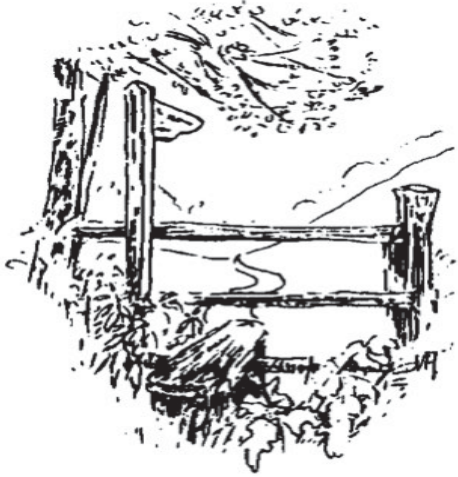


THE EDWARD THOMAS FELLOWSHIP



‘So I came into a valley and there was one white house in it, with a green glowing, and humming garden, and at the door was a woman who might have been the Old Year. It was one of those white houses so fair that in the old time a poet compared a girl’s complexion with them, as with lilies and foam. It held all the sun, so that suddenly I knew that in another valley, farther south and farther east, the rooks were making the lanes sleepy with their busy talk: the kingfishers were in pairs on the brooks, whose gentle water was waving and combing the hair of the river moss; the gold of the willow catkins was darkened by bees; over an old root of dock was a heaving colony of gleaming ants; perhaps the chiffchaff had come to the larches and the little green moschatel was in flower with large primroses among the ash stools in wet woods; and in the splendid moments of the day the poplars seemed to come into the world, suddenly all purple. ...’

from *Beautiful Wales*

NEWSLETTER 83 January 2020

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

Membership Secretary: Mr. David Kerslake, 3 Bream Close, Calne, Wiltshire, SN11 9UF. Email: etfmembership@gmail.com. Could members please check that they have paid this year’s subscription (due January), and that they are paying the correct annual subscription amount, which is £15.00 for individuals or families living at the same address? Many thanks.

Newsletter Editor: Dr. Julia Maxted, 54 Southmoor Road, Oxford, OX2 6RD. Thanks as always are due to members for providing reports, articles and information for the newsletter. Please continue to send them either by post to the above address or by email to ethomasfellowshipnewsletter@gmail.com.

Chair’s Report

Welcome everyone to the Edward Thomas Fellowship’s eighty-third newsletter in what will be its fortieth year since being established in the autumn of 1980. As always much happens between newsletters and hopefully those of you who have subscribed to receiving interim news by email have been able to keep up to date. For those of you have not, you may do so by following this link to the Fellowship’s website - <https://edward-thomas-fellowship.us6.list-manage.com/subscribe/> - where you can sign-up to receive them.

Your committee are also using the website to let you know of other events that are planned by other organisations that may be of interest. We would really like to hear from you should you become aware of such events so that we may add them to the website – we are keen to make the Edward Thomas Fellowship the ‘go-to’ website for everyone to find out about Edward Thomas and any events that reference him or his work.

There will be more in the following sections of this newsletter about events held in 2019 and those planned for 2020, in the meantime I would like, briefly, to transport you back to the late 1970s.

By then Anne Mallinson, who ran Selborne Bookshop, was in regular correspondence with Myfanwy and, following the centenary weekend programme in 1978, when a record number of people took part, she was prompted into action by the number of enquiries she had received asking if there was an organisation associated with Edward Thomas.

Whilst the annual ‘Birthday Walk’ had been taking place on the first Sunday in March for several years, there had been no formal organisation in place to celebrate and promote the work of Edward Thomas. The walks themselves had been organised by Anne, using her bookshop in Selborne, Hampshire, as the hub. Anne sent what was in effect the first newsletter in February 1979 to those whose address she had asking how people felt about “the formation of an organised group as a natural outcome of this growing fellowship”.

The response must have been positive as by January 1980 Myfanwy was writing the following welcome to prospective members of what was to become the Edward Thomas Fellowship:

“I have been rather dubious about the formation of an Edward Thomas Society – ‘Society’ implying earnest meetings, worried committees, obligatory lectures, coach outings with, with luck and anxious planning, a cream tea at the end. However, the very sound of the word ‘Fellowship’ is at once friendly and with a salty taste, not too solemn or reverential or circumscribed. I agree that there is a need to group together to share the responsibilities outlined in this pamphlet. I’m sure that members of the Edward Thomas Fellowship will themselves provide varied and enjoyable suggestions, helping to look after and perpetuate the things my parents treasured – books, the country and all that is in it, walking, good company and – may I suggest it – sometimes just enjoying solitude.

“Blessings on its beginning and continuance.”

January 1980.

MYFANWY THOMAS”

As I look back on that time forty years ago, I am both honoured and humbled to be the current chair of this wonderful Fellowship and am fully aware of the legacy that I help to hold in trust for current and future generations.

Thank you everyone for your continuing support as members and we look forward to seeing as many of you as possible on the Birthday Walks and at our AGM on March 1st and at our Study Day on June 13th, in which we will also incorporate a small fortieth celebration.

Jeremy Mitchell

The Birthday Walk: 1st March 2020

The Edward Thomas Birthday Walk takes place this year on 1st March. Join us for a fairly strenuous morning walk of some 4.5 miles meeting at Bedales Car Park from 10.00 am for a prompt 10.30am start. This walk will include a climb up the Shoulder of Mutton Hill and a stop at the Edward Thomas Memorial Stone for some readings of his work. This year the chosen theme is 'The Weather' and 'Poems of place around Steep'. Please note that in addition to the steep climb up the Shoulder of Mutton that there are a number of high stiles along the route of the morning walk.

Returning to Steep Village Hall for lunch (bring your own) there is the opportunity to meet other Fellowship members and friends and to purchase books, CDs, cards etc.

In the afternoon there will be a shorter walk of some 2.5 miles again leaving from Bedales Car Park starting at 2.30 p.m. and returning to Steep Church at 3.45 p.m. for refreshments and the Fellowship Annual General Meeting. We very much look forward to seeing you there.

For more information including routes, directions and maps of the day please look for the Edward Thomas Birthday Walk itinerary 2020 on the website. All those participating in the walks do so at their own risk. Please refer to the Health and Safety Procedure for Country Walks page on our website.

Mike Cope

Study Day: 13 June 2020

The 2020 Edward Thomas Fellowship Study Day will take place on Saturday 13 June in Petersfield, Hampshire, in St Peters Church. Tickets will be £20 per head for members and £30 for non-members, with concessions available for those aged 16-25 years. As always there are late changes to programmes, however the broad outline of the day will be as follows:

10:30 for 11:00	Coffee, tea and welcome
11:00 – 11:45	A talk by Dr Guy Cuthbertson
11:45 – 12:15	Break
12:15 – 13:00	A series of poetry readings
13:00 – 14:15	Break for lunch – please bring or buy your own
14:15 – 15:00	A talk by Dr Elizabeth Black
15:00 – 15:15	Break
15:15 – 16:00	A talk by Dr William Wootten
16:00 – 16:15	Close, followed by Refreshments in St Peters Hall

Running alongside the Study Day, Petersfield Museum will be hosting a 'Museum Roadshow' in the nearby St Peter's Hall throughout the day, which attendees are welcome to visit during any of the breaks. As well as highlighting what the newly refurbished Museum will have to offer when it reopens in October 2020, there will be an 'Edward Thomas' theme

attached to many of the activities being run, particularly around creativity and poetry. We hope many attendees will take the opportunity to visit the Roadshow during the day and stay for a cup of tea at the end of the day before the Hall closes at 18:00.

Booking forms for the Study Day will follow by email in February with a newsnote and if you would like a booking form but do not receive newsnotes please let Jeremy Mitchell know on 01730 267214 or 07920 193025, or by writing to Fairlands, Finchmead Lane, Stroud, Petersfield, GU32 3PF.

Jeremy Mitchell

Obituary: Gordon Ottewell 1931 - 2019

On the morning of 11th September 2001 Gordon and I were walking along the Doone Valley on Exmoor. It was a sunny early autumn day. It transpired that Gordon had left his camera where he was staying in Porlock, so we retraced our steps and drove back there to collect it. When we arrived we found the door was wide open, so we went in and the lady of the house said, "Something terrible is happening." She was watching television as the Twin Towers crumbled and collapsed. We watched the dreadful scenes for half an hour, then more soberly returned to the peace of the Doone Valley. Gordon was collecting material for a book he was to write on literary walks in the West Country. He wrote several books on similar themes in different parts of the country. For obvious reasons that day will remain with me, although all days spent with Gordon were memorable, but in more pleasurable ways.

Born in Swanwick, Derbyshire, Gordon's early days were very different. Swanwick then was part countryside and part industrial mining. His father, self-employed in the as a joiner and bulder, subsequently bought some land in the vicinity with the intention of building a house for his family. Unfortunately, his father and mother did not get on well and moved back to the village. This left the land, which became a sort of playground and natural environment for Gordon and his friends. It was here that his lifelong love of the natural world was born. His knowledge was rich, broad and deep.

Leaving school at sixteen without qualifications, he went into the local mines in the surveying team and stayed there for nearly ten years. He wanted to be a writer and after a course in journalism wrote for local newspapers and eventually for The Manchester Guardian. During that period he was encouraged by a local, educated lady to think more broadly about his future; she mentored him and encouraged him, so that eventually he was trained as a teacher in Worcester, spending the remainder of his working life in primary schools: Kingham and Burford in particular.

It was when he became Headmaster of Kingham School in Oxfordshire that he was able to put into practice some of his beliefs about primary school education, partly based on the theories and ideas of the artist engraver, Robin Tanner, who was also a school inspector, and partly on his own ideas about open air education. The school raised and looked after animals, grew vegetables and ran what was almost a small farm. One can talk to middle aged men in Kingham today with vivid memories of school under Gordon. Adult education also became part of his life and he established many courses at various colleges.

While at Kingham, he came across the work of a former resident, W. Warde Fowler, a don at Lincoln College and friend of Edward Thomas. Warde Fowler was a naturalist of distinction and local historian, with whom Thomas occasionally stayed. The link gave Gordon much pleasure and he wrote about Warde Fowler, researching and writing about his life and work.

A modest, quiet and gentle man, Gordon rather hid his vast knowledge and reading, but to those who knew him he was an example and mentor. A couple of years before his death, he was able to travel to the Quantocks for a few days. Despite being crippled and in a wheelchair, he could identify all the birdsong and plants. He is irreplaceable, and those who knew him have treasured memories. We send our condolences to Margaret, his wife and to his family.

Richard Emeny, September 2019

Notes: Gordon's writing includes books about walking and children's fiction as well as autobiographical and educational books. His childhood and time in the Derbyshire pits are recorded in three charming memoirs: *Those Innocent Years*, *Pit Boy* and *Square Peg*. *The Countryside our Classroom* is also autobiographical as well as expressing his views on education. The internet has an interview on Radio Winchcombe Local Live Extra with Gordon, which is excellent and captures the man perfectly.

A tribute to Ernest Gordon Ottewell, 1931-2019

Gordon and I met in December 1988, in the unlikely surroundings of a Government-funded course for people starting their own businesses. I was embarking on a brief spell as a self-employed ecologist, whilst Gordon had just retired from his teaching career and was planning to diversify into publishing and leading walking holidays. Neither of us found the Thatcherite rhetoric of the course easy to take and it was this which drew us together initially, but we were quick to discover that we shared many interests -in birds, botany, walking, countryside writers and cricket- and a valued friendship formed which was to develop over more than thirty years of shared walks and discussions.

Gordon was brought up in the mining village of Swanwick, near Alfreton, and he remained proud of and loyal to his Derbyshire roots, notwithstanding the deep affection he developed for Gloucestershire's landscapes and particularly those of the Cotswolds. On leaving school he went 'down t'pit', training as a mine surveyor at the newly-nationalised local colliery – an experience captured with wit and wisdom in *Square Peg - memoirs of a misfit miner*, his first volume of autobiography published in 2008. If Gordon felt that he wasted the first ten years of his working life, he more than made up for the lost time with the energy and enthusiasm he applied to his subsequent roles as teacher and writer.

In his mid-20s Gordon retrained as a teacher, specialising in primary education, at what is now the University of Worcester. After working at schools in Derbyshire and Staffordshire he secured the headship of Kingham Primary School in Oxfordshire's Evenlode Valley, where he enjoyed the freedom to put into practice his deeply held conviction that young children learn best through an intimate involvement with their local environment – with rewarding results, as described in the second volume of autobiography *The Countryside our Classroom – A Cotswold village school in the 1960s* (2009). The impact of Gordon's teaching methods can be gauged by the fact that several of his former pupils kept in touch with him until the end of his life.

Whilst at Kingham Gordon became familiar with the life and works of William Warde Fowler, a pioneer ornithologist who made Kingham his home for more than fifty years, and championed them by editing *Warde Fowler's Countryside* (1985), a selection of his writings, and writing a biography *Warde Fowler of Kingham – Oxford don and ornithologist* published in 2010.

From Kingham Gordon moved to the headship of Burford Primary School before leaving Oxfordshire for larger schools in Cheltenham. Although he remained an influential figure in local educational circles, as the role of headteacher became increasingly managerial Gordon was frustrated by the constraints imposed by government-inspired regulation and missed hands-on teaching; hence his decision to retire after over thirty years in the profession. But the next thirty-plus years of 'retirement' were to be no less full and no less influential than the previous thirty, as Gordon threw himself into a wide range of projects which touched the lives of many people.

Gordon enjoyed writing from an early age - his initial idea for an escape route from a life underground was to become a journalist, although at the time he imagined himself as a cricket writer in the fashion of his hero Neville Cardus - and for many years was a regular contributor on wildlife and countryside themes to *Cotswold Life* and the *Gloucestershire Echo* (a selection of these articles was published as *A Cotswold Country Diary* in 1989). His first book *Journey from Darkness*, an adventure story for children, was published in 1982, but many more were to follow, including three more stories for children and seventeen books of walks – most of them focused on Gloucestershire, but also featuring Derbyshire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Somerset and Wiltshire.

Gordon's last book, published in 2017, was the final volume of his autobiographical trilogy. *Those Innocent Years*, tales of his Derbyshire boyhood in the 1930s and 40s, was a slimmer volume than *Square Peg* and *The Countryside our Classroom*, but its production was a considerable achievement, requiring great tenacity on the author's part as his determination to see it published overcame his failing health.

If researching, writing and sometimes publishing books (under the 'Barn Owl Books' imprint) kept Gordon busy, he found time to do much more besides. He was a regular and popular speaker on countryside subjects to local Women's Institutes, which led to an invitation to teach courses at Denman, the WI's college in Oxfordshire. Gordon became a popular fixture at Denman and found teaching there very rewarding. Perhaps because of his own unorthodox path into education, he was mindful that for the women attending his courses a week at Denman could be a rare and precious opportunity and determined to make their experience as enjoyable and worthwhile as possible. For several years Gordon also taught residential courses at Urchfont Manor, an adult education centre in Wiltshire sadly now closed.

Gordon and his family moved to the historic Cotswold town of Winchcombe in the early 1980s. Inevitably Gordon became a well-known figure in the local community, through his talks, guided walks and more recently his contributions to Radio Winchcombe. Gordon was a natural for the radio, which provided an ideal platform for his wit and story-telling ability and produced a memorable collection of programmes ranging from monologues through poetry to celebrations of birdsong. Gordon's warmth, humour and fascination with people and places shone through his broadcasts, as they did through so many facets of his rich life.

The bedrock of that life - as he was quick to acknowledge - was Margaret, whom he met in 1949 and married in 1957, his constant support and companion.

I hope that this brief account of Gordon's life is of interest to members of the Edward Thomas Fellowship who may not have known him outside that capacity. I know that Gordon was very proud of having been a member of the Fellowship since its foundation in 1980 and derived great pleasure from his participation in and contribution to its activities.

Simon Barker

“Two Roads Converge”

A joint study day with the John Clare Society and the Edward Thomas Fellowship

On Saturday 21st September 2019 around 60 members of the Edward Thomas Fellowship and the John Clare Society and guests gathered at Helpston Village Hall near Peterborough for our much anticipated joint study day.

A study day comparing and contrasting the lives and works of these two great writers seemed like an obvious and natural thing to do. So much so, that although I can't remember who first proposed organising such an event, I do remember clearly that no-one asked 'why'?

Like any study day it took a great deal of organising and I would like to pay tribute to my co-conspirator Noel Crack of the John Clare Society committee, who did such a brilliant job of organising everything at the Helpston end in particular, as well as hosting our many get-togethers and helping to give shape to the whole event.

As members will recognise, the title chosen for the day 'Two Roads Converge' is an inversion of the first three lines of Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*. During the day we wanted to explore points of convergence but also divergence in the lives, concerns and work of two of Britain's best-loved poets.

It might seem that the most obvious similarity between the two is that they both valued and wrote a great deal about the countryside. The most obvious difference their personal backgrounds and circumstances. However, as I was to discover, there was a great deal more to say about them both than just that!

We asked each of our three speakers to explore one 'journey' undertaken by both Clare and Thomas. Dr. Sam Ward of Nottingham Trent University spoke about their 'life journeys'. Dr. Erica MacAlpine of Oxford University addressed their 'landscape journeys' and Dr. Erin Lafford of Derby University their poetic journeys.

I think everyone who attended would agree that our three speakers were excellent. Our principal aim was that all who attended would leave with a curiosity to find out even more about the 'other' writer and we hope that aim was achieved. Speaking for myself, what I took away from the day was an enhanced sense of the magical way in which both writers seemed

to be able to establish a strong sense of their own personal presence in the poetic landscapes they created. That, I decided, must be one of the reasons that I find their work so engaging and vital.

As well as our three speakers the afternoon began with a session in which members of the Fellowship and the John Clare Society paired up to discuss particular poems by both writers. The intention had been for the pairs to reform on three occasions during the hour but those taking part seemed so engrossed, this didn't need to happen!

Many thanks are due to all who helped with the organisation of the day as well as all those who attended and the John Clare Society for making us feel so welcome.

For those who were unable to attend, the text of the talks delivered by two of our three speakers appear below.

David Kerslake

Excavating the future

Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas: a spiritual affinity in poetry and prose

When Edward Thomas wrote his biography of Richard Jefferies (published in 1909) he was paying homage to a writer who had influenced him, at the deepest level, from childhood onwards. We should beware of over-simplifying the complexities of literary influence – shared concerns do not necessarily imply the direct passage of ideas from an older to a younger writer. But it's clear that Jefferies's works played a crucial role in Thomas's intellectual and imaginative development, and that Thomas's admiration for his predecessor constituted a form of filial devotion. When he discussed his early reading in the memoir posthumously published as *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, he accorded Jefferies an importance allowed to no other writer mentioned in that context.

While still at school, Thomas tells us, he had “begun to write accounts of [his] walks in an approach as near as possible to the style of Jefferies”. One of his earliest publications, printed in the *New Age* when he was barely eighteen, was an essay titled “In the Footprints of Richard Jefferies”, in which he guides the reader from Swindon station out through the town to the landscapes that figure so prominently in Jefferies's work. It's a palpably immature piece of writing but there is no doubt as to its high aspirations, and no mistaking the debt to Jefferies's descriptions of the natural world:

Pale wind anemones spangle the slopes and hedgemounds, and the violet hides amid the herbage growing about the stately ash trees and far-spreading oaks. In June, about the open glades grown with sweet turf and bracken, we have seen the ghostly nightjar wheel, and the

kestrel hover in his mid-day course. On the opposite side of Burderop, and well known to all the country-side, is Ladder Hill, with its steep primrose-dappled inclines and grass carpets pranked with exquisite bird's-foot lotus, whose beauties Jefferies so eloquently celebrates.

A decade later Thomas submitted to the short-lived periodical *Temple Bar* a considerably more substantial article on Jefferies, one that strongly suggests he was already preparing the way for a full-length biography. In particular, we see him implicitly providing a rationale for a new account – the work to which he would formally commit himself just over a year later, in May 1907:

in reading any one of [Jefferies's] books I have always had a sense of a man behind it, of a man whom to know would be to set a higher value than ever upon his work In the end, readers should come to have an admiration for the personality of Jefferies which it is not a simple matter to trace; and in its turn this admiration will compel them to set a value upon his ordinary work which is sometimes not easily to be justified. Certainly, this sense of Jefferies' personality is not due to anything I have read by other men about his life.

