmyard was much busier than in the poem. The horses, rather than just swishing their tales with their manes hanging over their eyes, leant on the gate sniffing Bronwen (his elder daughter)'s "hay-like hair".

Birds

The white pigeons of Priors Dean were just one of many birds mentioned in FNB 42. In all there are around 25 birds in the notebook, which covered the period of the year when they are most evident. There are thrushes, larks, yellowhammers, gulls over the Downs, great tits, corn bunting, hedge sparrow, missel thrushes, linnets, starlings, rooks, jackdaws, green woodpeckers, spotted wagtail, blackbirds, swallow, corn crake, chiffchaffs, robins, chaffinch, pewit, ducks, blackcaps and cuckoo.

One of his habits from early days was to note the date he first heard or saw a returning bird, especially the chiffchaff. On the morning of 11th April - "a cloudy promising SW windy" morning he suddenly thought "of something new, something coming, something dear, something returning". He looked up "and the note of a swallow fell on my ear & I saw the solitary bird flit by & disappear - the first."

He never returned to this idea for a poem but one of his later poems turned the idea on its head with the swallow's cousin, the swift. In *How at once* he described the sense of loss when he realised each year that he had seen the last swift "Until next May/Again it is due?"

Other poetry subjects

There were other notes in the Field Note Book which, though less comprehensive than those about *Beauty* and *Ambition*, pointed the way to future poems.

On the last page of the notebook he wrote:

"That romantic chalk pit by curve in road once a house there ——a

woman who turned into a hare - house left empty - stones carted away - chalk (flint *crossed out*) pit opened — a man killed his brother there - now only ash trees & they cut down lately."

This seems to have been the answer to the mystery of *The Chalk-Pit* - the "tragical" and "unusual" happenings that one of his protagonists referred to in the poem but which were never discovered.

He also made a note about a view of the lake under the Black Mountain, above Llanddeusant. in Wales, that he had written of in previous notebooks. This was the lake he wrote of in *Over the hills* "that rests and stirs not in its nook."

Old Man, a perennial subject in his notebooks and one of his earliest poem, also gets a mention.,

As does a spotted wagtail "running along & across sunny roofs singing quiet clear & happy like a lark in the sun" which appears in his poem *Health*.

There are other moments of poetry in the notebook, which he never used in poems. During a February storm he noted the “total sound as if earth being scoured like a pot”

The following day on a cold windy hill under a flying silver, white and blue sky, he saw linnets as “little grains of song scattered and gleaming”.

After an April shower, with blue overhead and gigantic white cloud mountains to the South and East, he felt “the height of the lovely walls of the world as I walk in hill country by Privett”

As I wrote at the outset, FNB 42 is in many ways a typical field note book with its wealth of observations and ideas but it proved a richer source for his poetry than many others. It offers an insight into the development of some of his poems - a slow fruition from acute observations and particular memories or layers of memory of place and time.

The richness and inventiveness on display in this notebook was undoubtedly the result of the Thomas’s recent move to The Red House, which seems to have inspired ET, enabling him to observe with a fresh perspective and giving him additional creative impetus. He had other periods of inspiration which he was also able to draw on for his poems - in particular his notebooks about walking along the Ridgeway in May 1912; his stay at Selsfield House in the autumn and winter of 1913; and the autumn of 1914 at Steep. FNB 42 ranks with these as a rich seam of wonderful ideas which he was able to turn into poetry finally five years later. It is also a good read in its own right.

The transcription of FNB 42 is available at the Edward Thomas Study Centre along with many other of Edward Thomas field note books.

More about the inspiration for the poems mentioned in this piece can be found on www.edwardthomaspoetryplaces.com

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Fellow committee member Ben Mackay has also worked on the Field note Books. Below is one of his fascinating transcriptions of notes that relates to Thomas’s childhood.

Addenda to Autobiography Holograph Notebook IV transcribed by Ben Mackay

(Thomas notes the relevant age for each with the Latin abbreviation 'aet')

I aet 15?

I remember one girl at the chapel whose parents mine knew slightly who wanted to know me. As I think of her now she was very pretty with dark eyes, not too dark brown hair, full rich coloured lips + cheeks, + often a brown fur cap. She had a smaller sister growing up to be exactly like her. Often in a certain road I had to pass down she used to appear coming towards me + look at me. She turned round as soon as I had gone by. I think that only shyness prevented me from stopping, but as I did not stop I assumed an expression to hide any thought of doing so, + I believe I never did. Her name was Burgess + her father managed a wine shop at a corner. Another girl about this time used to meet or follow me in the same way, an older girl, tall gentle + awkward, with a pale melancholy face. Once a smaller girl, perhaps her sister, ran ahead of her + overtook me to tell me she wanted to speak to me, but I was embarrassed + took no notice. She herself hardly smiled and never spoke.

