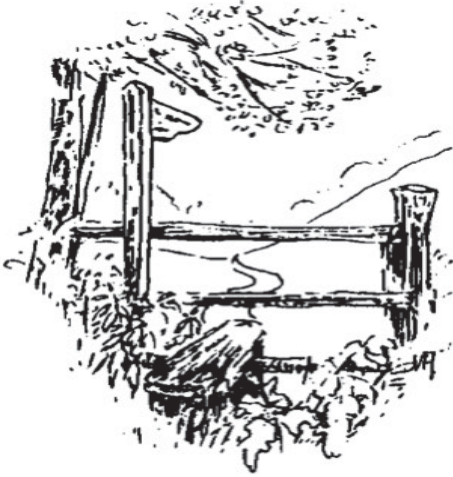


# THE EDWARD THOMAS FELLOWSHIP



Except that bridges superannuated fords, the conditions for the travelling of cattle cannot have changed much from Alfred's time until the day of railway trucks carrying thickets of moaning horns and square blocks of sheep. The turnpike system helped to preserve the old roads because drovers using them could avoid the tolls; their cattle could also feed by the wayside. Canon Jackson, in 1862, said that the Ridgeway of Berkshire and Wiltshire was part of the road used for ages and to this day for driving cattle from Anglesey to Kent. Mr. Walter Money, in a note to Miss Gossett's *Shepherds of Britain*, said much the same thing. Unfortunately neither has told us anything of their route. I have no doubt they could have covered most of the distance on grass. I should like to have travelled with them.

*The Icknield Way*

## NEWSLETTER 84 AUGUST 2020

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### CHAIR'S WELCOME AND REPORT

Welcome everyone to the Fellowship's eighty-fourth newsletter. We are in a period of time that has been more momentous than I am sure any of us could have imagined – and have had profound, and sad, impacts on many. To all of you who have lost loved ones, friends, colleagues to this dreadful disease, please accept our condolences.

When I was writing my welcome to the previous newsletter we were in the midst of an extremely wet winter and on the verge of the wettest February on record.

We were looking forward to the annual Birthday Walk (1st March) and an exciting Study Day in June. Owing to a mixture of climate and COVID, both had to be postponed, and we appreciate a number of you had to make last minute change of plans. Thank you for your forbearance.

The "Birthday" Walk, and Fellowship AGM are now scheduled to take place on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October although the exact format may change if COVID guidelines (which are in a state of constant flux) alter in the meantime. Further details follow in this newsletter and there will be regular updates during September on the Fellowship's website.

The Study Day will now take place on Saturday 12th June 2021 and as far as possible will follow the format, with the same participants, as previously planned. More details about the Study Day will appear in the next newsletter.

In the meantime, your committee have been thinking about how else we can celebrate the Fellowship's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary since inception by Myfanwy Thomas, Anne Mallinson and

others in the autumn of 1980. We were therefore delighted to hear of an Edward Thomas Digital Festival being proposed by Petersfield Museum (where the new Edward Thomas Study Centre will be based) to take place between 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> October this year.

The Fellowship has been invited to take part and have been delighted to accept, as the focus of those fortieth celebrations. There is a separate article about this exciting event, which also encompasses National Poetry Day, later in the newsletter (although final details and programme will not be available until late August, and again please check our website).

As always, there is much to read and enjoy in this newsletter, which, since 2016, has been put together for us by fellow committee member Julia Maxted, so I will let you move on through this 'box of delights'. Before doing so, however, I wanted to bring to your attention that, after these four years as editor, Julia is stepping down and I am sure you will want me to extend thanks on your behalf for her sterling efforts in producing such an interesting, informative and engaging newsletter twice a year. Thank you, Julia.

We are fortunate that David Kerslake, another committee member, has offered to take on the editorship whilst Julia will continue to curate our esteemed Twitter account - @EdwardThomasFS. This leads to the opportunity for another Fellowship member to join the Committee - please contact me ([mitchjd.etf@outlook.com](mailto:mitchjd.etf@outlook.com), or telephone 01730 267214) if you would like to know more.