At the same time the article reinforces our sense of the closeness with which, from childhood onwards, Thomas had followed in Jefferies's footsteps, and of the influence exerted by the older writer on his youthful imagination:

Among the earliest things which I can remember well is the North Wiltshire country, and the satisfaction of feeling that it was the country of Richard Jefferies Several years passed before I could believe that he was dead, and I remember thinking that a tall, lean man who ran well with the V. W. H. [Vale of the White Horse] hounds – he had a glorious view halloo – was Jefferies, though that was as late as 1892. I expected to see him as a man might expect to see Pan in Arcadia.

The imaginative relationship begun in childhood persisted into Thomas's later life, influencing his poems as well as his mature prose. The Thomas scholar Edna Longley plausibly suggests a connection between the opening lines of "The Penny Whistle" ("The new moon hangs like an ivory bugle / In the naked frosty blue") and a sentence from Jefferies's *The Life of the Fields* ("The curved moon hung on the sky as the hunter's horn on the wall"), as well as between "Tears" – in which Thomas speaks of the tears elicited by the sight of "soldiers in line" – and a passage in *The Story of My Heart*, Jefferies's "spiritual autobiography": "sometimes to watch troops marching in rhythmic order, undulating along the column as the feet are lifted, brings tears in my eyes".

There are other notable correspondences. The opening phrase of "The sun used to shine" is a repetition, in a remarkably similar context, of a key phrase from Jefferies's essay "My Old Village", while Jefferies's lament (in a letter now lost but reported by Thomas) that "while, a few days ago, he could walk thirty miles, now he can scarcely take thirty steps" is adapted and amplified in Thomas's "Health":

Four miles at a leap, over the dark hollow land,
To the frosted steep of the down and its junipers black,
Travels my eye with equal ease and delight:
And scarce could my body leap four yards.

Correspondences of this kind do not necessarily imply conscious borrowing, but it's

significant that in each of these four examples the relevant passage from Jefferies features in Thomas's biography of him. Whether the question is one of direct influence or a general affinity may not always be clear, but no careful reading of Thomas's writings alongside those of Jefferies could miss the essential closeness. It's not simply that the two writers gravitate towards the same subjects, but that their approach to those subjects is often strikingly similar. Writing of the countryside and its inhabitants, human and non-human, both men display a multi-dimensional awareness of the world they describe – a consciousness of its sharply observed details as representative of larger patterns, social, historical, geographical and geological.

Thomas's readings of rural landscape were in part an archaeological exercise; an examination of the layers laid down by successive generations as they led their everyday lives or were caught up in the larger progress of their nation's history. "It is a battlefield", he wrote in *The South Country*, "and the earth shows the scars of its old wounds; or a castle or cathedral of distinct renown rises among the oaks; or a manor house or cottage, or tomb or woodland walk that speaks of a dead poet or soldier." He sifts the land with an archaeologist's eye for meaningful detail, offering the earth's hoarded relics – "skull and weapon and shroudpin and coin and carven stone" – as objects for fruitful contemplation. Landscape is explicitly presented as an endlessly rich, if largely arcane, text. "If we but knew or cared", he observes, "every swelling of the grass, every wavering line of hedge or path or road were an inscription, brief as an epitaph, in many languages and characters."

But Thomas's archaeologies, like those of Jefferies, had a dimension beyond the historical. For Jefferies, conventional chronologies seem always to have been alien: "Existence is continuous and knows no break", he wrote in a posthumously published autobiographical fragment, "and what is meant by dates I could never grasp". What Thomas referred to as Jefferies's "mystic consciousness" finds its fullest expression in *The Story of My Heart*, a work largely dedicated to the tracing of the timeless in the temporal. There Jefferies refines and elaborates the idea of temporal continuity, feeling his way back into the life of the occupant of the prehistoric tumulus he habitually visits, and letting that life infuse his own: "As my thought could slip back the twenty centuries in a moment to the forest-days when he hurled the spear, or shot with the bow, hunting the deer, and could return again as swiftly to this moment, so his spirit could endure from then till now, and the time was nothing". "In truth", he says in "Nature and Eternity",

there is no time at all. The mind loses the sense of time and reposes in eternity. This hour, this instant is eternity Only by walking hand in hand with nature, only by a reverent and loving study of the mysteries for ever around us, is it possible to disabuse the mind of the narrow view, the contracted belief that time is now and eternity to-morrow. Eternity is to-day.

The more mystical aspects of Thomas's reflections on time are not, of course, attributable simply to the influence of Jefferies: both men were treading ground mapped out over many centuries by visionaries from a range of different cultures, and both seem also to have had relevant personal experience to draw on. Even so, it's not difficult to pick up the echoes of Jefferies's voice in a passage such as this, from *The South Country*:

How little do we know of the business of the earth, not to speak of the universe; of time, not to speak of eternity The rumour of much toil and scheming and triumph may never reach the stars, and what we value not at all, are not conscious of, may break the surface of eternity

with endless ripples of good . . . That maid walking so proudly is about the business of eternity.

The South Country was published in 1909, the year that also saw the publication of *Richard Jefferies* and *The Hills and the Vale*, Thomas's edition of previously unpublished essays by Jefferies. In his introduction to the latter Thomas focuses strongly on Jefferies's mysticism, reinforcing his own observations with quotation from William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and from *Cosmic Consciousness* by Richard Maurice Bucke, a study of mystical experience which contains specific reference to Jefferies. In Jefferies's later years, says Thomas, "the light which he had carried about with him since his youth . . . leaped up with a mystic significance", irradiating the best of his work, including a number of the essays collected in *The Hills and the Vale*.

Jefferies's fluid and complex understanding of time certainly informs Thomas's "February Afternoon" – though it should be added that knowledge of the poem also shadows and complicates our reading of Jefferies's meditations on time and timelessness, inviting us to think in terms of sympathetic resonance rather than of sound and echo. Written in February 1916, the poem acknowledges the war for which Thomas had already enlisted and in which, a little over a year later, he would be killed, but its hints of present disruption are subsumed in a broader vision of continuity:

Men heard this roar of parleying starlings, saw,
A thousand years ago even as now,
Black rooks with white gulls following the plough
So that the first are last until a caw
Commands that last are first again, – a law
Which was of old when one, like me, dreamed how
A thousand years might dust lie on his brow
Yet thus would birds do between hedge and shaw.

From his twentieth-century vantage point the observer looks back across 1,000 years to examine the temporal space occupied by a shadowy predecessor who is himself dreaming of a future 1,000 years after his own death; more than this, the dreamer is recognized as witness to a law already ancient in his own lifetime. And the vision is further complicated by intimations of a future lying as far beyond the observer's immediate vantage point as the poem's present moment lies beyond the dreamer's: that deftly inserted "like me" opens up a prospect as dizzying as the more explicitly defined retrospect.

Whatever it shares with Jefferies's work in conceptual terms, the poem has a stylistic poise which was arguably beyond Jefferies. The fluidity of Thomas's vision finds its perfect correlative and expression in a complex syntax which draws together past, present and future in a single sinuous sentence. Memory and precognition are indissolubly linked. This is a recurrent feature of Thomas's poetry, but nowhere is that linkage more darkly intimated than in "Old Man". Contemplating the bitter herb of the poem's title, the thinker threads a frustrating maze of half-definitions before homing in on the image of his daughter plucking the herb's leaves and sniffing her scented fingers. "Not a word she says", he continues,

And I can only wonder how much hereafter
She will remember, with that bitter scent,

Of garden rows, and ancient damson-trees
Topping a hedge, a bent path to a door,
A low thick bush beside the door, and me
Forbidding her to pick.

As the lines pattern out a trajectory in which the thinker's present becomes another mind's remembered (or unrememberable) past in an imagined (or unimaginable) future, they amplify the significance of the frustrated quest for meaning, and prepare the way for the poem's disquieting close:

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet never can, remember:
No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush
Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;
Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

It's not only because of our knowledge of Thomas's life – and death – that we register, in the thinker's contemplation of that dark vista, a faint premonitory shiver. Although the endless perspective is ostensibly a retrospect, the clues to a more ambiguous reading are there in the poem itself – in the earlier projection of the narrative into a future in which the thinker has become a fragment of his daughter's remembered past, as well as in the obsessive play on other forms of ambiguity. And when we place the poem among others – “February Afternoon”, “Rain”, or “The New House”, in which a house and its occupant are more unambiguously haunted by the future – it becomes still more obvious that its veiled complexities are aspects of a meditation on time no less profound than the meditations of Jefferies, and altogether more subtle in its expression.

If the sympathetic resonances are there in the art, they are also – and perhaps more mysteriously – present in the lives of the two writers. It was not knowledge of Jefferies's writings, but a family connection, that brought Thomas, as a child, to within walking distance of Jefferies's boyhood home. Holidaying in his grandmother's house in Swindon and exploring the countryside around, Thomas found early inspiration in the very landscapes that had played such a formative role in his predecessor's intellectual and spiritual development. And there is an odd congruence in the shape of the two men's lives – not just in their closely matching spans (Thomas's the longer by a bare four months) but also in the creative intensity of their last few years.

In his biography of Jefferies, Thomas described the delayed emergence of his subject's visionary genius in these terms: “For a long time Jefferies must have been imperfectly conscious of the meaning of his mystic communion with Nature. It was as a deep pool that slowly fills with an element so clear that it is unnoticed until it overflows. It overflowed, and Jefferies wrote *The Story of My Heart* in a passion”. The slow gathering, the late, unprecedented spate as the constraints are breached: as a metaphor for Jefferies's artistic development the image is certainly apt, but few readers familiar with the story of Thomas's life will fail to register the extent to which it applies to him as well. In 1909, more than five years before the start of the two-year outpouring of poetry that represents his creative

fulfilment, Thomas's excavation and rearticulation of Jefferies's life has revealed the pattern of his own future.

Much has been made of the influence of Robert Frost on Thomas's development as a poet, and rightly so: Frost's example and encouragement played a major role in the self-discovery of those last years. But the influence of Jefferies certainly ran deeper, and it would, moreover, be a mistake to assume that, in turning to verse, Thomas was somehow distancing himself from that influence. When Frost told Thomas that "he was writing as good poetry as anybody alive, but in prose form where it did not declare itself and gain him recognition", he was identifying in his friend's prose the very qualities that Thomas had previously identified in *The Story of My Heart*:

The book is a poem; I had almost said a piece of music. The ideas rise up and fall, lose their outlines, and, resurgent again, have not fulfilled their whole purpose until the full-charged silence of the conclusion. Prose has rarely reached such a length . . . and yet retained this absolute, more than logical, unity, such a complex consistency of moods that now shake the cliffs and now cannot loosen the dew from the flower of the grass.

That certain kinds of prose might aspire to the condition of poetry was a lesson Thomas had learned from Jefferies long before he met Frost; Frost's task was to persuade him that the best of his own prose (he instanced *In Pursuit of Spring*) possessed a lyric force comparable to that of Jefferies's visionary writings. It might be added that in describing the prose of the last four essays in *The Hills and the Vale* in late 1909 Thomas would again invoke a musical analogy ("like a theme of music, always a repetition, and yet never exactly the same") before going on to characterize the cadences of one of them, "The Dawn", as "gentle, wistful, not quite certain". This is an apt description of Jefferies's mature style, certainly, but no less apt a description of the voice of Thomas's as yet unwritten poetry.

Jem Poster

The Times Literary Supplement No. 6011 (June 15 2018) pp.18-19. Reprinted with permission.

'I should want nothing more': Edward Thomas and Simplicity

GUY CUTHBERTSON

Chatterton Lecture on Poetry read 1 November 2018

In the decade or so before the First World War, simplicity became somewhat fashionable—indeed it was a religion for some. This craze is captured rather wonderfully in the Edwardian hit musical *The Arcadians* (1909), where the central character is given the name 'Simplicitas', idyllic Arcady is recreated in London at a successful new health food restaurant and men are 'keen as a knife / On the Simple life'.¹ Although some might want it otherwise, Edward Thomas was part of this atmosphere. He sought simplicity as a way of life and a way of

¹ Wimperis (1909: 147).

writing. Edmund Blunden referred to him as ‘the interesting literary labourer, the simple-lifer, Edward Thomas’.² As a critic, Thomas greatly admired simplicity; and his own poetry is simple. And his simplicity is popular today. But this simplicity is challenging, especially to universities, where complexity tends to be preferred; and there have been efforts to dig up some difficulty, to portray Thomas’s work as more complex than it really is, seeing the simplicity as merely superficial. Great poetry does not have to be difficult. And simplicity isn’t easily achieved. To quote Apple’s Steve Jobs (someone who contributed to a recent reawakened interest in simplicity), ‘Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple’.³ C.F.G. Masterman observed in *The Condition of England* (1909) that ‘Simplicity in writing, or in character, is as difficult of attainment as it is worth the attaining’.⁴ Thomas’s life is the story of that struggle and its achievement is his poetry.

The Simple Life

By 1914, Holbrook Jackson could speak of ‘the Renaissance of Simplicity’.⁵ Reviewing *Georgian Poetry* in 1912, Edward Thomas said the volume ‘brings out with great cleverness many sides of the modern love of the simple and primitive, as seen in children, peasants, savages, early men, animals, and Nature in general’.⁶ There was a radical and socialist dimension – so Robert Blatchford’s popular rustic-socialist text *Merrie England* (1893) opens with the quotation ‘We are lovers of the beautiful, yet simple in our tastes, and we cultivate the mind without loss of manliness’⁷ – but, for many Edwardians, the rejection of modern urban life in favour of the simple life meant health foods, fresh air, innocence, country dancing, country walks and country cottages. Thomas certainly saw some of the foolishness in this fashion, especially when the simple life acquired capital letters and attracted a certain kind of crank, an eccentric bourgeois faddist– the kind of Simple Lifer one would have found in Letchworth, a place ‘like so many wounds on the earth and so much sticking-plaster’, a place Thomas is unimpressed by,⁸ and tries to avoid, in his book *The Icknield Way* (1913):

On the right two paths went off to some of the new houses of the Letchworth Garden City, and to a building gigantically labelled ‘IDRIS.’ This was, I suppose, the temple of this city’s god, though the name, except as the Welsh equivalent for Arthur, was unknown to me. They say now that Arthur was a solar hero, and when in doubt men

² Blunden (1958).

³ Isaacson (2012).

⁴ Masterman (1909: 77).

⁵ Jackson (1914: 464).

⁶ Thomas (1913), a review of *Georgian Poetry, 1911–1912*, *The Daily Chronicle*, 14 January. Cardiff scrap-book 6.

⁷ Thucydides, cited by Blatchford (1894: 11).

⁸ Thomas (1913a: 125).

might do worse than to worship the sun, if they could discover how. At Letchworth they were endeavouring to do so. The sun was not benign or even merciful in return for these efforts. He responded by telling the truth with his most brilliant beams, so that the city resembled a caravan of bathing machines, except that there was no sea and the machines could not conveniently be moved.⁹

‘Idris & co’ were in fact ‘mineral water manufacturers’. Thomas hurries through the forlorn roads of Letchworth. This was a place of mineral water and sun-worship, and educated gentlemen in monastic smocks and sandals. He disliked the sandal-wearers’ conscious, contrived return to nature and their idea of the countryside: sensing the market, he wryly proposed a book to his agent as ‘an impression of rural England, leaving out red brick, murals, advertisements & liver pills & real life generally, but making much of maypoles & woad costumes & the like’.¹⁰ In Letchworth, the song on his mind was ‘She’s off with the wraggle-taggle gypsies, oh!’, a song about a rich woman running away with the gypsies, which is a comically inappropriate song for Letchworth, even though it might represent one of the fantasies of its residents:¹¹

What care I for a goose-feather bed?
With the sheet turned down so bravely, O!
For to-night I shall sleep in a cold open field
Along with the raggle-taggle gypsies, O!

Nonetheless, it is also true that some of those arty hygienic middle-class types were his friends: at times, he was practically one of them, a dabbler in vegetarianism for some time, unafraid of nut cutlets and spinach sprinkled with plasmon powder, a frequenter of a ‘simple life’ restaurant like the one in *The Arcadians*, an admirer of Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, a worshipper of the open air, and a lover of folk-songs, sea shanties and the wraggle-taggle gypsies. His contemporary and fellow poet, T. Sturge Moore, saw him as a prose writer who was marching behind a banner that had the ‘heraldic picture of *Simple Life Returning*’ blazoned on it;¹² a prose writer who was enthusiastic for deep country ancientness:

in a general sense one would imagine that his birth vexed him because it had not befallen in a pastoral age, in Arcady, in Ireland when Cuchulain was about or in the Middle Ages when the oldest of existing barns was building. This soul, we say as we

⁹ Thomas (1913a: 124).

¹⁰ Durham, Durham University Library, Abbott Literary Manuscripts, MS ABL 307 (letter to Cazenove), f. 1r.

¹¹ Thomas (1913a: 126).

¹² Moore (1920: 79).

read, must have chafed against modern circumstance. Union with nature, between man and the most essential conditions of his life, such as that supposed to have been achieved in far-off times and places, has a true ideal value; it does correspond to a profound and rational aspiration.¹³

Like Kenneth Grahame in *The Wind in the Willows* (published the year before *The Arcadians*), while lyrically singing simplicity's praises he also laughs a little at the cultish pursuit of it, represented for Grahame by Toad's gypsy caravan - Toad is 'by no means so rapturous about the simplicity of the primitive life' once he learns how much work is involved.¹⁴ A review by Thomas in 1905 moaning about simple-lifers and the escape to the country - 'a cunning search for simplicity' in 'an age that is not at all simple' - is a characteristic piece of self-criticism.¹⁵

Thomas's simplicity is, we might say, simpler, more down to earth, more unaffected than the capitalised Simple Life. Thomas knew that it wasn't about how you dress: even though he wore the countryman's tweeds he said that 'a man with a hard hat, black clothes and a malacca cane may be a good deal simpler and more at home with natural things than a hairy hygienic gentleman'.¹⁶ But simplicity was a fundamental part of his life. From London, the city where he was born in 1878 (what he called his accidental cockney nativity), Thomas escaped to the countryside to live simply - not as a tramp, but without some of the bourgeois aspirations that his father had had for him. He would not take up the lucrative professional career in London that a man of St Paul's and Lincoln College, Oxford, could expect. As for many, simplicity was a choice, a form of escape.

In 1897, as a 19-year-old, he told his future wife, Helen, that his ideal was 'ingenuousness': he said that in his young years 'in spite of everything, I was purer because really ingenuous and not as now only contriving ingenuousness and recognising it as an ideal'.¹⁷ The first line of R. George Thomas's little book on Thomas in 1972 was the statement that 'Edward Thomas was a writer of unusual complexity and innate simplicity',¹⁸ which, as a description of the man (rather than his writing), is probably accurate enough. Simplicity didn't necessarily always come naturally; but he loved those to whom it did. Thus when, as a married man, he briefly fell for a teenager, he was attracted to her simplicity, her innocence, her 'animal kindness & rudeness of extraordinary beauty'.¹⁹ In the story 'The

¹³ Moore (1920: 80).

¹⁴ Grahame (2010: 22).

¹⁵ Thomas (1905), a review of five books, including *Ellan Vannin* by Harrold Johnson, *The Daily Chronicle*, 30 August. Cardiff scrapbook 2.

¹⁶ Thomas (1912a: 247).

¹⁷ Thomas (2000: 3).

¹⁸ R. George Thomas (1972: 1).

¹⁹ New York, Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, MS 'Field Notes' (80 holograph notebooks 1895-1915), notebook 22, 'Ashford vi-vii.08', p. 32r.