II Swindon

My uncle got up late on Sundays, spending some time in his shirt sleeves, doing odd jobs for himself, shaving after breakfast, feeding the 2 linnets who survived a year or 2 after he left England + were long recalled by their cage + dusty seed up among other useless valuables on top of the pantry in the back kitchen. He used to polish his boots carefully to what he called, with a look at me, the Piccadilly polish. He would sing snatches of songs as he went about, such as

How d'ye do, old boy, how d'ye do?
You are looking very merry
Will you take a glass of sherry?
How d'ye do, old boy, how d'ye do?

III aet

Father had a few songs + comic speeches that he used to treat us to in turn when we were six or seven. He used to put on an artificial voice + expression + say 'Walk up, walk up + see the show! Strike up, Joe! Walk up + see the live lion stuffed with straw + Napoleon crossing the Alps in an open boat.' When we were younger he had us on his knee to sing

Paddy from Cork he had never been,
A railway train he never had seen,
He's off to catch the great machine,
That runs along the railway. Whoop!

(It ended in a high whoop + a wrinkling grin of delight from my brother as he tossed us up). Of course he sang also

Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross. –

And

Here comes my lord with a drawn sword
Trot trot trot
Here comes my lady with a little bay
Amble amble amble
And after us come the country clowns
the country clowns
Jiggety-jig – jiggety-jig, jiggety, jiggety, jiggety-jig.

IV Board School

The rope of the school bell hung down the wall in our classroom, with a handle of woolly red + white intertwisted, + the caretaker used to be pulling it still as we came in. On Monday mornings we had to go up to the teacher's desk + put down our weekly fee of 2 pennies, or, in the upper school 4.

V aet 10?

One of the nice strange things about Swindon that made us sure we were there + suggested everything else, was the shrill cry of the Wiltshire paper boys shouting 'North Wilts Herald' or 'Argus'. Nothing could have been less like this than the cry of the London paper boys. Them I remember best, shouting loudly, in dark quiet November fog, 'Another Ripper murder! Terrible murder in Whitechapel! Terrible murder!' My grandmother suspected every stranger with a black bag of being Jack the Ripper. When I took to going fishing with a man from London down on a visit to Swindon, – as a matter of fact, a relative of a neighbour, – she tried to scare me out of it by hinting at Jack the Ripper.

VI aet 11

When I was still a little boy, I used to hear a good deal of talk of childhood, my own + my parents'. Theirs, + especially my mother's, fascinated me. It was mostly sad. She and her sister, orphans, had lived some years with an unmarried aunt in Newport. The house, as I knew it from her talk + one visit, was a dark substantial plain one on a hill. The sisters called it Hell House, not Hill House. It was cut off from the street by iron railings. Some trees stood near darkening + danking it. I think a black retriever lived in a kennel at one side. The aunt was stern, even cruel, – I don't know in what way, – and a church-goer. I pictured the house as a prison for the 2 girls.

VII aet 10

My early feeling for Wales culminated in my singing Moore's 'Minstrel Boy', was clenched + fostered by it. I knew only of Welsh harps. I supposed the minstrel boy with his wild harp slung behind him was Welsh – as I sang the song I melted + trembled with a kind of gloomy pleasure in being about to die for Wales, Arthur's + Llewelyn's Wales, the 'land of song'. While I shivered with exaltation repeating his words:

Though each man else betrays thee
One sword at least thy rights shall guard,
One harp at least shall praise thee.

It might have been my harp + my sword.

VIII aet 16

Once a week a debating society met in the classroom, including a few boys from other forms. The only time I took part was when I read a paper to oppose one just read proving that 'Elizabeth was a bad woman + a bad queen'. In preparation, I did nothing but look up the school history book. I was in fact stumped. The matter, I suggested, had been quite settled long ago, so when my opponent got up he complimented me on my 'admirable summary of Bright' (Bright's History of England) + I sat blushing under his cleverness, but I remember nothing more of it.

IX aet 8 or 9

One of the abusive rhymes they used to yell at one another at the Board School was

Bandy legs! Broken nose!
Bite your fingers + your toes!

Another to a ragged boy was

Giddy giddy gout
Shirt hangs out
One yard in + two yards out.

To a boy who said 'What?' too much or at the wrong time, the retort was

What? Pot! Cat's tails all hot –
I'll skin 'em + you eat 'em.