Fountain' he praised that girl's purity and 'dark simplicity'.²⁰

Thomas sent his children to the progressive Bedales School, and his wife worked there – the country pursuits and practicality of bourgeois Bedales was an antidote to the usual bookish artificiality of education.²¹ They chose to live in Steep, a Hampshire village of Simple Lifers – Helen described these folk: they read *The Guardian*, were 'moderate in all things', they were teetotal vegetarians, 'Their simple oak furniture was made by skilled craftsmen, and their curtains were hand-woven'.²² Edward and Helen lived like that, even though, according to Helen, 'the genuine simplicity of our life' contrasted with 'the thought-out simplicity of the school people'.²³ He had learnt carpentry, making 'the simpler sorts of things'.²⁴ We find him writing that

I don't like London. [...] I am elated at the prospect of getting back, especially as in the Spring a friend who has bought 20 or 30 acres at the top of the hill (and built himself a house & a workshop – he is an old Bedales boy & makes furniture) is going to build us a house up there²⁵

Like the Arcadians, he didn't care for 'London's hubbubs, / And the seething of the subbubs',²⁶ or for very much of modern life. He was happier with the simple life, and was excited by his Arts and Crafts house (although its newness and location ultimately proved disappointing). Suffering from depression, and from what he identified as self-consciousness ('that way will always lie misery, dissatisfaction, imperfection, perhaps "tragedy" or tragic farce rather'),²⁷ the pursuit of simplicity was in part a response to his anxieties and restlessness, as it was for others, although for him simplicity was more than just a fad or the latest cure. He associated simplicity with purity, beauty, dignity, peace, naturalness, honesty, strength, feeling, liberty, fairness, and goodness.

The word 'simple' is almost a refrain in *The South Country* (1909) and *The Heart of England* (1906). In *The South Country* he also declares that 'I prefer any country church or chapel to Winchester or Chichester or Canterbury Cathedral, just as I prefer "All around my hat," or "Somerset is icumen in," to Beethoven'²⁸ – a statement that is in fact a rather powerful

²⁰ Thomas (1910a: 140).

²¹ Badley (1923).

²² Helen Thomas (1990: 111).

²³ Helen Thomas (1990: 125).

²⁴ Helen Thomas (1990: 100).

²⁵ Thomas (1968: 170). The Bedales old boy was Geoffrey Lupton.

²⁶ Wimperis (1909: 113).

²⁷ Thomas (1968: 90).

²⁸ Thomas (1909b: 4).

and radical rejection of high culture in favour of the popular and vernacular, a rejection of the metropolitan in favour of the parochial, a rejection of the German in favour of the English, and a rejection of complexity (orchestral and architectural) in favour of simplicity. A review by Walter de la Mare of Thomas's *Rest and Unrest* in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1910 noted 'the love of all things simple and pure and childlike', and how 'in every one of these stories it is simplicity, whether of innocence or of wisdom, that most attracts him'.²⁹ The writers he most admired, from Thomas Traherne to W.H. Davies, were writers he associated with simple living and a simple outlook. Davies, finding in nature his 'thoughts as pure and simple as the large eyes of cows',³⁰ lived 'a life so quiet, full and simple'³¹ – 'the man himself is extraordinary, for he is so simple'.³² William Morris, one of Thomas's true heroes, had called for 'Simplicity of life, begetting simplicity of taste', and wanted 'simplicity everywhere, in the palace as well as in the cottage'.³³ Henry David Thoreau was another hero – in 1896 Thomas described Thoreau as his favourite author (with a question mark). Thoreau was the prophet of simplicity, who in *Walden* (1854) told us to simplify because our life is frittered away by detail. We get a distorted sense of Thomas's literary interests from the books that he wrote, which were the books that he could get a book deal for: he didn't write a book on Thoreau, but more than once he proposed one to his agent, C.F. Cazenove. Thoreau, John Ruskin, George Borrow and Richard Jefferies, those writers who encouraged E.M. Forster's Leonard Bast to escape out of London into the countryside, were also Thomas's writers.³⁴

What Thomas wanted was the relationship with simplicity that he describes in his book on George Borrow: Borrow is at home with 'the fortunate simple yeomen, or careless poor men, or noble savages, or untradesmanlike fishermen, or unromanized *Germani*, or animals who do not fret about their souls'; Borrow 'mingles with them as one almost on an equality with them, though his melancholy or his book knowledge is at times something of a foil'.³⁵ Thomas was at times concerned that the simple life might be out of reach. Reviewing W.H. Hudson's *A Shepherd's Life* (1910), Thomas noted that 'in addition to the sympathy with old simple things he has the contrasting power of feeling them poignantly from without and interpreting them for those who must always remain without'.³⁶ Thomas's own writing

²⁹ de la Mare (1910: 82).

³⁰ Thomas (1914), a review of *Nature* by W. H. Davies, publication unknown, May. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

³¹ Thomas (1981a: 92).

³² Thomas (2004: 84).

³³ Morris (2008: 83).

³⁴ Cuthbertson (2005a: 87-9).

³⁵ Thomas (1912a: 319).

³⁶ Thomas (1910), a review of *A Shepherd's Life: Impressions of the South Wiltshire Downs* by W. H. Hudson, *The Morning Post*, 26 September. Cardiff scrapbook 5.

includes a number of men who have tried to flee modernity, book knowledge and the middle-classes, but they can't become simple peasants even if they quit a London office for the life of the fields. His character called Hawthornden, a self-portrait of a kind, lives in the countryside, loves Borrow, admires tramps and wants gypsy adventures. Hawthornden despises literary criticism too: 'it seemed to him absurd that the writing class should not only produce books, but circulate its opinion of them' and he wants 'no middleman between art and himself as a human being'.³⁷ But he can't escape his middle-class existence. Hawthornden had 'continued to sigh for the simple antique attitudes of the emotions in their liberty',³⁸ and 'tried simplicity for a while, but this also meant a new outlay, and he was soon unfaithful'.³⁹ He is always home for tea. Hawthornden achieves simplicity in the end, unwittingly, when he dies in his attempt to find the gypsy life. That death gives him that final release from his bookish bourgeois propriety – if it isn't a simple life that he attains, then it is a simple death.

A Simple Writing Style

Thomas also made efforts to simplify his writing style. He had written that 'just as, in thinking about life, we cry out for a return to Nature and her beneficent simplicity, so we are apt to cry out for a return to simplicity in literature'.⁴⁰ As a book reviewer and biographer he often praised simple prose. Yet despite his own love of simplicity his younger self had developed a prose style that was artificial and elaborate. Violet Scott-James thought so, writing in *The Yorkshire Post* in 1932 that 'He is an Oxford scholar too lately "down": describing *The Heart of England* she highlighted that 'In the enveloping warmth of an August afternoon, the only two satisfying places to him are a willowy pool in a deep shade, and – the Bodleian Library'.⁴¹ In 1905 he told Gordon Bottomley that

Short things are all I have energy both to conceive & to extrude. Here, e.g. is a suburban one. It is at least simple – a virtue so unusual in me that perhaps I exaggerate its merit here.⁴²

And to Edward Garnett, Thomas said in 1909 that

You are unjust in your view of what you call 'literary' phrases that 'smell of the lamp'. Such phrases however bad come to me without thinking or seeking. It is your

³⁷ Thomas (1911a: 119).

³⁸ Thomas (1911a: 121).

³⁹ Thomas (1911a: 125).

⁴⁰ Thomas (1905), a review of five books, including *Ellan Vannin* by Harrold Johnson, *The Daily Chronicle*, 30 August. Cardiff scrapbook 2.

⁴¹ Scott-James (1932).

⁴² Thomas (1968: 94).

‘simple & direct’ phrases that I have to seek for.⁴³

But the review of *Rest and Unrest* by Walter de la Mare in 1910 saw ‘a pure delicate prose’ - ‘set down as directly and simply as words allow’.⁴⁴ That year, Thomas remarked of another writer that ‘he may very likely write much better when he gives up trying to write well’.⁴⁵ Violet Scott-James observed that Thomas ‘became simpler, more mellow, less fastidious, less conscious of himself as a man of letters striving to interpret natural scenes’.⁴⁶

In his book on Borrow in 1912, Thomas said that Borrow could not resist William Cobbett’s ‘plain living and plain thinking, or his sentences that are like acts—like blows or strides’.⁴⁷ He sought plainness. The word ‘plain’ became important – it was a word at the heart of the Arts and Crafts Movement and hygienic simple living, but Thomas became devoted to it as he worked on Pater, Cobbett and Borrow after 1910. Plain living, plain thinking, plain style. It was a word that expressed sincerity, a lack of humbug, and a vernacular clarity. Cobbett’s sentences ‘express a plain thought or feeling as clearly and swiftly as the flash of an eye or a bang of the fist on a table’.⁴⁸ He admired how Borrow and Cobbett believed in writing without thinking about words, putting down thoughts just as they come – the clarity of their writing reflected their ‘plain thinking’, their lack of self-consciousness. This was at a time when Thomas’s self-consciousness was being treated by Godwin Baynes, an extreme example of the simple lifer, a back-to-the-land neo-pagan and folk-singer. In Thomas’s book on Walter Pater in 1913, Thomas contrasts ‘inspired simplicity and crystal clearness’ with the ‘over-consciousness of culture’: ‘It is not clear how perfect culture can ever equal the genius of simplicity’. Pater was not advancing towards ‘this direct simplicity’, Thomas says; but we sense that Thomas was.⁴⁹

A review of Thomas’s prose in 1948 noticed that ‘on the whole, Thomas’s development in prose was towards a more simple style’.⁵⁰ The posthumously published *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* (1938) and its close relation, the unfinished ‘Fiction’, which describes itself as ‘this plain record’,⁵¹ would be evidence of this. One of Thomas’s responses to his self-consciousness had been a decision to focus not on his present but on his past: in

⁴³ Thomas (1981b: 12).

⁴⁴ de la Mare (1910: 82).

⁴⁵ Thomas (1910), a review of *An Outdoor Breviary* by M. Jourdain, *The Daily Chronicle*, 1 August. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

⁴⁶ Scott-James (1932).

⁴⁷ Thomas (1912a: 8).

⁴⁸ Thomas (1912b: ix).

⁴⁹ Thomas (1913b: 73-4).

⁵⁰ Anon (1948).

⁵¹ Thomas (2011a: 303).

The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans (1913),⁵² *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* and 'Fiction' he turned from a self-conscious present to the easier world of his childhood. A plain style went with a less self-conscious time, as it did in Thomas's book for children, *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds* (1915).⁵³ Rhetoric was the beast, as he put it, and he was intent on killing it, by wringing the beast's neck. On 22 May 1914, he stated that 'now I am again working hard, mostly at uncalled for little Welsh pictures, of a plain perhaps lucid kind, in my later manner, if it is a manner'.⁵⁴ And on 14 August 1914 he was considering, he said, 'turning plain reporter and giving unvarnished reports'.⁵⁵

Plain Poetry

When Edward Thomas became friends with Robert Frost he found in his work a kind of simplicity that he could understand and love. Thomas had said in *Walter Pater* that 'It is the last thing that many writers would think of, to write as they speak',⁵⁶ but when Thomas reviewed *North of Boston* in *The New Weekly* in August 1914, he admired 'all its tame common words, straightforward constructions, and innumerable perfectly normal lines'.⁵⁷ 'Common', 'straightforward', 'normal'. This was ordinary language, often colloquial and idiomatic, brought onto the page as great poetry. Thomas said of Frost's poetry that 'Extraordinary things have not been sought for'.⁵⁸ In another review of *North of Boston*, in August 1914, he said that 'The language ranges from a never vulgar colloquialism to brief moments of heightened and intense simplicity'.⁵⁹ A year later, when he was sent the poem 'The Road Not Taken', Thomas noted 'the simple words and unemphatic rhythms'.⁶⁰

As one reviewer noted in 1915, 'The best poetry of the present day is simple poetry'.⁶¹ Thomas too had repeatedly, as a reviewer, applauded simplicity in poetry. W.H. Davies's is 'simple and passionate';⁶² it is poetry of simple and familiar words; he 'will often attain simplicity unawares'.⁶³ 'Blake did not go beyond Mr. Davies in radical purity and

⁵² Thomas (1913c).

⁵³ Thomas (1915a).

⁵⁴ Thomas (1968: 232).

⁵⁵ Farjeon (1958: 83).

⁵⁶ Thomas (1913b: 206).

⁵⁷ Frost & Thomas (2003: 20).

⁵⁸ Frost & Thomas (2003: 21).

⁵⁹ Frost & Thomas (2003: 24).

⁶⁰ Letter to Frost, 13 June 15 (Frost & Thomas 2003: 61).

⁶¹ Anon (1915).

⁶² Thomas (1981a: 89).

⁶³ Thomas (1968: 130).

simplicity’;⁶⁴ and ‘where else today shall we find simplicity like this?’⁶⁵ Ernest Dowson had a ‘beauty and simplicity which no contemporary equalled’ - ‘simple rhythms’ and ‘simple diction’.⁶⁶ Thomas also admired W.B. Yeats’s simplicity, including ‘the beautiful simplicity of language’.⁶⁷ In 1909 Thomas had even enjoyed the early poetry of Ezra Pound precisely because of its simplicity – ‘the chief part of his power is directness and simplicity’⁶⁸ (W.H. Davies achieved ‘simplicity and directness’ as well);⁶⁹ and he praised ‘a chaste and simple vocabulary’.⁷⁰ Pound’s *Personae* (1909) had a ‘simple’ method:

No remarkable melody; no golden words shot with meaning; a temperate use of images, and none far-fetched; no flattering of modern fashions, in descriptions of Nature, for example; no apostrophe, no rhetoric, nothing “Celtic.”⁷¹

In his third review of *Personae*, in *The Bookman*, Thomas observed that again and again ‘you come upon some lyric that is beautifully simple in form and utterance, that orbs itself easily and naturally’. Significantly, Thomas went beyond commenting on Pound to comment on poetry in general: ‘No eccentricities go to the making of great poetry; when Browning rose to his highest he was neither eccentric nor obscure.’⁷²

Some of his praise for other poets would serve as a description of the poetry that Thomas started writing towards the end of 1914. In J.M. Synge’s *Poems and Translations* (1909), ‘the constant quality is simplicity’ – Synge’s poems are ‘small’, ‘spare’, ‘poetry shrunk almost to its bones’, ‘exact and lucid’, ‘they overstate nothing’;⁷³ they are ‘wonderfully lean & bare’.⁷⁴ A review of Christina Rossetti’s poetry appeared in *The Daily*

⁶⁴ Thomas (2004: 82).

⁶⁵ Thomas (1981a: 89).

⁶⁶ Thomas (1981a: 61).

⁶⁷ Thomas (1981a: 86).

⁶⁸ Thomas (1909c: 628).

⁶⁹ See Thomas (1981a: 90). That ‘directness and simplicity’ were Georgian characteristics: ‘They seem to us, too, to show a wholesome revolt against poetic clichés, a desire for directness and simplicity both of feeling and expression’, a reviewer of *Georgian Poetry, 1911–1912* observed in *The Spectator* (Anon 1913).

⁷⁰ Thomas (1909), a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Daily Chronicle*, 7 June. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

⁷¹ Thomas (1909), a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Daily Chronicle*, 7 June. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

⁷² Thomas (1909), ‘A New Poet’, a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Bookman*, July. Cardiff scrapbook 8.

⁷³ Thomas (1909), a review of *Poems and Translations* by John M. Synge, *The Daily Chronicle*, 26 July. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

⁷⁴ 1 September 1909. Thomas (1968: 191).

News in March 1914, only a few months before Thomas started writing poetry: ‘By a simple vocabulary, remarkably frugal of adjectives, and by lucid rhythms’, with ‘little words and common things’, Christina Rossetti ‘produces many different effects, always of equal firmness and fragility’:

She refines things into their essences. Her poems are the unearthly essences, echoes, or reflections, of earthly tragedy. It is not short lines and little words only that make ‘The Wind’ seem a translation out of one of our poets by an elf

‘She speaks, and it is music’;⁷⁵ while Thomas said of Frost’s verse that ‘It speaks and it is poetry’.⁷⁶

In March 1915 Thomas told John Freeman of ‘my growing imperviousness to anything not as plain as pen & ink & bread & butter’.⁷⁷ By which he meant his aversion to the kind of ornate, abstract and fairly obscure poetry that Freeman had written. ‘I can’t learn the language’ he told Freeman.⁷⁸ The word ‘plain’ features prominently in Thomas’s poems, as does ‘clear’. The ideal is to be like the owl’s ‘clear’ cry in ‘The Owl’, ‘telling me plain’, or the bird in ‘The Word’ ‘saying it clear’. He refers to ‘Clean and clear’ in the poem ‘November’. ‘And what you meant is plain’, he says in ‘After you Speak’. He used the word ‘plain’ again when describing his poetry to Gordon Bottomley in June 1915: ‘although it has a plain look it does so far, I think, represent a culmination as a rule, & does not ask or get much correction on paper’.⁷⁹ The uncorrected text, a belief that first thoughts are best, is something he had admired in Borrow and Cobbett. He saw in Synge’s drama ‘a poetry that has nothing to do with invention, but falls naturally out of the life of the speakers, as apples fall in a still night’.⁸⁰ Simplicity comes from confidence, a sure sense of one’s own voice, not self-consciousness but self-belief, and a belief in instinct. He isn’t trying to be Robert Frost – as he said, his poems ‘haven’t been Frosty very much or so I imagine’.⁸¹ One early review said Thomas was worth ‘fifty Frosts’.⁸² Walter de la Mare felt that Thomas ‘had unlearned all

⁷⁵ Thomas (1914), a review of *Goblin Market, The Prince’s Progress, and other Poems* by Christina Rossetti, *The Daily News*, 26 March. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

⁷⁶ Thomas (1981a: 125).

⁷⁷ Kendall (2007: 105).

⁷⁸ Kendall (2007: 147).

⁷⁹ Thomas (1968: 251).

⁸⁰ Thomas (1981a: 144).

⁸¹ To John Freeman. Thomas (1995: 106).

⁸² ‘Solomon Eagle’ (J.C. Squire), review of *An Annual of New Poetry*, *The New Statesman* (31 March 1917). Rogers (1977: 180).

literary influences'.⁸³

We see a poet who is not anxious about what he should be, coming to poetry from the inside as an expert and from the outside as the innocent newcomer. In the very best sense he is an amateur poet – writing from a desire rather than financial necessity, uncommissioned (and soon anonymized as 'Edward Eastaway'), unafraid of the simplicity and naivety of amateur art. Thomas contrasted the 'subtlety' of 'great literature by known authors' with the simplicity of folk songs and ballads, but he himself was moving from the subtlety of literature towards the 'simplicity' of folk songs and ballads.⁸⁴ Folk music 'is transparently pure and truthful, simple and direct in its utterance', according to its saviour, Cecil Sharp.⁸⁵ Thomas, too, loved the simplicity, commenting that 'of all music, the old ballads and folk songs and their airs are richest in the plain, immortal symbols'.⁸⁶ In a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1905) Thomas praised ballads for their extraordinary simplicity: 'Their simplicity may remind us of statuary or of a green hill shining in sun after rain'.⁸⁷ A ballad 'relieves us of all the effort of thought and fancy which modern poetry often demands'.⁸⁸ His own poetry refers to folk songs and popular songs on a number of occasions, and, more often, echoes and resembles them.⁸⁹ There is a poem that adapts 'The Lincolnshire Poacher', for example, and another that adapts the sea shanty 'Amsterdam'; and the poem beginning 'If I should ever by chance grow rich' rhymes that line with 'Childerditch', echoing the old rhyme 'Oranges and Lemons', where 'When I grow rich, / Say the bells at Shoreditch'.

Simple, down-to-earth, avoiding rhetoric, his poetry prefers short words rather than long. In some cases, the poems are remarkably monosyllabic: in the poem 'Words', the first 18 lines contain only five words that are longer than one syllable and those five have only two syllables. Many of the poems are also very short. It is the sweetness of brevity: we often get a feeling that the poem ends abruptly, surprising us with its refusal to go any further. 'A Private', started on 6 January 1915, his first war poem, is eight lines long:

⁸³ Walter de la Mare, 'Foreword', in Thomas, *Collected Poems* (1936: 11).

⁸⁴ See Thomas (1905), 'English and Scottish Popular Ballads', a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, MA, Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7. See also *The Heart of England* (1906: 198).

⁸⁵ Cited by Marsh (1982: 79).

⁸⁶ Thomas (1906: 197).

⁸⁷ Thomas, Edward (1905), 'English and Scottish Popular Ballads', a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, MA, Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

⁸⁸ Thomas, Edward (1905), 'English and Scottish Popular Ballads', a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

⁸⁹ See Barker (1987).

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors
 Many a frosty night, and merrily
 Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:
 ‘At Mrs Greenland’s Hawthorn Bush,’ said he,
 ‘I slept.’ None knew which bush. Above the town,
 Beyond ‘The Drover’, a hundred spot the down
 In Wiltshire. And where now at last he sleeps
 More sound in France – that, too, he secret keeps.

Beginning with an emphasis on ‘This’ as if the lines are on a non-existent grave, this is a parochial epitaph, such a local poem that only the ploughman knew which bush was ‘Mrs Greenland’s Hawthorn Bush’. Thomas allows us to believe that perhaps he met his ploughman when drinking in ‘The Drover’. Only the word ‘merrily’ has more than two syllables, and it is to the poet’s credit that ‘A Private’ is a poem that a Wiltshire ploughman could have written. War poets might express a desire to speak for others, to use a common language, to give voice to the uneducated, but rarely is that achieved as plainly as it is here. Not surprisingly, in *The Country* Thomas agreed with the man who said that “‘When a poet writes he is often putting into words what some little old countryman puzzled out among the sheep and the corn in a long lifetime’”.⁹⁰ By contrast, a Georgian poem, Gordon Bottomley’s ‘The Ploughman’ (1917), emphasises the poet’s detachment from ploughmen in a way that Thomas’s does not. In Bottomley’s poem, ‘the unknowing ploughman climbs / Slowly and inveterately’.⁹¹

The poems don’t just have a ‘plain look’, as Thomas put it, but also focus on simplicity as their subject. Ploughmen and ploughing represent simplicity – the plough, he said, is ancient simplicity. His ploughman even sleeps out of doors, as many Simple Lifers did (Lord Leverhulme and Robert Baden-Powell among them), and like the lady with the wraggle-taggle gypsies: ‘For to-night I shall sleep in a cold open field’. In his first poem, ‘Up in the Wind’, he plays with the idea of escaping London to retreat into the wilds of the countryside:

Her cockney accent
 Made her and the house seem wilder by calling up –
 Only to be subdued at once by wildness –
 The idea of London there in that forest parlour

The poem ‘For these’ is reminiscent of Thoreau’s *Walden* and Yeats’s ‘Lake Isle of Innisfree’. ‘The Sheiling’, meanwhile, portrays a bourgeois home as if it is a cottage, or a shepherd’s hut. And ‘Rain’ could be by a Thoreau and sounds like some descriptions in *Walden*: ‘Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain / On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me’.

The characters familiar from his prose populate his poems – the tramps or wanderers,

⁹⁰ Thomas (1913a: 48).

⁹¹ Bottomley (1917: 181).

the gypsies, those people Thomas called 'careless poor men',⁹² and children. There are a number of poems about children, written almost in a child's voice. He had written that 'children often make phrases that are poetry, though they still more often produce it in their acts and half-suggested thoughts'.⁹³ 'Snow', for instance, is a poem that was inspired by his daughter Myfanwy and her words are nearly half of the poem. And in another poem for Myfanwy, 'What Shall I Give?', Thomas suggests that she would be happier without wealth: 'I shall not give her anything'.

Similarly, 'The Huxter' is a simple little piece about simple, happy lives. There is 'not a plainer thing on the earth'. Only 'plentiful' has more than two syllables:

He has a hump like an ape on his back;
He has of money a plentiful lack;
And but for a gay coat of double his girth
There is not a plainer thing on the earth
This fine May morning.

But the huxter has a bottle of beer;
He drives a cart and his wife sits near
Who does not heed his lack or his hump;
And they laugh as down the lane they bump
This fine May morning.

In this poem about 'lack' and plainness, happiness can be had despite that lack, or, more likely, because of it. In 'November' he had observed how 'earth is silent as it is black, / Yet not unhappy for its lack'.

The most famous of these simple country characters though is his 'Lob', not only a traveller but a creator of simple verse, who 'made up weather rhymes / Which others spoil'. Two gypsy poems assert the limitations of poetry when compared with simple, demotic music. In one, 'The Penny Whistle', a gypsy playing 'an old nursery melody' says 'far more than I am saying'. In the other, 'The Gypsy', he says:

I paid nothing then,
As I pay nothing now with the dipping of my pen
For her brother's music when he drummed the tambourine
And stamped his feet, which made the workmen passing grin

While his mouth-organ changed to a rascally Bacchanal dance
'Over the hills and far away.'

That poem then describes the December fair in the simplest way possible, using a list: 'farmer, and auctioneer, / Cheap-jack, balloon-man, drover with crooked stick, and steer, / Pig, turkey, goose, and duck'. 'Adlestrop' also uses a list to sketch the scene in its third

⁹² Thomas (1912a: 319).

⁹³ Thomas (1910b: 85).

stanza – in fact, based on notes Thomas had taken in June 1914, the whole of ‘Adlestrop’ is distinctly list-like.

‘Adlestrop’

Sturge Moore argued that Thomas moved from prose to poetry in order to avoid a fashion for ‘remote places with quaint names’,⁹⁴ but ‘Adlestrop’ is his most popular poem, and its simplicity has been key to its popularity. The poem offers a picture of the simple life, described simply, with a rhythm that is conversational, natural:

Yes. I remember Adlestrop –
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop – only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

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

The poem’s heart, the name Adlestrop, is unusual (most of us would only know it through this poem) but for Thomas it represented simplicity. In *A Literary Pilgrim in England* (1917), one of Thomas’s last books, he discussed the role of place-names in Thomas Hardy’s poetry, arguing that ‘The general effect of using local names with no significance for the stranger, and no special private value of sound or association for the poet [...] is to aid reality by suggestions of gross and humble simplicity’.⁹⁵ Arguably, place-names are the simplest words because they have no meaning. Attempts to find hidden meaning in the name ‘Adlestrop’ rather miss the point.⁹⁶ And if Hardy was an inspiration, so too was A.E.

⁹⁴ Moore (1920: 79).

⁹⁵ Thomas (1917: 150-1).

⁹⁶ See, for instance, Paulin (1981: 59). Grigson’s response appeared a fortnight later: ‘I hope this silly deduction from a false premise is not going to be embedded in commentaries on the poems of Edward Thomas’. Grigson (1981).

Housman. Housman's 'Bredon Hill', for instance, is certainly similar to 'Adlestrop' (the two locations are about 25 miles apart).⁹⁷

Housman's poem uses simple language, repeating the word 'and' so that ten of the 35 lines begin with that word. In 'Adlestrop', 'and' occurs ten times in a poem of less than a hundred words. 'The' occurs eight times. Another ten words are 'on', 'no', 'one', 'only', 'someone' and 'lonely'. The poem is built around repetition. A dozen different words are used more than once. The second stanza alone uses 'Someone', 'no one' twice, 'on' and 'only'. Words echo each other quite straightforwardly: when 'hissed' is used it is followed by 'his' three words later. 'Minute a' is echoed by 'mistier'. 'Willow' is used twice in one line then echoed by 'meadow' in the next line, the 'owe' sound then occurring in 'lonely' in the next line. The last syllable of 'Oxfordshire' is repeated, 'only' is repeated in 'lonely' and so on. The word 'only' is key, as is the feeling of absence – expressed by 'no one', and 'bare'. This is a poem about simplicity, a poem pared back to essentials, a poem no longer than it needs to be. And emptiness, bareness, or absence, recur as a subject in Thomas's work. His poems are filled with holes and absences and abandoned spaces. The poem 'Old Man' closes with an emptiness that offers no closure: 'Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate; / Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.' In 1913, when undertaking the journeys described in *In Pursuit of Spring*, Thomas took a series of photographs that, like Adlestrop, show an empty, bare countryside – as if the war has already happened, as if everyone is already dead. There are a number of simple, unpeopled roads. As he says in *The Heart of England* 'the road ahead was a simple white line'.⁹⁸ The photos' ordinariness is striking and memorable, revealing Thomas's eye for what is least extraordinary.

'The Wasp Trap'

In *The Speaker*, in October 1898, Thomas's story 'The Coming of Autumn' described 'a certain favoured cottage-girl' in Caermarthen, who finds 'inexplicable value' in 'simple words', and 'began to find how interesting and even intoxicating the simplest things in life may become':

Indoors, for example, she could not fail to note the exorbitant, spiritual value of single moments on the staircase of the darkened house in long summer twilights, when passing speeches on small matters – to her mother perhaps – were so pregnant, as if they were the foam on the surface of a great deep, beaming with some of the significance of the deep. Or, again, she found the pious melodies heard afar from a little band ere the world awakens on Sunday morning tumultuously impressive.⁹⁹

In the brilliant little poem 'The Wasp Trap', Thomas focuses on the most insignificant object, a wasp trap made from a jar - a jam jar presumably (in his notebook he recorded seeing a

⁹⁷ See Cuthbertson (2004).

⁹⁸ Thomas (1906: 11).

⁹⁹ Thomas (1898), 'The Coming of Autumn', *The Speaker*, 22 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

bottle used in this way). There is moonlight too, but this is a poem about a jar, not the moon – he is, as Thomas said in his *Keats* (1916), ‘though a lover of the moon, a most sublunary poet, earthly’.¹⁰⁰ Thomas sees beauty in the simple sublunary jar that is now a star:

This moonlight makes
The lovely lovelier
Than ever before lakes
And meadows were.

And yet they are not,
Though this their hour is, more
Lovely than things that were not
Lovely before.

Nothing on earth,
And in the heavens no star,
For pure brightness is worth
More than that jar,

For wasps meant, now
A star - long may it swing
From the dead apple-bough,
So glistening.

‘Anything, however small, may make a poem’, he wrote.¹⁰¹ Contentment and meaning are given to him by this littlest of things. It is a small, simple, beautiful poem, and as clear as glass – a poetic equivalent of the jam jar. And Thomas has the ability to create what look like lines from an old song, but which are in fact original lines of his own. Again, the poem is almost childlike; he sees and speaks as a child would. The word ‘lovely’ appears three times and ‘lovelier’ is used too. As he said of folk songs, ‘Their alphabet is small’.¹⁰² All of the words in Thomas’s ‘The Wasp Trap’ are simple and familiar. What an amazing last line it has – it is just two words. That word ‘glistening’ and the word ‘lovelier’ are the only words of more than two syllables. (Thomas had said of Christopher Marlowe that ‘his characteristic word is “lovely”’ – but here it is very much Thomas’s word).¹⁰³

As a critic, Thomas used the term ‘magic reality’ and even ‘magic realism’ to describe Hardy and Yeats,¹⁰⁴ and ‘The Wasp Trap’ too creates that magic reality. Reading it, one might be reminded of Samuel Palmer’s Shoreham pictures, or of one of Thomas’s favourite passages of prose, in Thomas Traherne’s *Centuries of Meditations*, which begins:

¹⁰⁰ Thomas (1916: 39).

¹⁰¹ Thomas (1911b: 28).

¹⁰² Thomas (1906: 197).

¹⁰³ Thomas (1909b: xii). ‘Lovely’ is now a word we might also associate with G.M. Hopkins.

¹⁰⁴ Discussing Hardy’s poetry, Thomas noted ‘a kind of magic reality’ (Thomas 1917: 151). In a review of Yeats’s *Deirdre* in 1907, Thomas said that ‘As a play, it stands alone in its magic realism’ (Thomas 1907).

The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty!¹⁰⁵

Like Palmer, Traherne gives us, Thomas said, ‘the appearance of the world to his childish eyes’.¹⁰⁶ For Thomas, the passage shows Traherne’s ‘characteristic ecstasy at the sight of common things’.¹⁰⁷ Compare Thomas’s poem with a similar and admirable poem by the Georgian John Drinkwater, ‘Moonlit Apples’ (1917), and Thomas’s poem is altogether freer and more alive, and more able to embody and convey that wonder. Comparing Thomas with Georgianism one often sees a greater naturalness in Thomas: as he said of Synge, the words fall naturally from him ‘as apples fall in a still night’¹⁰⁸ – and one could also say that the words move as naturally as the jar swinging from the dead apple-bough. When Thomas is at his simplest, he is at his best – ‘The Wasp Trap’ is often ignored,¹⁰⁹ but, arguably, it is his greatest poem.

Thomas and the Critics

Early praise for Thomas’s poetry focused on this bareness, this ordinariness and on his simplicity generally. In 1920, Walter de la Mare stated that Thomas’s poetry ‘ennobles by simplification’.¹¹⁰ In *On the Margin* (1923), Aldous Huxley highlighted Thomas’s ‘bare precision’:¹¹¹ ‘He devised a curiously bare and candid verse to express with all possible simplicity and clarity his clear sensations and emotions’.¹¹² The bare verse was simple but

¹⁰⁵ Traherne (1908: 157–8). Quoted by Thomas (1903: 56–7). First quoted in Traherne (1903: xxiii–xxiv).

¹⁰⁶ Thomas (1908), a review of *Centuries of Meditations* by Thomas Traherne, *The Morning Post*, 31 August 1908. Cardiff scrapbook 5. Thomas took ‘precious as gold’ from Traherne and used the simile in his poem ‘Words’. (See Cuthbertson 2005b.)

¹⁰⁷ Thomas (1903: 56).

¹⁰⁸ Thomas (1981a: 144).

¹⁰⁹ For instance, it is overlooked in Motion (1980) and Hollis (2011), and it is given only the briefest passing mention in Wilson (2015).

¹¹⁰ Walter de la Mare, ‘Foreword’, in Thomas, *Collected Poems* (1936: 10).

¹¹¹ Huxley, ‘Edward Thomas’, in Huxley (1923: 154).

¹¹² Huxley (1923: 153).

‘devoid of any affectation, whether of cleverness or a too great simplicity’.¹¹³ An article in 1924, in *The Gloucester Journal*, quoted Thomas’s remarks about the simplicity of folk songs, and said that

These qualities he praised in folk-song are, with a difference (the difference between the inarticulate unconscious music of the untrained artist, and the deliberate and subtle skill of the trained artist), the qualities of his own verse. “The quintessential” and “simplicity” – these are the notes of the two thin posthumous volumes of his lyrics.

Thomas’s poetry has, we are told, ‘the perfect and unaffected simplicity of which Dante, the greatest of all poets, is the greatest of all exemplars. Thomas’s has that unforced order and phrasing, in its kind, that Dante’s has’.¹¹⁴

Nonetheless, one of the first reviews Thomas’s poetry received, in *The Scotsman* in March 1917, a gloriously grumpy review of *An Annual of New Poetry* (which contained poems by Thomas, Frost and six Georgians, including Bottomley’s ‘The Ploughman’), expressed dislike of ‘the modern school of realistic poetry’, sarcastically declaring it better than Shelley and Wordsworth, and sarcastically associating Thomas with difficulty - ‘Difficult, however, as Mr Eastaway’s art is, it can be imitated, and Mr Robert Frost does it not unsuccessfully’.¹¹⁵ Thomas’s simplicity clashed with some Victorian ideas of poetry. In 1928, ‘Adlestrop’ was dismissed as a failure because ‘the words are commonplace except the name of the station’.¹¹⁶ And, with the arrival of Modernism, with the arrival of difficulty, with T.S. Eliot announcing that poets must be difficult,¹¹⁷ from that new perspective Thomas’s work was also seen as unsophisticated. Simplicity (of a kind) is an important characteristic of Modernism – it’s there in imagism, minimalism, primitivism, Cubism, Bauhaus, and so on, albeit without Thomas’s naturalness or warmth - but Modernism’s emphasis on difficulty, in poetry in particular, was one reason why Thomas was an underrated poet. There has also been an unfortunate tendency to associate difficulty with diversity, progressiveness or liberty, despite the political opinions of Modernists like Ezra Pound, and Thomas’s simplicity therefore made him conservative, unenlightened; even though it was Thomas’s simplicity that, for him, went hand-in-hand with democracy, equality, freedom, fairness, and honesty (in 1912 Edmund Gosse described Thomas as a ‘youngish Socialist journalist’ who worked on ‘radical’ newspapers).¹¹⁸

There has been then, among Thomas’s greatest advocates, a refusal to accept his

¹¹³ Huxley (1923: 153).

¹¹⁴ Kerr (1924: 13).

¹¹⁵ ‘One can imagine how Marvell or Cowper would have envied the sweet simplicity and tender grace’. Anon (1917).

¹¹⁶ E. A. Greening Lamborn’s *Poetic Values*, cited by Pinion (1990: 294).

¹¹⁷ For Eliot on difficulty see ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921), and *The Use of Poetry and Use of Criticism* (1932).

¹¹⁸ Edmund Gosse to [Thomas] Wise, 30 November 1912. London, British Library, MS Ashley A4474, fo. 85v. See Thomas (2011b: xxxvii).

simplicity. Early on, F.R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) saw hidden value in Thomas, and in *Scrutiny* (where he described Thomas's poetry as 'decidedly limited'), Leavis refused to accept that Thomas really did like the writers he claimed to like.¹¹⁹ Simplicity became surface simplicity, a disguise that supposedly hid the complexity beneath it. We have repeatedly been told that although the poems might look simple they are in fact not at all. Under the influence of Leavis, Harry Coombes, in his book on Thomas in 1956, expressed his unhappiness that Thomas 'has been seen mainly as a simple poet writing of simple things and of simple joys and sorrows';¹²⁰ so Coombes set out to expose 'depth' and complexities,¹²¹ but his book failed to defeat its enemy, 'the simplicity-lovers',¹²² and, even after reading the book carefully, one could still easily believe in Thomas's 'simple charm'.¹²³ Similar approaches followed from other critics, arguing, for instance, that 'Thomas can be read as a Georgian, a poet of nature, melancholy, and the transfixed lyrical moment, but he is more complex than this suggests';¹²⁴ or 'it is not as a simple rural poet that Thomas, any more than Frost, should be valued'.¹²⁵ Or the poetry is 'infinitely complex beneath its surface transparency'.¹²⁶ It has been argued that the poems carry 'much cultural and metaphysical freight' but do so lightly: 'Their difficulty is never of the surface.'¹²⁷

Even if Thomas isn't called a Modernist, or is seen as an alternative to Modernism, there is evidence of Modernism's tyranny in universities here - poems have to be judged and justified in terms of how complex they are, or, really, how Eliotic they are. Thomas should though be valued because he is good, not because he has been rebranded as a bit Modernist. Indeed, we should value the work for its simplicity rather than its complexity. Pushing Thomas towards Modernism and complexity is not only a misreading of his work and his intentions, but it will always make him seem a failure, a producer of watered-down 'English' Modernism. He praised the simplicity of Pound's *Personae*, but he also complained that 'Again and again his verse strikes you as too artificial, too tricky; the frequent use of old words and eccentricities of phrasing give it an air of affectation'.¹²⁸ Later, reviewing *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* (1914), having admired the austerity of Pound's writing 'under the restraint imposed by Chinese originals or models', Thomas said of an 'impressive-looking'

¹¹⁹ Leavis (1939: 442).

¹²⁰ Coombes (1956: 12).

¹²¹ Coombes (1956: 15).

¹²² Coombes (1956: 16).

¹²³ Coombes (1956: 12).

¹²⁴ Danby (1959: 308). Danby, a Professor at Bangor, unearthed 'the Thomas complexity'.

¹²⁵ Thwaite (1978: 36).

¹²⁶ Longley, "'Worn New": Edward Thomas and English Tradition' (1986: 48).

¹²⁷ Longley (2008).

¹²⁸ Thomas (1909), 'A New Poet', a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Bookman*, July 1909. Cardiff scrapbook 8.

Pound poem that ‘I do not see the meaning’ and ‘I even doubt whether the words mean anything’.¹²⁹ Yet English Literature departments have been conditioned to create and celebrate complexity. Edward de Bono has complained that academics love a complex book ‘because obviously the book needs the special skill of the academic for its interpretation to ordinary people’ and simultaneously ‘the complexity encourages any interpretation’.¹³⁰ And where complexity doesn’t exist, it will be created. As Thomas said of folk songs, ‘The best of them seem to be written in a language that should be universal, if only simplicity were truly simple to mankind’.¹³¹

There have been attempts to argue that, when inspected closely, Thomas’s poems express thoughts and feelings that are more complex than they might at first seem, but even with ‘Old Man’, which is the poem that is usually mentioned by critics in this context,¹³² the ultimate feeling we have is of clarity. ‘Old Man’ is remarkable and unique; it is perceptive, even modern, and it is about the avenues of memory; it is not a typical Thomas poem; but it would be an exaggeration to call it complex. The poem is simpler than the mind it explores.