Often if we were walking aimlessly one would suddenly begin to run towards some point, shouting 'Last one there's lousy' + we raced to avoid the name. I remember thus racing to a heap of gravel or

old bricks + rubble where one of the big house on Clapham Common had been pulled down. Then perhaps the one at the top would try to keep the rest down by shouting: I'm the king of the castle, Get down you dirty rascal.
A thing to do when there was nothing else was to make a sentence out of PREFACE in a book thus: Policeman Running Every Friday After Charlie Evans

aet 8

One of the sights of St John's R^{d} + other busy shopping streets was a man in clown's dress on very high stilts. He would cock one leg over the horizontal bar of a street lamp + rest, or he would peep roguishly in at a first floor window. The hat for collection he carried at the end of a long stick. I think his white trouser legs reached right down over the stilts.

This should go with the passage about Jack in the Green.

aet 13 or 14

My handwriting being neat, my aunt once employed me to make a fair copy of a lecture on Hamlet from her M.S. Her handwriting being difficult + Polonius not interesting me I soon wearied + took to leaving out long sentences, with very small regard to continuity. If she found out she never taxed me with it.

Transcribed by Ben Mackay from Edward Thomas's Field Notes, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

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FROM THE ARCHIVE

To complement Ben's transcription above we have chosen this article from our archive that appeared first in Newsletter 32 in 1995.

Edward Thomas's First School

Belleview Schools – The Early Years by Roger Logan

Readers may recall that, just over a year ago, "Common News" published some articles to celebrate the centenary of the Belleview Road Schools. At that time regret was expressed that there appeared to be no personal recollections of former pupils or staff from the pre-1900 era. It is with much pleasure that we can now present some authentic memories of the early days of the schools using material from a hitherto neglected autobiography, "The childhood of Edward Thomas", published by Faber and Faber, by a man whose eminence is only now being fully appreciated.

At the outset I must record my thanks to Mrs. AM. Rodnight, whose researches have assisted me in the preparation of this article. For the most recent edition of the "Wandsworth Historian", the Wandsworth Historical Society's Journal, she wrote an article entitled "Edward Thomas: some Battersea connections." For the uninitiated, Edward Thomas was a writer of prose and poetry around the turn of the century until his death in 1917 at Arras, in France, during the Great War. Mrs. Rodnight produced an excellent discourse on his early days, which, it transpired were spent in South Battersea. From close examination of Mrs. Rodnight's article, the primary source mentioned above, together with other available evidence, I am willing to claim that Edward Thomas gained his early education at Belleview Road schools, infants and later Boys, and that his recollections form a part of the history of the schools.

Edward Thomas was born in Stockwell in March 1878. In 1880 his family moved to Wakehurst Road, number 49. "Our street, like three or four others parallel to it, was in two halves, running straight up the 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." From his home, the three storey Board school in the eastern portion of the Road would have been easily visible. By the time he was old enough to go to school, this was still the only Board school in the district and it seems inconceivable that he would have attended any but Belleview Road.

"Then I entered the lowest class of a suburban board school. There were some boys and girls whom I desired and sometimes struggled to sit next to; and at least two whom I avoided. One, a poor dirty girl, without eyelashes, who came from an old hovel at the top of one of the poorer and older streets, and has lent a certain disrelish ever since to the name of 'Lizzie'; the other was a boy whom I had seen charging at his desk with his head lowered."

Other, vivid memories came to mind. "When I think of school, I smell carbolic soap, I see the caretaker by the wall of one room, ringing the bell. I deposit my weekly four pence on the master's desk. I go round, as a privilege, filling the scores of inkpots from a tin with a long thin spout. I join in the one verse hymn before and after lessons. I see large light bare rooms with a map or two, and boys in long parallel desks facing a master; for we were soon separated from the girls". The latter comment clearly relates to his moving from the infants to the boys school.

Of that time we are fortunate that Thomas was able to recall the names and characteristics of at least some of his masters. These would be teachers at the boys' school during the latter half of the 1880's.

"One of the masters, named Jones, was little, with dark prominent eyes, round plump red face and quick steps and fiery temper; another, named Spragg, was a tall fairer bony man, who had a deep resonant voice; and I think that once when the two quarelled, the tall one lifted the little one into the air. There was a third named Wigley, a mild man, a chewer of his moustache, who struck me as feeble even before Spragg got the better of him in a tussle."

The description of the headmaster is even more detailed, although regrettably, Thomas does not record his name.