There’s also a kind of wordplay, which comes perhaps from literary theory – from New Historicism in particular – but more accurately might be seen as a kind of extreme close reading, speculative and creative. This is a fun game, a jump down the rabbit hole, a kind of highbrow wordsearch puzzle, a hunt for hidden meanings, displaying ingenuity or madness; and sometimes the game is played with real flare - as it is, for example, when Tom Paulin conducts a fanciful dissection of ‘The Owl’ in *The Secret Life of Poems* (2008). But that supposed secret life doesn’t improve the poem, and it could well kill it. Looking at the opening line, ‘Downhill I came, hungry, and yet not starved’, Paulin says it is a simple line and yet there are, he says, ‘the subliminal flickers, the tiny signals, which the opening line sends out’.¹³³ So, for example, the ‘Hun’ (a word that is not actually used in the poem) is there in the word ‘hungry’; and the word ‘unable’ in the last line of the poem ‘takes us back to the middle of the first line’ to ‘hungry’ and to ‘Hun’, the word Thomas ‘wanted to infiltrate his poem’.¹³⁴ Reading Thomas’s intentions based on no evidence and plenty to the contrary is particularly dangerous.

This kind of investigation sometimes emanates from a desire to see Thomas as a war poet. So ‘Hun’ is in ‘hungry’. Reeds likened to ‘criss-cross bayonets’ in ‘Bright Clouds’ became some kind of coded reference, even though the simile predated the war (Edna Longley notes that Thomas first used it back in 1895).¹³⁵ A swift is like a bow and arrow, but

¹²⁹ Thomas (1914), a review of *Des Imagistes: An Anthology*, *The New Weekly*, 9 May. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

¹³⁰ de Bono (1998: 65).

¹³¹ Thomas (1906: 197).

¹³² See, for instance, Thwaite (1978: 36), or Maxwell (2016: 97).

¹³³ Paulin (2008: 147).

¹³⁴ Paulin (2008: 149).

¹³⁵ Edna Longley (in Thomas 2008: 303).

that martial image too had already been used by Thomas in peacetime.¹³⁶ In the case of Wilfred Owen the critics or admirers' focus on the First World War has simplified the poetry, reducing it to slogans and cliché, whereas in the case of Edward Thomas that same focus has done the opposite, complicating the work unnecessarily. Edward Thomas has been a lot more fortunate than Owen though (Owen is very nearly a lost cause in that regard).

Allusiveness

Much of the argument for complexity comes down to allusiveness, 'Thomas's echoing allusiveness' as it has been called,¹³⁷ which in recent years has frequently been stressed. The poetry did emerge out of a wide range of reading, and out of a brilliant associative mind; indeed we can detect the influence of some of his favourite examples of simplicity, such as Shakespeare's 'When Icicles Hang by the Wall',¹³⁸ the poetry of W.H. Davies,¹³⁹ and the prose of Thomas Traherne.¹⁴⁰ A few writers are mentioned by name. Cobbett, for instance, is named in the early drafts of 'Lob',¹⁴¹ and he is mentioned, in simple company, in 'Haymaking', where the scene is 'Older than Clare and Cobbett, Morland and Crome'. But we should also note Thomas's dislike of bookishness (at times, of books themselves), and how he seemed to be avoiding his learning rather than deploying it. 'I am sick of books', he had written in 1904, sounding a little like the Lady of Shalott,¹⁴² and a decade later, in 1914, he declared,

I should like to have 5 years free from reading or writing about books. The occupation turns country into town.¹⁴³

When Philip Larkin says books are 'a load of crap' one feels he's only joking, but in Edward

¹³⁶ In 'Haymaking', Thomas describes 'The swift with wings and tail as sharp and narrow / As if the bow had flown off with the arrow', and in his prose piece called 'The Artist', in *Light and Twilight* in 1911, he refers to 'the flight of the swift which was as if the arrow and bow had flown away together'. Thomas (1911a: 133).

¹³⁷ Edna Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas' (in Cuthbertson and Newlyn 2007: 37).

¹³⁸ There are references to this song from *Love's Labour's Lost* in 'Lob' and 'The Owl'.

¹³⁹ In 'Roads', 'all the clouds like sheep' (l.22) suggests Davies's poem 'The Likeness', a poem Thomas admired, which was in *New Poems* (1913), a collection dedicated 'To Helen and Edward Thomas'.

¹⁴⁰ Written as Thomas travelled through Gloucestershire and especially the area where it meets Herefordshire, 'Words' says 'Tough as oak' (line 14), influenced by Thomas Fuller's description of Gloucestershire, and, the next line, 'Precious as gold' (line 15), from Thomas Traherne's description of Herefordshire (a county named in the poem).

¹⁴¹ London, British Library, MS 44990, f.53r.

¹⁴² Thomas to Jesse Berridge, 16 September 1904. Thomas (1983: 45).

¹⁴³ Edward Thomas to R.C. Trevelyan, 3 April 1914. Cambridge, Trinity College Library, MS RCT 17 (122), f.1v.

Thomas's writing the similar confessions are more sincere. He had learnt to hate books and the literary world and complained about being trapped in bookishness. Indeed, books were killing him just as much as they destroyed Leonard Bast, who ends up dead beneath a heap of them. Thomas recognised that books were something to escape from. He displayed plenty of weary disregard for books and bookishness, and took some pleasure in burning books at home.

In W.H. Hudson, Thomas admired how 'As he mentions and uses no books, so he seems a character as free from literary influence as his shepherds'.¹⁴⁴ He approvingly said of 'unbookish' Synge's poems that 'most of them seem to have been written without remembering any poetry'.¹⁴⁵ It's remarkable how little bookishness there is in the poetry of a poet who spent a career reading and writing about books. Most of the so-called allusions in Thomas's work are nothing of the sort. At best what we could say is that if there are allusions sometimes (rather than echoes and evidence of Thomas's thought processes),¹⁴⁶ then, like any allusion, those in Thomas are not necessary to the poem, we do not need to identify them and Thomas did not want them to complicate the poem. It would be a mistake to see that any allusion is an important characteristic of the poem. It has been said that they are 'unobtrusive' allusions but many so-called allusions are so unobtrusive that they probably aren't allusions at all.¹⁴⁷

In the anthology *This England*, compiled by Thomas in 1915, he provides a passage from the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*:

The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man.¹⁴⁸

This is the extent of the passage, specifically given to us as evidence of Wordsworth's greatness. Earlier, in *Maurice Maeterlinck* in 1911, discussing symbolism, Thomas had noted that poems used to have 'a simple fundamental meaning which every sane reader can agree

¹⁴⁴ Thomas (1910), a review of *A Shepherd's Life: Impressions of the South Wiltshire Downs* by W. H. Hudson, *The Morning Post*, 26 September. Cardiff scrapbook 5.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas (1909), a review of *Poems and Translations* by John M. Synge, *The Daily Chronicle*, 26 July. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

¹⁴⁶ Jan Marsh says that in Thomas's verse 'echoes and allusions to virtually the whole past of English poetry may be found', and that other poets 'lurk' behind his poems. Marsh (1978: 199).

¹⁴⁷ 'This allusiveness is unobtrusive and natural in Thomas's verse, as if he were conscious of no division between his and earlier uses of language: all inhabit the same world'. Marsh (1978: 199). Edna Longley also used that word 'unobtrusive': 'Steeped in English poetry, whose living trail can be glimpsed in unobtrusive allusions throughout his work, Thomas certainly knew (as much as T. S. Eliot) just "how derivative he was being"'. Longley, "'Worn New": Edward Thomas and English Tradition' (1986: 71).

¹⁴⁸ Thomas (1915: 152-3).

upon; above and beyond this each one builds as he can or must'.¹⁴⁹ And he says that 'Whatever be the subject, the poem must not depend for its main effect upon anything outside itself except the humanity of the reader' because 'sooner or later, it will be left naked and solitary, and will so be judged, and if it does not create about itself a world of its own it is condemned to endure the death which is its element'.¹⁵⁰

Thomas said of the simple words of folk songs that they 'lend themselves to infinite interpretations, according to the listener's heart'.¹⁵¹ 'By its simplicity and remoteness from life', a song that he hears 'set going the potent logic of fancy which would lead many men to diverse conclusions'.¹⁵² A ballad 'comes to us so nakedly that we can clothe it as we will and interpret it *en la perfectissime partie*, so that we make it bear meanings of which the early chanters of it never dreamed'. In ballads, 'the reader may perhaps be excused if he finds about them something which they have not of themselves'.¹⁵³ The reader of Thomas's poetry likewise finds a variety of meanings and echoes. But the complexity is somewhere other than in the poetry. It has been argued that 'There is always more to decode in Edward Thomas'¹⁵⁴ – and in 2013 a book called *The Secret Code of Edward Thomas* was published¹⁵⁵ – but that decoding must be an investigation of Edward Thomas's mind or, more likely, the mind of one of his readers. We have been told that in Thomas's poem 'Two Pewits', 'Clarity or apparent simplicity conceals complex art',¹⁵⁶ which is in a sense true, but Thomas himself said that that poem 'had to be as clear as glass' and it is.¹⁵⁷

Commentary has not been so clear or so simple. Reviewing an edition of Thomas's poetry in 2004, P.J. Kavanagh described Thomas's poems as 'so bare, so perfect' but contrasted their simplicity with Peter Sacks's 'surprisingly wordy' introduction to the book, which Kavanagh identified as 'Proof, maybe, that simplicity, and Thomas was far from being a simple man, is of all things the most difficult to attain'.¹⁵⁸ Writing about Thomas – often as unclear as Thomas's is clear, as complex as Thomas's is simple – to get in the way and

¹⁴⁹ Thomas (1911b: 21).

¹⁵⁰ Thomas (1911b: 28).

¹⁵¹ Thomas (1906: 198).

¹⁵² Thomas (1906: 199).

¹⁵³ Thomas, Edward (1905), 'English and Scottish Popular Ballads', a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, MA, Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

¹⁵⁴ Edna Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', in Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn (2007: 31).

¹⁵⁵ Smithers (2013).

¹⁵⁶ Edna Longley (in Thomas 2008: 205).

¹⁵⁷ Thomas (2008: 205).

¹⁵⁸ Kavanagh (2004).

obscure or choke the poetry. Kavanagh picks out 'The Watchers' as quintessentially simple but this is a poem that has had all sorts of complexity given to it by others:

By the ford at the town's edge
Horse and carter rest:
The carter smokes on the bridge
Watching the water press in swathes about his horse's chest.

From the inn one watches, too,
In the room for visitors
That has no fire but a view
And many cases of stuffed fish, vermin, and kingfishers.

An article in *A Review of English Literature* in 1964 discussed how the fish are common symbols of fertility, and that the water may have some general symbolic value, as might the fire of the smoking carter. That 1964 article concluded that although 'The poem makes its points simply' there's much intricacy to explore.¹⁵⁹ Nonetheless, looking at this little inn poem one might think of Thomas's description of Synge's simple verse: 'They are notes such as a man sitting alone might scratch on a window at an inn'.¹⁶⁰ And every visitor to the inn can interpret them differently, and wrap them up in their own thoughts and reading. What matters is that the poem is, in Kavanagh's words, 'so bare, so perfect'.¹⁶¹ 'Perfect' is a word Thomas deserves – discussing 'The Long Small Room', Peter Levi said that the poem 'seems to me perfect': 'It hardly needs even this amount of simplistic exegesis'.¹⁶² That surely is a feeling we have with many of his poems – exegesis is redundant. Like Walter de la Mare's 'The Listeners', a poem it resembles, 'The Long Small Room' achieves both mystery and clarity.¹⁶³ It is a poem to be read again and again, but not necessarily in order to understand the poem better or to find yet another interpretation of it. Within the poem, as in others, Thomas closes down any pursuit of hidden meanings: 'When I look back I am like moon, sparrow, and mouse / That witnessed what they could never understand'. The poem is simply what it is, and anything else is brought by the reader. As with 'Adlestrop', there might be unanswered questions, but Thomas isn't hiding any answers.

Thomas Today

Ultimately, simplicity is a significant reason for Thomas's unpopularity in some quarters, and, at the same time, for his relevance, appeal and survival today. Thomas's popularity has risen sharply since the millennium and especially following Matthew Hollis's book on Thomas in 2011 (Hollis caught a mood, even though as it happens that successful book says

¹⁵⁹ Emslie (1964: 68).

¹⁶⁰ Edward Thomas, a review of *Poems and Translations* by John M. Synge, *The Daily Chronicle* (26 July 1909). Cardiff, scrapbook 4.

¹⁶¹ Kavanagh (2004: 36).

¹⁶² Peter Levi, 'Notes on Edward Thomas' (in Barker 1987: 29).

¹⁶³ Thomas (1912), a review of *The Listeners and Other Poems* by Walter de la Mare, *The Bookman*, August 1912. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

almost nothing about simplicity specifically);¹⁶⁴ and one could seriously speculate that Thomas's popularity is connected to the recent return to simplicity. As Thomas knew, simplicity isn't always popular with everyone, and he wasn't aiming to write best-selling verse; but, for various reasons, including the economy and the environment, we have gone back to 'nuts, bananas, and truth, and simplicity and all that sort of thing'. We have experienced a twenty-first-century version of the 'return to simplicity' cult, but it has had an identity, a lifestyle, of its own: pure food, clean eating, detoxing, decluttering, knitting, baking, wellness, Scandinavian homes, normcore, the White Company, A.P.C., FRAME, a million motivational memes, minimalism, being more with less, and Apple (a company that aimed not at surface simplicity but at something deeper, and 'built an ecosystem of Simplicity').¹⁶⁵ In an age of austerity, we saw a return to the celebration of simplicity - an austerity government arrived the year before Edward Thomas's big year of 2011. But even so, there was money to be made. *Deliciously Ella* began in 2012; decluttering became a global craze with Marie Kondo's book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* in 2014 and the television series *Organise the World*. There was Danish Hygge – *The Little Book of Hygge* (2016)¹⁶⁶ was an international bestseller – and Swedish Lagom, the philosophy of just enough and not too much. A Forbes report in 2016 was entitled 'Millennials Go Minimal'.¹⁶⁷ Articles on millennials and the yearning for simplicity are legion. The relationship between mental health and the countryside and physical activity is now much-discussed. And lifestyle simplicity has overlapped with the incredible explosion of nature writing in the last few years (thoroughly bookish though that writing often is) - these books in turn overlap with Edward Thomas. We can at least see why Edward Thomas should be popular now, and in the future.

Edmund Blunden, writing in 1958, foresaw this popularity: 'we may count on Edward Thomas for a benefaction as the need for a renewal of simple life and natural piety increases'.¹⁶⁸ Back in 1919, Walter de la Mare had commented that Thomas offers simplicity to those whose minds are not at rest - 'the desire of many of us now is for the simple, lonely, and solitary things which circumstance may in part deny us, but, far more, our own troubled and divided hearts, busy and restless minds'. And de la Mare added that we should approach Thomas's work with a mind that is open to simplicity: 'His work, then, can give its best only to a reader who will give in his turn the attention of his imagination, that simplicity and receptivity of consciousness not easy to achieve or to maintain.'¹⁶⁹ Thomas's earliest readers were right to see the simplicity and not go hankering after something else ('Thomas studies' might require a kind of archaeology, not for unearthing hidden meanings but scraping away years of accretion to get back to the poetry that has become buried in criticism). To take five words from 'As the Team's Head-Brass', the reader's approach could be summed up as 'I

¹⁶⁴ Hollis (2011).

¹⁶⁵ Segall (2013: 158). Also see Isaacson (2012).

¹⁶⁶ Wiking (2016).

¹⁶⁷ Weinswig (2016).

¹⁶⁸ Blunden (1958).

¹⁶⁹ de la Mare (1919).

should want nothing more', just as that was also in effect Thomas's own attitude, in pursuit of plainness. Universities might not always be the best places for that mindset. They tend to prefer Beethoven rather than 'All Around my Hat'. Note that Thomas wrote poetry about the Lincolnshire Poacher and all the birds of Oxfordshire but not Lincoln College or Oxford University. The Oxford scholar was trying to shed his education. Even in his book on Oxford in 1903, he was unusually uninterested in the teaching and learning. In 1909 he said he had forgotten everything he learnt for his degree. His greatness lies in his ability to look beyond learning, books, 'culture', and reading.

When war arrived he considered lecturing and teaching, but he said he would rather 'plough & hoe & reap & sow & be a farmer's boy'.¹⁷⁰ And then he volunteered for the army, where he did have a teaching job but it was a return to nature, teaching map-reading. In 1916, at the end of his time at Hare Hall camp in Essex, Thomas wrote to Robert Frost, 'I don't believe I often had as good times as I have had, one way and another, these past 13 months'.¹⁷¹ There was a greater simplicity about his life and thought by then. He told Frost, 'You can't imagine the degree of my disinclination for books'.¹⁷² When Thomas went to France, he wrote no poetry: his career as a poet reached 'the clean white page' of 'The Long Small Room'. His war diary was the beautiful triumph of plain prose, offering, too, images of simplicity. On a slip of paper loose inside the diary he had written notes that ended with the line 'Roads shining like river up hill after rain',¹⁷³ and he had once offered 'a green hill shining in sun after rain' as an image of quintessential simplicity.¹⁷⁴ His life and journeys were no longer book fodder. Happy to lose a writing hand, he had written in 'As the Team's Head-Brass' that

'If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more...'

Writing about a version of his young self, Thomas described how he was pleased by 'The monotony and simplicity of death'.¹⁷⁵ In the story 'The Attempt', Thomas provides another self-portrait, suicidal Morgan Traheron, who intends to shoot himself: 'Recalling the

¹⁷⁰ 22 July 1915. Frost & Thomas (2003: 82).

¹⁷¹ Cited by R. George Thomas (1985: 272).

¹⁷² 9 September 1916 (Frost & Thomas 2003: 148).

¹⁷³ Thomas (1981c: 194).

¹⁷⁴ In his review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Thomas praised ballads for their extraordinary simplicity: 'Their simplicity may remind us of statuary or of a green hill shining in sun after rain. Thomas (1905), 'English and Scottish Popular Ballads', a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, MA, Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

¹⁷⁵ Thomas (2011a: 309).

repulsiveness of the weapon, the idea of a rope crossed his mind, not because it was preferable, but because it was something else, something apart from his plans which now had a painful air of simplicity'.¹⁷⁶ Suicide can be a very simple solution to the mind's complexities:

To escape from the difficulty of life, from the need of deliberating on it, from the hopeless search for something that would make it possible for him to go on living like anybody else without questioning, he was eager to hide himself away in annihilation, just as, when a child, he hid himself in the folds of his mother's dress or her warm bosom, where he could shut out everything save the bright patterns floating on the gloom under his closed eyelids.¹⁷⁷

Attempts to achieve simplicity can be forms of self-denial, and from there self-annihilation might be the natural next step. As he wrote in 'Lights Out',

There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown

Morgan Traheron doesn't shoot himself and is home for tea; but eventually at Arras in April 1917 Thomas did achieve an unassailable simplicity, that monotony and simplicity of death.

Guy Cuthbertson

Journal of the British Academy, 7, 89–121. (2019). Reprinted with permission.

Acknowledgements:

In this lecture, Edward Thomas's poems are taken from Edward Thomas, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2008). For images used in the lecture on 1 November 2018, I would like to thank Richard Emeny, the Edward Thomas Fellowship, and Cardiff University's Special Collections and Archives. I am grateful to various libraries and archives, and I would also like to thank the British Academy for inviting me to give the lecture, and Robert Crawford for acting as Chair.

Chatterton Lecture on Poetry, delivered 1 November 2018. The British Academy, 10-11 Carlton House Terrace, London.