"The headmaster was short, square-shouldered, lean, pallid, bearded, took long rapid strides with head low and projecting, flat high overhanging forehead, deep set eyes, always on the verge of anger, a harsh barking voice, a general expression of dark solitary determination... Sometimes he went by me in the street, his hands in his black overcoat pockets, an umbrella under his arm, overtaking everybody with rapid sidelong dark glances." Thomas noted that he could remember very little about school itself "We were huddled close together in great lofty rooms with big windows and big maps and on Mondays a smell of carbolic soap. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, parsing were easy to me... I rather liked wearing the numbered ticket on examination days, and took pride in having the numbers neatly printed in black with a 4 rather than a 4 and so on... Discipline was strict."

Brief references to playing games "in the hard asphalt playground", struck a familiar chord,

although the practice of waging battles with "the boys of a neighbouring school of the grammar school" who "looked down upon the Board-school boys or 'Boardy Blags' (i.e. blackguards)," has, to the best of my knowledge, ceased.

Edward Thomas concludes his references to his schooldays in this way. "My later days at the Board school were pleasant enough. My class sat in the same room and was taken by the same master as a special small class of the oldest boys in the school... I made friends with one or two of them, laughed at their jokes and catch phrases..." At the age of 10,in 1888, he left Belleville Road school to attend a private school.

What influences school-life has on his later writings remains to be determined. From his recollections however, along with those of contributors to our original articles, it is apparent that no matter how teaching methods change, a strand of continuity between those early days and more recent years exists; such a valuable asset deserves to be more widely appreciated.

Further childhood reminiscences are found in jottings held by the Berg Collection in the New York Library.

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BOOK REVIEWS

'A Peculiarly English Genius or, a Wiltshire Taoist: a Biography of Richard Jefferies Volume III' by Andrew Rossabi.

Fellowship members will be interested to know that Andrew Rossabi has now completed the third volume of his account of the life and works of the country writer Richard Jefferies. Jefferies was a formative influence upon the early writings of Edward Thomas and Thomas it was who became Jefferies' first biographer.

Volume III of covers 'The Years of Success', 1876-1883. It is 800 pages long, includes 48 black and white illustrations and will be published on 1 January 2023 at a cover price of £60. The dust jacket includes an extract of Richard Emeny's review of Volume II that was published in the *ETF Newsletter* No. 84, August 2020.

The Richard Jefferies Society is offering Vol. III to ETF members at a subsidised rate of £40, including postage within the UK. Please send any order or enquiry to richardjefferiessociety@btinternet.com or The Old Mill, Mill Drive, Foulsham, Norfolk NR20 5RB.

We hope to be able to publish Richard Emeny's review of Volume 111 in Newsletter 90.

We are grateful to the Richard Jefferies Society for providing us with the following extract from Rossabi's Introduction to Volume 111:

'Volume III treats Jefferies' years of success, which coincide with the five years he lived at Tolworth near Surbiton in North Surrey, where he moved in 1877 for more convenient access to his editors in London, while still retaining a foothold in the country. Tolworth was then still largely rural, consisting of farmland, wood, and commons. Here, under the prestigious imprint of Smith, Elder & Co., he published the books that made his name as a fresh and original writer of scenes from nature and rural life. *The Gamekeeper at Home* and its successors received what today would be termed rave notices. The reviewers hailed Jefferies as the natural successor to Gilbert White, and reading their eulogies one has the impression that a new planet had swum into their ken: the phrase from Keats's 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' comes irresistibly to mind.

At this date it is hard to appreciate how great was the reputation Jefferies once enjoyed .... The six titles published by Smith, Elder form a special group within his oeuvre: *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, *The Amateur Poacher*, *Greene Ferne Farm*, *Hodge and His Masters*, and *Round About a Great Estate*. Each has a different colouring, but together they form a homogeneous whole. In them several streams from Jefferies' early career meet and coalesce: the provincial reporter of farmers' club meetings and police court proceedings; the amateur archaeologist, antiquary, and local historian; the aspirant but commercially unsuccessful novelist; the satirical pamphleteer and versifier; the singularly well informed and often uncannily prescient agricultural journalist; the field naturalist blessed with senses of an acuity and powers of observation far above the norm; and the mystic alive to the presence of a timeless, unchanging world beyond the threshold of the senses.

The five Surbiton years were a quinquennium of literary success, good health, and domestic happiness. With the birth of his daughter Phyllis in 1880 Jefferies became the father of a pigeon pair and in Surbiton he wrote two children's books which have become classics: *Wood Magic* and *Bevis*. The seeds of Jefferies' mysticism can be traced back to his boyhood and in these two books he sounded the themes of nature and eternity at length for the first time. They look forward to the cornerstone of his work, the spiritual autobiography *The Story of My Heart*.