Chair: Professor Robert Crawford FBA, Professor of Modern Scottish Literature and Bishop

¹⁷⁶ Thomas (1911a: 166).

¹⁷⁷ Thomas (1911a: 165).

Wardlaw Professor of Poetry, University of St Andrews.

The Chatterton Lecture is given by an early career scholar, on the life and works of a deceased poet who had written in the English language. The lecture series was established through a bequest from E H W Meyerstein, and named after the poet Thomas Chatterton. It was first delivered in 1955.

REFERENCES

- Anon (1913), a review of *Georgian Poetry, 1911–1912*, *The Spectator*, 18 January: 23.
- Anon (1915), ‘Georgian Poetry’, *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 16 December: 10.
- Anon (1917), a review of *An Annual of New Poetry*, *The Scotsman*, 26 March: 2.
- Anon (1948), ‘Poet’s Prose’, a review of *The Prose of Edward Thomas*, *The Scotsman*, 23 September: 7.
- Badley, J. H. (1923), *Bedales: A Pioneer School* (London, Methuen).
- Barker, Jonathan (ed.) (1987), *The Art of Edward Thomas* (Bridgend, Poetry Wales Press).
- Blatchford, Robert (Nunquam) (1893), *Merrie England* (London, Clarion).
- Blunden, Edmund (1958), ‘Love and Friendship’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 November: 688.
- Bottomley, Gordon (1917), ‘The Ploughman’, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, January: 181.
- Coombes, Harry (1956), *Edward Thomas* (London, Chatto and Windus).
- Cuthbertson, Guy (2004), ‘“Bredon Hill” and “Adlestrop”’, *The Housman Society Journal*, pp. 163–6.
- Cuthbertson, Guy (2005a), ‘Leonard Bast and Edward Thomas’, *Notes and Queries*, March: 87–9.
- Cuthbertson, Guy (2005b), ‘Edward Thomas’s “Words” and the Worthies of Dymock Country’, *Dymock Poets and Friends*, pp. 58–61.
- Cuthbertson, Guy & Newlyn, Lucy (eds) (2007), *Branch-lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry* (London, Enitharmon).
- Danby, John F. (1959), ‘Edward Thomas’, *Critical Quarterly*, December.
- Davies, W. H. (1913), *New Poems* (London, Elkin Mathews).
- de Bono, Edward (1998), *Simplicity* (London, Viking).
- de la Mare, Walter (1910), ‘Rest and Unrest’, a review of *Rest and Unrest*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 10 March: 82.

- de la Mare, Walter (1919), ‘“In the Perpetual Yesterday”’, a review of *Last Poems* by Edward Thomas, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2 January: 7.
- de la Mare, Walter (1936), ‘Foreword’, in *Collected Poems* by Edward Thomas (London, Faber and Faber).
- Eliot, T. S. (1921), ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, in *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn (London, Faber and Faber, 1951), 281–91.
- Eliot, T. S. (1933), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London, Faber and Faber).
- Emslie, MacDonald (1964), ‘Spectatorial Attitudes’, *A Review of English Literature*, January: 66–8.
- Farjeon, Eleanor (1958), *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* (London, Oxford University Press).
- Frost, Robert (1914), *North of Boston* (London, David Nutt).
- Frost, Robert & Thomas, Edward (2003), *Elected Friends: Robert Frost and Edward Thomas to One Another*, ed. Matthew Spencer (New York, Handsel Books).
- Grahame, Kenneth (2010), *The Wind in the Willows*, ed. Peter Hunt (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Grigson, Geoffrey (1981), ‘Adlestrop’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 30 January: 113.
- Hollis, Matthew (2011), *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* (London, Faber and Faber).
- Hudson, W. H. (1910), *A Shepherd’s Life: Impressions of the South Wiltshire Downs* (London, Methuen).
- Huxley, Aldous (1923), ‘Edward Thomas’, in *On the Margin: Notes and Essays* (London, Chatto and Windus).
- Isaacson, Walter (2012), ‘How Steve Jobs’ Love of Simplicity Fueled A Design Revolution’, *Smithsonian Magazine*, September.
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-steve-jobs-love-of-simplicity-fueled-a-design-revolution-23868877/#twDtZ5A1DO1okdwg.99>
- Jackson, Holbrook (1914), ‘Makers of Movements: No. X.—William H. Davies and the Renaissance of Simplicity’, *The Bystander*, 4 March: 464–6.
- Kavanagh, P. J. (2004), ‘The War and a Sprained Ankle’, *The Spectator*, 14 February: 36.
- Kendall, Judy (ed.) (2007), *Edward Thomas’s Poets* (Manchester, Carcanet).
- Kerr, William (1924), ‘Edward Thomas’, *Gloucester Journal*, 13 September: 13.
- Kondo, Marie (2014), *The Life-changing Magic of Tidying: The Japanese Art* (London, Vermillion). Published in Japanese in 2011.

- Leavis, F. R. (1932), *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (London, Chatto and Windus).
- Leavis, F. R. (1939), 'The Fate of Edward Thomas', *Scrutiny*, March: 441–3.
- Levi, Peter (1987), 'Notes on Edward Thomas', in Jonathan Barker (ed.) *The Art of Edward Thomas* (Bridgend, Poetry Wales Press).
- Longley, Edna (1986), '"Worn New": Edward Thomas and English Tradition', in *Poetry in the Wars* (Hexham, Bloodaxe).
- Longley, Edna (2007), 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', in Guy Cuthbertson & Lucy Newlyn (eds) *Branch-lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry* (London, Enitharmon).
- Longley, Edna (2008), 'Roads from France', *The Guardian*, 28 June.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/28/saturdayreviewsfeatures.guardianreview22>
- Marsh, Jan (1978), *Edward Thomas: A Poet for his Country* (London, Paul Elek).
- Marsh, Jan (1982). *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England from 1880 to 1914* (London, Quartet).
- Masterman, C. F. G. (1909), *The Condition of England* (London, Methuen).
- Maxwell, Glyn (2016), *On Poetry* (London, Oberon).
- Moore, T. Sturge (1920), *Some Soldier Poets* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Howe).
- Morris, William (2008), *Useful Work v. Useful Toil* (London, Penguin).
- Motion, Andrew (1980), *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul).
- Paulin, Tom (1981), 'Tourists and Topographers', a review of Geoffrey Grigson's *The Faber Book of Poems and Places*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 16 January: 59.
- Paulin, Tom (2008), *The Secret Life of Poems: A Poetry Primer* (London, Faber and Faber).
- Pinion, F. B. (1990), *Hardy the Writer: Surveys and Assessments* (Basingstoke, Macmillan).
- Pound, Ezra (1909) *Personae* (London, Elkin Mathews).
- Pound, Ezra (1914), *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* (New York, Albert and Charles Boni).
- Rogers, Timothy (ed.) (1977), *Georgian Poetry 1911–22: The Critical Heritage* (London, Routledge).
- Rossetti, Christina (1862), *Goblin Market, The Prince's Progress, and Other Poems* (London, Macmillan).

Scott-James, Violet (1932), 'Edward Thomas: His Country Prose', *The Yorkshire Post*, 5 October: 6.

Segall, Ken (2013), *Insanely Simple: The Obsession That Drives Apple's Success* (London, Portfolio Penguin).

Smithers, Gavin (2013), *The Secret Code of Edward Thomas* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform).

Synge, J. M. (1909), *Poems and Translations* (Dundrum, Cuala Press).

Thomas, Helen (1990), *Under Storm's Wing* (London, Paladin).

Thomas, R. George (1972), *Edward Thomas* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press).

Thomas, R. George (1985), *Edward Thomas: A Portrait* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).

Thoreau, Henry David (1854), *Walden: or, Life in the Woods* (Boston, Ticknor and Fields).

Thwaite, Anthony (1978), *Twentieth Century English Poetry: An Introduction* (London, Heinemann).

Traherne, Thomas (1903), *The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne*, ed. Bertram Dobell (London, published by the editor).

Traherne, Thomas (1908), *Centuries of Meditations*, ed. Bertram Dobell (London, published by the editor). Weinswig, Deborah (2016), 'Millennials Go Minimal: The Decluttering Lifestyle Trend That Is Taking Over', *Forbes*.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/deborahweinswig/2016/09/07/millennials-go-minimal-the-decluttering-lifestyle-trend-that-is-taking-over/#c47099337550>

Wiking, Meik (2016) *The Little Book of Hygge* (London, Penguin).

Wilson, Jean Moorcroft (2015), *Edward Thomas, From Adlestrop to Arras: A Biography* (London, Bloomsbury).

Wimperis, Arthur (lyricist) (1909), *The Arcadians: A Fantastic Musical Play in Three Acts* (London, Chappell). Music by Lionel Monckton & Howard Talbot. Book by Mark Ambient and A. M. Thompson.

Yeats, W. B. (1907), *Deirdre* (Dublin, Maunsel).

Work by Edward Thomas:

Thomas, Edward (1903), *Oxford* (London, A. and C. Black).

Thomas, Edward (1906), *The Heart of England* (London, J. M. Dent).

Thomas, Edward (1907), 'Deirdre', *The Bookman*, October 1907: 47.

Thomas, Edward (1909a), introduction to *The Plays and Poems of Christopher Marlowe* (London, J. M. Dent).

Thomas, Edward (1909b), *The South Country* (London, J. M. Dent).

- Thomas, Edward (1909c), 'Two Poets', a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The English Review*, June: 627–32.
- Thomas, Edward (1910a), *Rest and Unrest* (London, Duckworth).
- Thomas, Edward (1910b), *Feminine Influence on the Poets* (London, Martin Secker).
- Thomas, Edward (1911a), *Light and Twilight* (London, Duckworth).
- Thomas, Edward (1911b), *Maurice Maeterlinck* (London, Methuen).
- Thomas, Edward (1912a), *George Borrow: The Man and his Books* (London, Chapman and Hall).
- Thomas, Edward (1912b), introduction to *Rural Rides*, by William Cobbett, volume 1 (London, J. M. Dent).
- Thomas, Edward (1913a), *The Icknield Way* (London, Constable).
- Thomas, Edward (1913b), *Walter Pater: A Critical Study* (London, Martin Secker).
- Thomas, Edward (1913c), *The Happy-go-lucky Morgans* (London, Duckworth).
- Thomas, Edward (1913d), *The Country* (London, Batsford).
- Thomas, Edward (1915a), *Four-and-twenty Blackbirds* (London, Duckworth).
- Thomas, Edward (ed.) (1915b), *This England: An Anthology* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Thomas, Edward (1916), *Keats* (London, T. C. and E. C. Jack).
- Thomas, Edward (1917), *A Literary Pilgrim in England* (London, Methuen).
- Thomas, Edward (1936), *Collected Poems*, introduction by Walter de la Mare (London, Faber and Faber).
- Thomas, Edward (1938), *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* (London, Faber and Faber).
- Thomas, Edward (1968), *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley*, ed. R. George Thomas (London, Oxford University Press).
- Thomas, Edward (1981a), *A Language Not to be Betrayed*, ed. Edna Longley (Manchester, Carcanet).
- Thomas, Edward (1981b), *A Selection of Letters to Edward Garnett* (Edinburgh, Tragara Press).
- Thomas, Edward (1981c), *The Collected Poems*, ed. R. George Thomas (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Thomas, Edward (1983), *The Letters of Edward Thomas to Jesse Berridge*, ed. Anthony Berridge (London, Enitharmon Press).

Thomas, Edward (1995), *Selected Letters*, ed. R. George Thomas (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Thomas, Edward (2000), *Letters to Helen*, ed. R. George Thomas (Manchester, Carcanet).

Thomas, Edward (2004), *Edward Thomas on the Georgians*, ed. Richard Emeny (Cheltenham, The Cyder Press).

Thomas, Edward (2008), *The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (Hexham, Bloodaxe).

Thomas, Edward (2011a), *Autobiographies* (Edward Thomas: Prose Writings: A Selected Edition, Volume I), ed. Guy Cuthbertson (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Thomas, Edward (2011b), *England and Wales* (Edward Thomas: Prose Writings: A Selected Edition, Volume II), ed. Guy Cuthbertson & Lucy Newlyn (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Cardiff, Cardiff University Arts and Social Studies Centre, scrapbooks of reviews and articles by Thomas:

Thomas, Edward (1898), 'The Coming of Autumn', *The Speaker*, 22 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

Thomas, Edward (1905), a review of five books, including *Ellan Vannin* by Harrold Johnson, *The Daily Chronicle*, 30 August. Cardiff scrapbook 2.

Thomas, Edward (1905), 'English and Scottish Popular Ballads', a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, MA, Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

Thomas, Edward (1908), a review of *Centuries of Meditations* by Thomas Traherne, *The Morning Post*, 31 August. Cardiff scrapbook 5.

Thomas, Edward (1909), a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Daily Chronicle*, 7 June. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

Thomas, Edward (1909), 'A New Poet', a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Bookman*, July. Cardiff scrapbook 8.

Thomas, Edward (1909), a review of *Poems and Translations* by John M. Synge, *The Daily Chronicle*, 26 July. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

Thomas, Edward (1910), a review of *A Shepherd's Life: Impressions of the South Wiltshire Downs* by W. H. Hudson, *The Morning Post*, 26 September. Cardiff scrapbook 5.

Thomas, Edward, (1910) a review of *An Outdoor Breviary* by M. Jourdain, *The Daily Chronicle*, 1 August. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

Thomas, Edward (1912), a review of *The Listeners and Other Poems* by Walter de la Mare, *The Bookman*, August. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

Thomas, Edward (1913), a review of *Georgian Poetry, 1911–1912*, *The Daily Chronicle*, 14 January. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

Thomas, Edward (1914), a review of *Goblin Market, The Prince's Progress, and other Poems* by Christina Rossetti, *The Daily News*, 26 March. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

Thomas, Edward (1914), a review of *Nature* by W. H. Davies, publication unknown, May. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

Thomas, Edward (1914), a review of *Des Imagistes: An Anthology*, *The New Weekly*, 9 May. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

Edward Thomas manuscript material:

Cambridge, Trinity College Library, MS RCT 17 (122).

Durham, Durham University Library, Abbott Literary Manuscripts, MS ABL 307 (letter to Cazenove).

London, British Library, MS 44990.

London, British Library, MS Ashley A4474.

New York, Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, MS 'Field Notes' (80 holograph notebooks 1895–1915), notebook 22.

**'Or must I be content with discontent | As larks and swallows are perhaps with wings?':
Lessons on Nature and Mental Health from Edward Thomas**

Introduction

The figure of Edward Thomas continues to cast its shadow across contemporary British nature writing, either as a central guide as in Robert Macfarlane's *The Old Ways*, or as a touchstone for the experience of deep engagement with nature, as in Horatio Clare's *The Light in the Dark* and John Lewis-Stempel's *Where Poppies Blow*. It is not difficult to understand why Edward Thomas remains so influential. Thomas is a poet whose deep personal need for contact with nature and willingness to fight to protect it is equalled by his awareness of its autonomous value separate from anthropocentric concerns. His poetic engagement with the non-human is complex and layered, but his writing style rejects artifice and decoration to seek more authentic, ecocentric ways of representing place. This commitment to truth also informs his realistic depiction of the British countryside, not as a static, idyllic retreat for urban people, but as a site of instability, change and conflict. All these factors contribute to Edward Thomas's continuing relevance to contemporary nature

writing and ecocriticism, but in this paper I will argue that the most important way in which the poems connect to contemporary readers is through their exploration of the relationship between nature and mental health. To explore this vital aspect of his writing, I will examine the nature of Edward Thomas's experiences of depression and trace its presence in his work. I will then consider the lessons contemporary nature writers can draw from his life and poetry, whilst also recognising the barriers that prevent certain groups and individuals from replicating his immersion in the natural world.

Edward Thomas's Mental Health

Throughout his life, Edward Thomas suffered from debilitating bouts of depression. It was a condition that was aggravated by a frustrating domestic life and the stifling demands of what he termed his 'hack' work: the endless stream of books and reviews he wrote to make his living. His wife, Helen, referred to 'his demons of melancholy' and the 'attacks of gloom and wretchedness' that led to 'days of silence and brooding despair'. This acute psychological distress is often identified as the defining feature of his work. John Lehmann claims that the 'intensity of suffering' in the poems is the element which 'sets his poetry apart from the great mass of pleasing nature writing/poetry which has been produced since the World War'. F. R. Leavis also found the psychological aspect of Thomas's work to be the dominant feature, stating that 'the outward scene is accessory to an inner theatre'. Thomas understood his own depression incisively, telling a friend: 'My self-criticism or rather my studied self-contempt is now nearly a disease'. He was formally diagnosed with neuroasthenia: an ill-defined condition marked by anxiety, listlessness and introspection. The illness caused periods of deep despair and once even drove him to take a revolver into the woods with the intention of ending his life. Thomas tried to cure his depression through periods of giving up alcohol, meat and sugar, by using opium, and by engaging in talking therapy with Godwin Baynes an early proponent of psychoanalysis. All had limited success. Always extremely self-aware, Thomas found that, for him, the most effective way of easing his depressive episodes was through what we may now term ecotherapy or green care: walking for days through the British countryside, immersing himself in nature and paying close attention to the physical world beyond the self. This need for contact with nature went beyond the pursuit of escapism, leisure or aesthetic pleasure, and when he started writing poetry, a creative outlet that would also ease his depression, this combination of his love of the natural world with his intense psychological enquiry would produce a new form of nature poetry that continues to inform contemporary ecocritical thought.

The Experience of Depression in the Poems

The impact of contact with nature on Edward Thomas's mental health is evident throughout the poems. One of the main ways in which nature eases his painful introspection is by drawing his attention beyond the self to consider non-human presences and alternative perspectives. This interest in the otherness of nature also brings humility in recognising forms of knowledge that exists beyond human perception. As Matthew Hollis explains, Edward Thomas knew 'that as a human being he must always remain outside of the experience of the animal, as if knowledge was uncertain, guessed at, and yet still possible to catch for the careful listener'. An example of this can be seen in 'The Unknown Bird'. In the poem, the speaker is unable to identify the source of the haunting 'Three lovely notes' of the bird's call. The sound is both completely separate from the speaker and mysteriously connected to their personal sadness. Characteristically, Thomas does not impose an anthropomorphic narrative on the bird's song, but retains its mystery, with even the recollection of its call having the power to alleviate his despair and allow him to temporarily escape his 'heavy body' and 'heavy heart' to become 'Light as that bird, wandering beyond my shore'.

'The Unknown Bird'

Three lovely notes he whistled, too soft to be heard
If others sang; but others never sang
In the great beech-wood all that May and June.
No one saw him: I alone could hear him
Though many listened. Was it but four years
Ago? or five? He never came again.

Oftenest when I heard him I was alone,
Nor could I ever make another hear.
La-la-la! he called, seeming far-off—
As if a cock crowed past the edge of the world,
As if the bird or I were in a dream.
Yet that he travelled through the trees and sometimes
Neared me, was plain, though somehow distant still
He sounded. All the proof is—I told men
What I had heard.

I never knew a voice,
Man, beast, or bird, better than this. I told
The naturalists; but neither had they heard
Anything like the notes that did so haunt me,
I had them clear by heart and have them still.
Four years, or five, have made no difference. Then
As now that La-la-la! was bodiless sweet:
Sad more than joyful it was, if I must say
That it was one or other, but if sad
'Twas sad only with joy too, too far off
For me to taste it. But I cannot tell
If truly never anything but fair
The days were when he sang, as now they seem.

This surely I know, that I who listened then,
Happy sometimes, sometimes suffering
A heavy body and a heavy heart,
Now straightway, if I think of it, become
Light as that bird wandering beyond my shore.

A similar respite from his excruciating self-consciousness and despair is evident in 'Beauty'. In the opening of the poem, the speaker describes themselves as 'Tired, angry, and ill at ease', bleakly composing an epitaph for themselves as 'all that no one loved of him | And that loved no one'. Finding a language for their despair through natural imagery, the speaker likens their mood to a river 'At fall of evening while it seems that never | Has the sun lighted it or warmed it'. However, even whilst expressing this sense of acute disconnection from the world, the speaker feels that 'some fraction' of themselves 'happily | Floats through the window even now to a tree' like a 'dove | That slants unswerving to its home and love'. The moment of separation from the despairing self and the connection to nature eases his self-reproach and in a rare moment of acceptance the speaker recognises 'Beauty is there'.

'Beauty'

WHAT does it mean? Tired, angry, and ill at ease,
No man, woman, or child alive could please
Me now. And yet I almost dare to laugh
Because I sit and frame an epitaph-
'Here lies all that no one loved of him
And that loved no one.' Then in a trice that whim
Has wearied. But, though I am like a river
At fall of evening when it seems that never
Has the sun lighted it or warmed it, while
Cross breezes cut the surface to a file,
This heart, some fraction of me, happily
Floats through a window even now to a tree
Down in the misting, dim-lit, quiet vale;
Not like a pewit that returns to wail
For something it has lost, but like a dove
That slants unanswering to its home and love.
There I find my rest, and through the dusk air
Flies what yet lives in me. Beauty is there

Nature also eased Edward Thomas's depression by providing a language to communicate the experience of despair and alienation. In 'Aspens' the speaker's affinity towards a tree that others find melancholy allows them to achieve greater self-knowledge and self-expression. The identification is stated explicitly as the aspens are shown to 'shake their leaves and men may hear | But need not listen more than to my rhymes'. This affiliation with the trees which stand outside the village rather than with 'The clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing' of the people in the inn reveals the essential loneliness of the speaker and his inability to rid

himself of the sadness which binds his character to the trees. However, whilst neither the tree nor speaker can control the association of their quiet, persistent voices with grief, the final lines indicate that an acceptance of self is achieved through the identification with nature.

‘Aspens’

All day and night, save winter, every weather,
Above the inn, the smithy, and the shop,
The aspens at the cross-roads talk together
Of rain, until their last leaves fall from the top.

Out of the blacksmith's cavern comes the ringing
Of hammer, shoe, and anvil; out of the inn
The clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing—
The sounds that for these fifty years have been.

The whisper of the aspens is not drowned,
And over lightless pane and footless road,
Empty as sky, with every other sound
Not ceasing, calls their ghosts from their abode,

A silent smithy, a silent inn, nor fails
In the bare moonlight or the thick-furred gloom,
In tempest or the night of nightingales,
To turn the cross-roads to a ghostly room.

And it would be the same were no house near.
Over all sorts of weather, men, and times,
Aspens must shake their leaves and men may hear
But need not listen, more than to my rhymes.

Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves
We cannot other than an aspen be
That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,
Or so men think who like a different tree.

When Nature Cannot Ease Depression

This feeling of connection to nature is central to Thomas's mental health, with moments of respite from depression always being associated with the experience of belonging. Such moments are precious because they are a rare counterpoint to more prevalent feelings of displacement and alienation. Whilst some poems celebrate moments of feeling fully connected to nature and relieved of excruciating feelings of despair, many focus on the antithesis: the devastating experience of complete estrangement from the world. One of the bleakest examples of this sense of isolation is in Thomas's prose work *The Icknield Way* where Thomas describes a particularly severe bout of depression exacerbated by a solitary night spent listening to a downpour of rain, which concludes with the statement that: 'I am not a part of nature. I am alone. There is nothing else in my world but my dead heart and

brain within me and the rain without'. He later adapted the passage into the poem 'Rain' which retains its sense of despair and desolation. In the poem, the speaker describes the relentless 'Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain' which drowns all but 'the love of death'.

'Rain'

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

Jan Marsh suggests that Thomas's 'melancholy stemmed from his inability to convey his delight in the country as vividly as he felt it'. This painful sense of self-limitation is present in poems such as 'Health' and 'The Glory'. In 'Health', the speaker mercilessly dissects his personal failings in comparison to the perfection of the spring day which 'Promises all and fails in nothing'. Restricted by his physical capabilities and debilitating depression the speaker knows that his acute self-consciousness means that he 'could not be as the wagtail' who is 'twittering | Happily and sweetly'. However, some value is found in being separate from non-human nature because unlike the birds who 'know not the sun' or the sun who 'regards not the bird' the speaker is conscious of the whole scene: 'I am almost proud to love both bird and sun, | Though scarce this Spring could my body leap four yards'.

In 'The Glory' the speaker again finds himself lacking in comparison to 'The glory of the beauty of the morning' which 'invites me, yet it leaves me scorning | All I can ever do, all I can be'. The beauty of the day provokes characteristic indecision in the speaker who cannot lift himself out of his 'discontent'. Characteristically considering non-human perspectives to understand his mood, the speaker asks 'must I be content with discontent / As larks and swallows are perhaps with wings?' At the close of the poem, the wearying indecision and the self-criticism in contrast to the magnificence of nature heightens the speaker's self-contempt and he concedes: 'I cannot bite the day to the core'.

Edward Thomas's poetic exploration of the relationship between nature and mental health is vital because it is permeated by the understanding that whilst nature could often ease his depression, it was not a 'cure' for his illness. This point is fundamental to the continuing relevance of his poetry. Thomas's refusal to diminish nature to a source of relief for human problems or to reduce depression to a condition that can be cured by a walk in the countryside means that his writing recognises the complexity of human/nature relations and the role of poetry in exploring them.

Three lessons for Nature Writers **Lesson 1**

What then can contemporary nature writers learn from Edward Thomas's complex poetic engagement with the relationship between nature and mental health? I have identified three key aspects of his work that continue to resonate over one hundred years later. The first lesson is the importance of paying attention to the world beyond ourselves and particularly to the small and overlooked aspects of the natural world. Thomas's poems are notable for their interest in what he called the 'innumerable holes and corners' in the countryside. Rather than the picturesque or grand, he is drawn to the 'unpoetic', the decaying barns, wood piles, nettle patches, overgrown lanes. This understanding of the beauty and importance of the seemingly innocuous or understated aspects of nature is evident in his study of spring in the poem 'But These Things Also' where he notices and gives value to:

The shell of a little snail bleached
In the grass; chip of flint, and mite
Of chalk; and the small birds' dung
In splashes of purest white

This attentiveness to the mundane or overlooked is also evident in 'November' where the speaker's attention is drawn to the muddy paths composed of 'Twig, leaf, flint, thorn' and patterned by the tracks of men and animals. The boot imprints are a literal representation of the impact of humans on the earth that are common throughout Thomas's poetry. The speaker finds these muddy paths that 'Few care for' to be 'the prettiest things on ground' because he recognises how their dark density clarifies the sky's 'cloudless heavenly light':

Another loves earth and November more dearly
Because without them, he sees clearly,
The sky would be nothing more to his eye
Than, he, in any case, is to the sky;
He loves even the mud whose dyes
Renounce all brightness to the skies.

This attentiveness toward the overlooked, mundane or common is important for contemporary nature writers and readers because it encourages interest in the presence of nature in our immediate environments rather than placing valuing on the idea of some mystical pristine nature that exists elsewhere. Edward Thomas's poetry may focus on the British countryside, but his love of nature and attention to the small and mundane parts of the non-human world started during his urban childhood on Wandsworth Common. This lifelong commitment to valuing aspects of nature overlooked by art and literature becomes increasingly important to contemporary life, as over 80% of the UK population now live in urban areas. It teaches us to value what is immediate and notice the beauty and importance of what is often overlooked and undervalued.

Lesson 2

The second lesson to be drawn from Edward Thomas's poetry, is that all places are continually shaped by both human and non-human presences, and that humans and nature are intricately connected. 'It is sometimes consoling to remember how much of the pleasantness of English country is due to men, by chance or design'. Recognising place as a composite of human and non-human forces, allows for greater understanding of nature and the impact of humans upon it. This interest in forms of history that engage with 'the humanness of place' can be seen in 'Bob's Lane'. In the poem, the speaker traces the history of a disused lane to the life of 'shovel-bearded Bob' who planted elm trees along it. The simple act is motivated by his love 'of most living things | But a tree chiefly'. In planting the trees the farmer creates a legacy which ties him to place even after his death: 'the name alone survives, Bob's Lane' and continue to shape the human experience of place as 'travellers hear from the slow-climbing train' the stormcock singing from the elms. Imaginatively, the landscape of the poems continues to evolve beyond its creation, with contemporary readers adding to the loss of the farmer, next the poet and then, due to Dutch Elm Disease, the absence of the trees that inspired the poem.

'As The Team's Head Brass' also shows human actions on the land. The initial description of ploughing seems to portray a conventional rural scene, but the conversation between the speaker and the ploughman reveals an intricate chain of events that connect the fighting in France to changes to the land, community and individuals at home. The presence of the fallen elm, which the ploughman cannot move until the unknown time 'When the war's over', illustrates how the absence of farm workers physically alters the rural landscape. Even a single death has repercussions, and the ploughman muses that 'Everything | Would have been different' if the war had not started and his friend had not been killed. This disconcerting sense of uncertainty is deepened by the final image of the horses 'stumbling' as they start out 'for the last time': foreshadowing the poet's imminent absence from the landscape, as well as

the disappearance of that particular rural scene as the mechanisation of farming and further depopulation of the countryside permanently alter British agriculture

As well as human actions, the countryside is equally shaped by their absences. The quiet emptiness of the countryside enables the speaker to hear the trees whispering and birds singing, but it also reveals not only the impact of countrymen fighting abroad, but also the consequences of the agricultural depression of the 1870s which stemmed from a culmination of urbanisation, poor weather, cheap food imports and bad harvests. This decline of British agriculture and the subsequent depopulation of areas of the countryside are reflected in the poems' depictions of solitary journeys through the landscape which are only occasionally disrupted by the welcome encounters with locals or wanderers marginalised by the changes brought by technological modernity. As a war poet who rarely mentioned the conflict explicitly in his poems, Edward Thomas conveyed the full pity of war through its impact on the British countryside. An example is 'In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)' a four line poem that manages in its simplicity to depict the disparity between the abundance of nature and the scarcity of human activity.

'In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)'

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
This Eastertide call into mind the men,
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts,
should
Have gathered them and will do never again.

It is a poem that gathers resonance for the contemporary reader, who pre-empted a further disappearance in the poet's own final journey to war. By illustrating the consequences of fighting abroad on the physical and social landscape of the British countryside, the poem emphasises the complex interconnections between humans and nature and presents the countryside as a composite of human and non-human presences where the fate of one is inversely correlated with that of the other. The importance of this knowledge is linked to the third and most important lesson we can take from Edward Thomas: the importance of personal responsibility for the physical environment.

Lesson 3

One of the key connections between Edward Thomas's war time poetry and contemporary nature writing in the age of the Anthropocene is an awareness of the vulnerability of nature to human actions and the challenge of how to meaningfully respond to this. The third lesson that Thomas's poetry can teach us is the importance of acting to protect the environment. Edward

Thomas was clear about why he chose to enlist to fight in the First World War. Crumbling some soil between his fingers, he told his friend that he was fighting 'Literally, for this'. Whilst it would be anachronistic to read the poems through the lens of current knowledge about anthropogenic climate change, what does resonate across the period is Thomas's awareness of the vulnerability of nature and the importance of looking to the natural world for signs of change.

An example of Thomas's knowledge of the precarious balance between humans and nature, and his awareness of the importance of birds and birdsong to understanding change is evident in 'How at Once'. In the poem the speaker's celebration of the swifts who return 'The same year after year' is undermined by an intangible anxiety about the vulnerability of human and non-human life:

'How At Once'

How at once should I know,
When stretched in the harvest blue
I saw the swift's black bow,
That I would not have that view
Another day
Until next May
Again it is due?

The same year after year -
But with the swift alone.
With other things I but fear
That they will be over and done
Suddenly
And I only see
Them to know them gone.

This tension between what is certain and what is now in doubt is also explored in 'March' where the speaker searches for signs of spring: 'Now I know the Spring will come again, Perhaps tomorrow'. In the poem he observes the natural world for signs of spring despite the 'cold burning of hail and wind' and 'Mountains on mountains of snow and ice in the west'. The unseasonable weather is disconcerting, but recognising the limits of human knowledge, the speaker looks to nature, asking: 'What did the thrushes know?' Importantly, Edward Thomas does not attempt to translate or anthropomorphise the birds' song or humanise its message, but neither are the birds completely separate as the speaker acknowledges their shared presence in place and their sensitivity to seasonal change: 'Something they knew- I also'. The presence of the birds strengthen his trust in the continuity of nature but his optimism is undercut by a qualification, 'that Spring returns, perhaps tomorrow'.

Limitations

These lessons drawn from Edward Thomas's poetry allow us to consider ways of engaging with nature that have the potential to improve mental health and increase environmental responsibility. However, it is important to recognise that for many there are barriers to attempting to replicate such engagement with nature. As a white, middle class, able-bodied male, Edward Thomas had the freedom and ability to wander the countryside without fear of experiencing hostility, harm or difficulties. For others, the countryside holds more barriers. It is noticeable that whilst Edward Thomas would impulsively leave home for days to walk across the South of England, his wife Helen was left to cover the childcare and domestic responsibilities at home. For women now, the desire to walk alone is tempered by a fear for personal safety. It was an issue highlighted recently on Twitter, where the provocative question of what women would do if men had a 9pm curfew generating an overwhelming expression of desire to walk alone anywhere at any time of day or night. Fear of hostility is also cited as a reason why there is such a low percentage of visitors to national parks from the Black, Asian and minority ethnic community in Britain and why, until the recent arrival of the *Willow Herb* journal, this absence was also reflected in minority representation in nature writing. Access to the countryside is also restricted by financial and physical restraints with a lack of adequate public transport or the expense of reaching rural areas, blocking many from doing so.

Conclusion

Whilst these barriers to replicating Edward Thomas's experiences of the British countryside require continuing negotiation and discussion, the central message of the potential for contact with nature to ease mental health difficulties remains pertinent. Awareness of the impact of nature on mental health has recently gained media attention, with Scottish GPs now prescribing hiking and birdwatching for patients, and research from neuroscience identifying strong links between exposure to nature and wellbeing. In a time when the continual stream of scientific reports about the devastating consequences of climate change can make us feel overwhelmed by the size of the challenge, the genre of nature writing has a vital role in providing a space in which to reconsider how humans live in the world and to nurture a sense of responsibility for all the places where we live. Edward Thomas remains important to contemporary nature writers because he understood the intricate connections between the internal and external world, and had paid the ultimate price in repaying the debt he owed to the landscapes that had lessened the suffering caused by his mental health. In these ways, the poet who Ted Hughes called 'the father of us all' continues to hold important lessons for the benefit of both the human and non-human world.

Dr. Elizabeth Black

Bibliography

Cuthbertson, Guy, and Lucy Newlyn, eds., *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007)

Hollis, Matthew, *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011)

Lehmann, John, *The Open Night* (London: Longmans Green + Co, 1952)

Leavis, F. R., *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1950)

Marsh, Jan, *Edward Thomas: A Poet for his Country* (London: Paul Elek, 1978)

Thomas, Edward, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979)

- *The Icknield Way* (London: Wildwood House, 1980)

- *The South Country* (Dorset: Little Toller Books, 2009)

**'Memories of Edward Thomas' by Julian, Ernest H. and Sir Theodore ('Dory')
Thomas, collected by Rowland Watson.**

Retyped from a typescript manuscript (1947) in the Edward Thomas Study Centre by Julia Maxted, with kind permission of the Estate of Rowland Watson.

Julian Thomas

I think it was in the summer of 1912 that Edward invited me to walk with him along the Icknield Way. We set out from Streatley and during a week-end covered 100 miles or more, eating only one meal a day. The reason for this extraordinary restriction was that Edward's neighbour (Geoffrey Lupton) at Wick Green, who radiated good health, used regularly to do a hard day's work, physical and intellectual, and return home to a meal of a dozen oranges having eaten nothing else all day. Almost every kind of food, except oranges, was harmful to the human body, or so we then believed. Our digestions were incapable of wrestling with more than one meal, even of the plainest fare, in 24 hours. Edward and I were both physically fit, but we allowed ourselves to be persuaded that by eating three or four times daily such mixtures of leavened bread, meat, cooked vegetables, and home-made cakes (which Helen prepared most appetisingly) we were doing ourselves irreparable harm. Be that as it may we began our long walk resolved to eat nothing each day but a good breakfast, which was more likely to consist of bacon and eggs (of which to our shame we were very fond) than oranges, which our chance wayside lodgings would be unable to provide. By evening on the first day we arrived at the village of East Hendred. Our feelings of hunger were hard to bear: but these we had been advised, were merely symptoms of indigestion, and would disappear if we continued fasting. I slept well, but Edward was kept awake by the noise of heavy rain which

continued all night.

Next day, after a good breakfast of a typically English sort, we walked on to Chiseldon where we hoped to find lodging for the night. Whether or not because we were not wearing hats we could not obtain shelter in that place and were obliged to tramp along a hard main road to Swindon where we were glad enough to rest our weary limbs and blistered feet. We were enjoying ourselves, and Edward was in good spirits all the time, even when the Chiseldon people took him for a suspicious character, possibly a German spy. He would pause on the way now and then to make a note of something one of us had observed which might be used in the book he had to do [The Icknield Way]. I reminded him of a review of one of his early books in which the critic tried to hurt by saying he wrote about “off-things” – a remark prompted by a misprint ‘Old unhappy far off things’. “Silly ass,” said Edward, “ and yet there may be something in what he says. Perhaps I do write about ‘off-things’, if he means things that other writers might not notice, or think not worth mentioning.’ I like to remember him for those beautiful “off-things’ he has preserved, whose significance increases as his England disappears.

Our walk ended next day at Marlborough. It was our last long walk together, and the longest. As I have already mentioned he was in the best of spirits when we started, and his good humour continued throughout, despite our senseless fasting. How long he kept up the practice of eating one meal a day I do not know, but I am sure that it was responsible for much of his irritability and gloom, which both disappeared when he became a soldier and ate regular meals of wholesome food.

Ernest H. Thomas

My earliest important memory of Edward is of sitting on a footstool on a chair at a table whilst he amused himself and me by drawing anything I asked for. But his favourite subject, often repeated was a fox-hunt. At that time I suppose I was about five years old and Edward seven, but I shall always remember the amount of action and life he got into his horses, hounds and the fox, and the details of his landscape.

One drawing of a donkey’s head, done when he was five, was treasured by my father for years. He kept it in his pocket wallet, carefully wrapped in tissue paper. The last time I saw it was when I was twenty-one, and had had several years at a school of art myself, and I remember being struck by the extraordinary way he had captured the characteristic bulging forehead and sleepy white rimmed eye of his subject.

It is idle to speculate as to what heights he could have reached as an artist, because so far as I know he gave up drawing before he reached his teens.

My brother and I had little to do with each other during our schooldays. Edward kept pigeons, and collected eggs and butterflies, whilst I was busy playing cricket and football. The only time we really spent together was in the Summer holidays, when we went year after year to stay with our grandmother at Swindon.

We went fishing every day in the Wilts and Berks Canal, now alas, stagnant and in many places, dry. But at that time it was in good order and daily use. It was well stocked with every kind of fresh water fish.

We were usually kept fairly busy with our rods, but sometimes on blazing afternoons when the fish refused to feed, we would trespass in the fields, which were separated from the canal by a hedge which skirted the tow-path and search for eggs.

Once we were caught red-handed.

In the middle of a field, and about two hundred yards from the canal was a dark, mysterious pool surrounded by trees, which Edward was sure was the haunt of moor-hens.

The farmer had a reputation for dealing sharply with trespassers, but we dashed across the two hundred yards and gained the safety of the trees. A branch of one hung over the pond ending in a spray of twigs resting on the water. And there, was a moor-hen's nest and eggs. Edward was out on the branch almost within reach of the eggs, and I was keeping 'cave', when we heard the thud of galloping hoofs from an unexpected direction. It was the farmer, absolutely true to type. Big, bearded, brown and bright of eye, and wearing a flat-topped brown bowler, he was mounted on a very imposing white horse which stood perfectly still while the farmer looked at us for a few moments of awful silence. Then he took our names and address.

Fortunately our father was in Swindon at the time and the next day the farmer rode up to the house on his white horse. He and our father had a long chat together, and the matter was settled by the donation of 5s. to the local hospital.