Jefferies wrote all the early country books, *The Gamekeeper* and its companions, out of memory ... Jefferies himself wrote: 'no one can ever be far from the place where he was born: distance is not separation.' In memory and imagination he continued to return to Coate and the surrounding country for the rest of his life.

It was not until 1880, when he came to write the series of articles first published in the *Standard* newspaper and later collected under the title *Nature near London* that Jefferies turned for material to his immediate surroundings in Surbiton. He had been astonished at the wealth of wild life, particularly bird life, to be found in relatively close proximity to the capital. ...

Two of the six country books stand out as slightly different. *Hodge and His Masters* represents the culmination of Jefferies' agricultural papers: through a series of rapid, richly incisive tableaux, many cast in the aforesaid semi-fictional form, Jefferies gives a magnificent overview of rural society in central southern England during the early years of what came to be known as the Great Agricultural Depression, while *Greene Ferne Farm* is the best of the early novels and stands in the same relation to the rest of Jefferies' fiction as *Under the Greenwood Tree* to Hardy's.

Jefferies' health was never strong, and the intense creativity of the five Surbiton years took its toll. In December 1881 he was diagnosed with an anal fistula that was almost certainly tubercular in origin and signalled a reactivation of the disease that had intermittently plagued his adolescence and that was to kill him within six years. He underwent four operations. The pain was excruciating, 'like lightning through the brain', and it was some time before the wounds were properly healed. He moved to West Brighton in the hope that the sea air would help him to convalesce. The presence of the sea and recovery of a chalk grassland landscape like that of his native Wiltshire, as well as the intimations of mortality brought on by his illness, inspired him finally to put on paper a record of his experiences since 'an inner and esoteric meaning' had come to him 'from all the visible universe', and to write the autobiography that heralded the last phase of his career, which we will treat in the final volume...'

Jean Saunders
Hon. Secretary
The Richard Jefferies Society

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Journey into Space by Sean Street – Shoestring Press, ISBN 978-1-912524-87-7, published in 2022.

It is always a pleasure to read a new volume of poetry by Sean Street. He is a little unusual in being equally at home and gifted in writing his prose (The Dymock Poets) as his poetry. While writing his latest volume, *Journey Into Space,* (nothing to do with NASA, but reminiscent of the series of that name broadcast in the old Home Service), I jotted down as I read a few single words, which seemed appropriate: elegance, precision, place, time, (places are of course of time), memory, melancholy. On reflection those words do not seem wrong as a reaction to the poems in the collection.

Street has had a varied career, starting I believe, as an actor in Paris, a freelance radio producer, a poet and prose writer, and the first Professor of Broadcasting ever appointed, and interviewer and recorder of Myfanwy Thomas. Some of this background surfaces into these poems, some are of a more personal nature. Apart from melancholy, which is too strong a term for these gentle poems, those words still seem correct, though more and more a sense, almost a haunting, of place and past time seems to dominate

I have always believed that Sickert's painting 'Little Dot Hetherington at the old Bedford' was the finest picture of his music hall ones. The intense spotlight on the slight girl in her scarlet dress, as she sings 'The boy I love is up in the gallery' contrasted with the dark shapes of the poor, as they lean forward to hear her every word and the shadowy Victorian baroque of the building, brings to life the tough times of the London poor. Street's poem superbly achieves the same. Maybe a knowledge of the picture helps an appreciation of the poem, I don't know, but I felt a deep feeling of recognition and of sadness at the passing of that moment in time, materially poor, but enormously rich in other ways. Place and time.

Other poems in the collection create a similar effect. 'Hawthorn Crescent' for instance, starts as a vivid and detailed memory, which expands into something more, while the description of the room spears precisely what those of my generation could record of such rooms. Places as varied as Grimes Graves in Norfolk to Deauville and Belfast as well as many others appear, each one precisely recognisable and evoking memory. Some of these memories such as in 'Song for Mina' are almost unbearably sad, yet full of life.

Nobody reading these poems need feel that they are the work of an old man looking back, there is much there for everyone. The emotions are for all time, just as the poems are for today. As with so many of Edward Thomas's poems, Street's are deceptively simple, but at heart there is a complexity that leads one into a different country, a country of the heart, a photograph album, the contents of which set hares running in all directions.

I believe I have read all Street's collections of poetry and *Journey into Space* is to me the most pleasing and finest. There are so many gems in it that it is difficult to select one in particular. It is a book that can be opened with pleasure at any time on any place: on a journey, last thing at night in one's bed, sitting in the garden in a warm summer's afternoon. Do read it.

Richard Emeny, December 2022

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