This was nearly the last of our holidays in Swindon together. The younger members of the family were taken to Eastbourne in the holidays, whilst Edward continued to go to Swindon. On these visits he went further afield, meeting 'The Old Man' ('Dad' David Uzzell, a peasant who became a great friend for excursions) and discovering Coate reservoir and exploring Richard Jefferies' haunts.

At about this time Edward and I were sharing a bedroom at home, and every night after we had got into bed he would keep me awake by repeating from memory yards of poetry, particularly Keats and Shelley, which he had been reading that evening. This led to arguments and quarrels, which lasted for several years until we were old enough to know better.

In about the summer of 1903 Edward and I went on our last visit to Swindon together, and spent three glorious days fishing from a punt on Coate Reservoir.

Edward, a far more keen and experienced fisherman than I, caught nothing but a few roach during the whole time. We each had two rods out, one for roach, which went into the live-bait can, and one for pike. I had all the luck with the “big ‘uns”, although Edward was the first to notice that the cork on my jack-line had disappeared, in fact he woke me from a day-dream by saying very quietly “ in case you’re interested you’ve probably hooked a jack”. It weighed 8 pounds!

I stayed with Edward several times after that. He had married and had a wife and two children to support by his literary work and would often be writing late into the night. At that time he was reviewing books of all kinds and he would pass on for me to read anything he thought would interest me.

In this way I read T. W. H. Crosland’s “ The Unspeakable Scot”, and I have never heard my brother laugh so heartily as when I read out some passage that appealed to me in that refreshing book.

He had a great sense of humour, but like any other highly sensitive soul forced by circumstances to do a great deal of uncongenial work, he found very little to laugh about, and became rather moody and morose.

It was not until he began to live a more or less care-free life in the Army that my brother Edward did his best work, though even then public appreciation was denied him and he died a disappointed man.

Sir Theodore Thomas

I knew my brother Edward best when he was aged between fourteen and twenty and I was four years younger. Incidentally he was always Edwy to his brothers and it was only professionally and to those who met him in that connection that his full second name was used.

My earliest recollections of him are being taken for long walks in search of butterflies, bird's egg, or nothing in particular other than isolation from mankind, coupled with a complete disregard for the laws of trespass. For one of so gentle a character he could be extraordinarily defiant of gamekeepers, and threatening letters to my father passed on to him with added threats were not of the slightest avail. He did no willing damage but regarded himself as entitled to go where he wished for the purpose in his mind without regard to the rights of ownership and the alleged presence of mantraps and spring guns. He was scornful of the latter though he told me once of the severe scars he had seen on a man who had been caught up in a trap which had been overlooked when the law compelled their removal. Edward's build, habits and advantage in years over me made it difficult for me to keep going on some of our walks: indeed 25 miles in one day for a boy of 13 years was no mean feat, and the pace was a brisk one. When the objective was reached the form of exercise changed and often consisted of climbing what seemed to me high trees in search of wood pigeons' or rooks' eggs. Sometimes a day would be devoted to fishing and I well remember walking with Edward from Clapham to Richmond Park late one afternoon to ground bait a selected part of the Penn ponds. This was done liberally and in great secrecy for we were not unselfish enough to desire that someone else should derive the benefit of our labours. The next morning we set out at 6 a.m. but at the end of 12 hours neither of us had had a bite. That didn't seem to matter and we thoroughly enjoyed our day. On another occasion when fishing at the same place by himself Edward caught the largest pike of the year. I met him returning with the fish swinging by his side and a look of sheer elation on his face. He would be about 16 years old but the sources of pleasure changed little with advancing years though his opportunities became less when the necessity to earn a living arose. The pressure hurt him badly not because he lacked energy and ability but because what he felt he could was not productive of income.

We used to spend holidays together at Swindon where our grandmother lived. There in the early morning we would start a fire, sole means of boiling a kettle, cooking a meal and heating the cottage. Bellows compensated for the shortage of wood and we always had a sense of accomplishment when this, the first task of the day, was completed. Then we prepared our fishing tackle and bait for we were free directly after breakfast to commence our part of the day. Along the canal sides to a point where we could rely on quickly catching enough roach or dace for bait, and then on to spots we favoured for jack fishing either from repute or own experience. Not infrequently one of us would take charge of both rods while the other went into neighbouring fields and woods after wild flowers, butterflies, snakes or lizards. I was usually the one to remain by the canal side. As this was school holiday time the season was not right for bird's eggs unless it happened that we went at Easter which was seldom. A large fish on his or my line was always an occasion for excitement for Edward and

he would jump into the canal with his gaff if he thought it the only way to land it. For him it was worth while despite the mess of mud on his clothes as there was no question of being equipped with gum boots. Weather was no deterrent for him and was never allowed to interfere with his plans. It was a result of walking with him in drenching rain, at first admittedly much against my will that I learnt eventually not to be bothered by it.

In later years, though at an early age, when Edward had 'settled down' with a wife and family we lived a good distance apart and our meetings took the form of my spending a week-end at Bearsted, the Weald of Kent, or Petersfield. He then had obligations to write for a living though many were the days when he would sit idly, and I fear, morosely, able to ponder but not to write such stuff, as editors would accept on commercial grounds. Sometimes he would pack up and come for a walk but his thoughts did not leave him though the physical exercise probably brought some relief from mental struggle.

Conversation of these occasions was not easy as the only relief from gloom was for me to indulge in a mild flippancy, which I didn't really feel. He was seldom in a mood to reciprocate so we might walk many miles without exchanging a word other than to comment that his dog had disappeared a long time ago on a hunting expedition. Its emergence from a wood with a bloody mouth gave us a welcome new topic for a few minutes. Often he would be carrying one of his children "flying angel" fashion for long distances apparently without effort.

On his best days Edward was a good companion by reason of his immense knowledge of all one can see or hear on a country walk and his easy and melodious way of putting over such knowledge. On his worst days the onus was upon you to originate conversation if you wanted it. Even in these moods he was easily stirred by the song of a human or a bird, by the laugh of a woodpecker, the hark of a pheasant, the sight of a rare butterfly, or the bark of a fox in the darkness, but the effect was not lasting and silence would descend unless by some trick you could disperse it. There was companionship in this silence because you knew it was no born of emptiness of mind but of a deep reserve which required help at times to enable it to find expression. He once stayed at my house for a month or more in a London suburb. Apart from breakfast, which he had in his own room he took his meals out. I hardly saw him the whole time but discovered later that his conscience worried him because he was receiving a salary as Secretary of a Commission and, though it was little enough, it appeared to him excessive for the work involved. In spite of my persuasion the powers of evil prevailed and he resigned. The fact that he couldn't afford to give it up made no impressions.

These notes illustrate some aspects of " *a boy who emerged into manhood without a restful pause*".

***The Observer* review, 26 April 1914, *In Pursuit of Spring* by Edward Thomas (Nelson.) 5s.**

Most of us are content to wait more or less patiently for the coming of Spring, and to fête her coming by as long a tramp as possible in the country. This year she peeped out in February, and coldly wept through March, and in April burst upon us in all her dancing splendour, so that old men have shaken their heads and declared that there never was such a Spring. She has stirred in us more than ever her own aspiration of life; even we, who have been but waiting for her advent, have answered her call to now life so that we have grudged our limitations, longed for powers of work and growth not yet developed among men.

But Mr. Thomas, in the year of his book, could not quietly wait for Spring's coming. He had to be up and out after her, to meet her on her way, to welcome her. He did not go to the South of France in a "train de Luxe," following fashion rather than the Spring. He did a better thing than that, jollier if less luxurious, and one which proves the sincerity of his quest. He got out his bicycle and pedalled his keen way from London to Bridgwater, through Guildford to Dunbridge, over Salisbury Plain to Trowbridge, Shepton Mallet and Bridgwater, where he found Winter's grave and Spring:

"By the side of the road were the first blue-bells and cowslips. They were not growing there, but some child had gathered them below at Stowey or Durleigh, and then, getting tired of them, had dropped them. They were beginning to wilt, but they lay upon the grave of Winter. I was quite sure of that. Winter may rise up through mould alive with violets and primroses and daffodils, but when cowslips and bluebells have grown over his grave he cannot rise again: he is dead and rotten, and from his ashes the blossoms are springing. Therefore I was very glad to see them."

And he was right to be glad, whatever old men may say who can remember snow in June. He had set out on a good pilgrimage, on a worthy quest, and he had achieved it —

"Thus I leapt over April and into May, as I sat in the sun on the north side of Cothelstone Hill on the 28th of March, the last day of my journey westward to find the Spring."

Mr. Thomas tells his adventures of mind and body on his journey; and a very pleasant wind-swept book the telling makes. As he passes Box Hill, he remembers Meredith and his love of earth; how "he was not so much an admirer and lover of Nature, like other poets, as a part of her, one of her most splendid creatures, fit to be ranked with the white-beam, the lark, and the south-west wind." And he thinks of other poets and writers, as he passes the places where

they lived, quite naturally as a man of letters should : of George Bourne, of W. H. Hudson, of Hardy, of Barnes and others, and his thoughts on them are just and sincere as are his thoughts on the weather and the inns and the beauty of the country and the character of the people he meets. All are woven together in a fresh and delightful book, which every lover of poetry and the open air and honest writing will appreciate.

Book Reviews

***Richard Jefferies, A Miscellany* by Andrew Rossabi**

How fortunate for us that Andrew Rossabi has produced this excellent miscellany of Jefferies' writing so soon after Volume One of his biography of the man. It may be a miscellany, but there is method in it, and although Rossabi pays heed to the chronology of the writing and to Jefferies' life, the extracts are not necessarily in the order in which they were written. Thus, the first extract is taken from *The Early Fiction of Richard Jefferies*, and that is followed by two extracts from *The Story of My Life*. The juxtapositions familiarise the reader with the major elements in Jefferies' art and thinking. I particularly liked the commentaries at the beginning of and occasionally within each text. These are succinct and helpful especially to those who are not familiar with Jefferies' life and ideas. Most of his works feature in the 271 pages.

What emerges is not themes as much as different sides of Jefferies character, on the one hand the practical country man, as demonstrated in books such as *The Amateur Poacher* and *Wild Life in a Southern County*, and the visionary, mystical side, as seen in *The Story of My Heart* and novels such as *The Dewy Morn*, which moved Edward Thomas greatly. Both sides come together in Benny Haylock's, the gamekeeper, words on the need to be in the fresh air, a lesson Thomas also learned. There are indeed numerous quotations from Thomas's biography of Jefferies.

Rossabi's book is useful for readers with varying knowledge of Jefferies. A beginner will find enough here to whet the appetite, while a long term admirer will have a useful bedside book: open at any page and he or she will find something to please them. Many of the key writings are there, including the letter to The Times that first made Jefferies well known, as well as the first chapter of *Amaryllis at the Fair*, and of *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *The Dewy Morn* and *After London*, all of which I would argue are keys to knowing Jefferies. There is much more besides. That final essay 'My Old Village', which tugs at the heartstrings of all lovers of his work is right at the end of the book, a climax as it should be.

Richard Emeny, December 2019

Richard Jefferies, A Miscellany, Edited and with an Introduction by Andrew Rossabi. (2019)
Galileo Publishers, Cambridge, 2019, ISBN978191291605-4

Turning the Boat for Home: A life writing about nature by Richard Mabey

A Claxton Diary: Further Field Notes from a Small Planet by Mark Cocker, Woodcuts by Jonny Gibbs

On his birthday in 1910, Thomas, noted: 3rd day of sun, light S and S.W. wind, pale blue skies w fleets of clouds over at times + some threats – frost at nt – larks sing – jackdaws soar + float – grey Old Man is tipped w sage green at end of each dry curved stem – green woodpeckers shout long + loud how lovely at 8 the white fields – dark woods – little houses sending thr mist of pearly smoke slowly + lighted low above dark trees + white earth – all looks new born and fair (Fieldwork Book 42, Berg Archive, New York Public Library).

This land and sky scan from his Ashford Hanger study is typical of his workbooks which routinely fed into his prose and poetry. Richard Mabey and Mark Cocker record what they have seen from their own study windows and, like Thomas, they have gathered massive material in their decades of walking, watching and ruminating. Both are accomplished writers with telling insight, eloquence and profundity.

Through previously published articles, Mabey structures his book around early writing influences, writing about plants, the politics of the environment and new nature writing. Cocker takes us through the year's seasons via 11 years of newspaper articles. With a poignancy of language and richness of metaphor, they describe the evolution of their outlook, decisions and attitudes, declaring ambivalence and doubt, frustration and moments of insight. They celebrate their past and current influences, some of whom Thomas respected – such as Gilbert White, Jefferies and Hudson – in Mabey's words, masters of making narratives of the untidy and uncertain excitements of their fieldwork. Norfolk naturalist Arthur Patterson is much admired by Cocker; Thomas reviewed five of his books and wrote of him as a hearty naturalist who enjoys his labours and, what is more, reveals his enjoyment as well as his labour in his style. (12.01.08).

Mabey recalls Roger Deakin, commenting on nature's connectivity, referencing Adlestrop and its vision of blackbirds singing 'Farther and farther, all the birds / Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire'. Both writers have studied birdsong and Mabey speaks movingly and

cogently of the nature and purposes of human and avian music. Cocker has a many-layered sense which reaches back into time. He writes with Thomas-like sensibility – one should not forget how [the withered heads of old nettles] even they, as they chaff and creak in the breeze, and when joined by reed or sedge all around, create that typical soft woodland accompaniment to winter. The music of woodland is every bit as important as that of the rainforests. The song-thrush melody is far older than the idea of England, older than this island itself – a sound of the whole Holocene that has sailed over the heads of British woods since the last ice age. It is well-worn and venerable and completely new all at the same time. And then: Something of that latent reverberation in birdsong is celebrated in one of the most famous and beloved poems in the English language, a popularity that tell us, incidentally a great deal about the universal impact of avian sounds. It is Edward Thomas's *Adlestrop...* Thomas captures so perfectly that momentary insight we have that their singing is not confined to our time and place. It is expansive and universal. My only question of Thomas is why did you limit your sense of the birds' spreading net of music to only two English counties?

Thomas felt strongly about the erosion of older ways by the growth of suburbia and its pretensions. Not being a political man, he was never as trenchantly critical of the ecologically-destructive attitudes of wealthy landed interests and global corporations – already at work in his day. The extensive damage was not then appreciated as it is today. But writing to de la Mare in 1908, Thomas said, ... Man seems to me a very little part of Nature & the part I enjoy least. But civilisation has estranged us superficially from Nature, & towns make it possible for a man to live as if a millionaire could really produce all the necessities of life, food, drink, clothes, vehicles & c, then a tombstone. I believe some do live so. He would have validated Mabey's notion of respectful neighbourliness – humans and landscape are ancient partners. Speaking of Ronald Blythe, Mabey says he offers something far more valuable and noble, the literature of 'us', where the 'I', so to speak, becomes the eye, fascinated with the world beyond itself.

Cocker and Mabey, in the prophetic tradition of nature writers such as Rachel Carson, speak urgently and extensively of the human manhandling of nature.

There is wry comment on the damaging mania for tidying up nature, evident in much horticultural and agricultural practice. At least I million acres of clipped lawn lie alongside the postwar reduction by 99% of our flowering meadows. Like Isabella Tree in Wilding, both authors advocate a *laissez faire* of sitting on your hands and giving nature its entitled space to enrich by its complex processes. Nature is a force within itself, not a human construct, asserts Mabey.

Both writers exemplify this struggle by recalling the battle of the Bogs or Flows, the vast Caithness tundra-like wet peatlands. Beckoned by the lure of lucrative investment opportunities and quick profits by planting fast-growing conifer plantations, the Thatcher administration deregulated and steamrollered local interests. Great swathes were gouged, disinfected and fenced off, inflicting damage on age-old ecology and its many habitats. (This struggle for a radical rethink of the human relationship to the environment is the culmination of Cocker's critique of environmental practice and malpractice, compellingly argued in **Our Place: Can We Save Britain's Wildlife Before It Is Too Late?** Jonathan Cape 2018.) In the teeth of moneyed privilege Cocker decries the domination of the grouse-shoot which can net £40k for a day's work at the cost of systematic massacre of predators as well as the gamebirds and ancient ecologies of wildlife and human habitation. Acquisitiveness trumps ecological respect.

Mabey comments that Nature could neither ethically nor practically be regarded as a private resource; it is damaged by the political determination of economic usefulness. Cocker maintains that we are so much more in love with our own creations, such as prized cathedrals (he loves them, too) than we are with those of nature, the immensely variable and valuable ecology of which should also be venerated as being as complex and beautiful as any human construction.

Both books are rich in interest and engage persuasively and informatively. If Mabey is telling a truth that sometimes it is the smallest things that reveal the largest themes, then these books are part of an epic theme. They speak to the urgency of our times.

Ben Mackay

A Clayton Diary: Further Field Notes from a Small Planet by Mark Cocker (2019) London: Jonathan Cape ISBN: 9781787331761

Turning the Boat for Home by Richard Mabey (2019) London: Chatto & Windus ISBN: 9780701181086

Ghostland. In Search of Haunted Country by Edward Parnell

Ghostland takes the familiar form of literary pilgrimage but merges it with the author's personal history. While its focus is the uncanny, the weird and supernatural, it can feel that there is scarcely an author in the British Isles who doesn't receive a passing mention. Fens, ruins, forests and the coast hold the potential for horror, mystery and alarm in the work of authors spanning chiefly the eighty years either side of the First World War.

The figure of MR James is referenced throughout, in part because his Fenland background held the author's childhood home and because he began the emphasis of potential terror in nature rather than the gothic focus on the haunted castles and abbeys of an earlier generation. Conan Doyle's spiritualist beliefs, de la Mare's mysterious work that has lasted so well, Algernon Blackwood's eerie stories, emerge as he traverses the east of the country.

Interwoven throughout among his explorations are memories of family holidays – of parents and an older brother: a sense of sadness is there throughout with good reason as the author had lost both parents when he was seventeen, his brother a few years older. The brothers were close and shared an interest in bird-watching, another recurring element. Although ill from the age of twenty-two, only at the conclusion do we learn that the brother also died as a consequence of cancer when he was in his forties. Parnell is himself consciously living with these 'ghosts' – to ensure that there is something of them remaining.

Journeys to Scotland, Wales and Cornwall trace chiefly minor writers of the genre, though Machen, Garner and Susan Cooper have interesting sections. Later he 'visits' W.G. Sebald: I think Sebald may have been an inspiration for *Ghostland*, not least in the inclusion of grainy black and white photographs, many more than in Sebald. They add very much to the interest of the book.

There is a difficulty for me in that Parnell 'tells' the plots of works he covers in an inevitably matter-of-fact summary, so that any atmosphere of the uncanny is, for me, lost. I also felt that it was a pity he couldn't refrain from including every possible literary reference- I don't need to be told that Hardy's *Tess* was arrested at Stonehenge, nor perhaps that blackbirds at dawn on the Ouse were an 'approximation of the last verse of Edward Thomas's poem 'Adlestrop' only with Suffolk and Norfolk now taking the place of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.' That is the only reference to Thomas, but Gibson's Flannan Isle- rather a favourite of mine – does appear.

Perhaps that is a clue to one way to use this book- use the index to seek out your favourite authors or locations, ones where you may be holidaying – Lamorna for me for example. But there is a narrative thread of personal memoir which Parnell has used to underpin his expeditions and that may merit a cover to cover approach through its 450 pages.

Margaret Keeping

Ghostland: In Search of a Haunted Country (October 2019)

New York: William Collins ISBN: 978-0008271954

Notices

Edward Thomas: A Miscellany by Anna Stenning with illustrations by Anna Dillon has been reprinted in a larger format by Galileo Publishers.

Edward Thomas's essay 'Swansea Village' has been reprinted in a pamphlet edited by Jeff Towns. Copies are available from Jeff at: Dylans Bookstore, The Old Manse, 5 Summerland Lane, Swansea SA3 4UJ.

Edward Thomas Study Centre, Petersfield Museum. The contractors took possession of the whole site at the end of July 2019 and are on track to deliver completed building works to the Museum trustees and staff in July for fit-out and re-opening in October. If you would like to know more about progress, please visit the Petersfield Museum website, <https://www.petersfieldmuseum.co.uk>.