Jeremy Mitchell

#### **A NOTE FROM THE RETIRING EDITOR**

Thank you very much for all the contributions I have received for publication in the Newsletter, to David Kerslake for taking over the reins, to Jeremy and my colleagues on the Edward Thomas Fellowship Committee members, and to all who have written to let me know how interesting and enjoyable they have found them. I am humbled to have contributed in a small way to the aims of the Fellowship with regard to furthering knowledge and understanding of Edward Thomas and his work, to maintaining links with his family and endeavouring to protect the places that he loved and wrote about. I will continue to further these aims on Twitter and have a number of other plans and projects in hand. I am always pleased to hear from anyone about matter concerning him either by mail to 54 Southmoor Road, Oxford OX2 6RD, by email - [maxtedjj@gmail.com](mailto:maxtedjj@gmail.com) or via Twitter (@EdwardThomasFS).

Julia Maxted

#### **EDWARD C. THOMAS POETRY COMPETITION 2020– JUDGE'S REPORT**

It has been a great pleasure, in a winter that has felt very low on sun, to have been asked to judge this year's Edward C. Thomas poetry competition and spend time in the generative, vivid worlds of so many new poems. My thanks as always are warmly due to all the poets who have submitted this year, even though sadly not all can make it to the final selection.

There were as always many personal, intimate poems as well as poems evoking a strong sense of place, poems of elegy and enquiry as well as wonder. I discovered several very enriching poems considering the lives of other writers, including Hardy and Plath, and also - in one fine poem - the artist Samuel Palmer. Many strong poems explored the relationship between the individual and nature, while others - more urgently now than ever - considered the relation between community responsibility and the organic world. The sense of imminent loss which is so closely related to that responsibility perhaps also connects with the high number of entries thinking in different ways about childhood, not least in the three winning poems.

In **Elena Croitoru**'s highly original **Playground**, the compelling voice of a now-grown narrator recalls a childhood winter scene playing inside the shell of an unfinished building in an unnamed 'silenced' town. The poem evokes simultaneously and with double immediacy both the child's original apprehension of the time as well as the poet's later understanding of the wider world in which the young person was growing up. I especially loved the detail of the cement dust that lay over the nettle leaves, recalling Thomas' own 'Tall Nettles'.

In **Jo Peter**'s **Snowfall**, another among the many submitted poems featuring a time of snow, the delicately balanced arrangement on the page suggests both the light, quiet of falling snow and the increasing possibility that the experience of it may become something only told to future generations of children as a kind of wonder-tale from the past - again brought to life with great present immediacy.

Something of that same lightness and resonance of 'Snowfall' permeates the child's concentration in the beautiful overall winning poem **The Reader** by **Sue Davies**, in which a small girl practices her reading one-to-one with the poem's narrator who observes around the child all the latent threat of trouble and violence in nature and the embattled world beyond. It's an impressively subtle and searching composition and highly moving in the quietest of ways, as befits a worthy winner of this unique competition.

Jane Draycott February 2020

## **EDWARD C. THOMAS POETRY COMPETITION WINNING POEMS 2020**

The winning poem is 'The Reader' by Sue Davies.

### **The Reader**

*November 2019*

*Harrison Road Primary School, Fareham.*

It is peaceful here...

through the tall school window copper oaks  
orchestrate the wind.

I listen to their low  
percussion of shaken leaves.

Bat boxes are now exposed  
nailed to trunks already wounded  
and scored.

Bethany comes with a book  
her hair tousled, and climbs the chair.

I try small talk but her mind is set  
to find her place and shy voice.

Her finger brushes every word  
her legs scissoring to cadences

and rhythms of distant feet

marching through flak and mist.

I think of a wren  
with a song

so strong  
it can send off  
the hawk and falcon.

Suddenly Bethany stops...

pins *gently* down by its tail  
*I love that word*, she says and leans into me.

When *gently* lifts from her breath it flutters  
over stippled meadow of sun-shot poppies

their heavy seed heads turn in the wind.

Second prize went to Elena Croitoru for her poem. 'Playground'.

### **Playground**

We grew up in our spare time,  
beyond a tower block island  
where pearly cement dust lay  
over the nerves of nettle and bindweed leaves  
which clung to the fractured pale soil.

In winter, we would sink up to our chests  
in snow and hide inside the unfinished body of a building,  
its graffiti erased before it was written,  
its three windowless walls wrapped around us  
in an embrace that always stayed the same.

The place was empty, save for bone  
fragments and jagged necks of green bottles.  
We pretended this was a furnished room we owned  
and thought God could not help us all  
until later, and that when our turn came  
we had to remember what we wanted.

We leaned against the concrete  
which drained our body heat  
through woollen clothes a size too small  
until we could no longer bend our knees.

From this place we could not hear  
the TV announcements that told us how  
to love our republic, but we listened  
to our silenced town and waited  
to see if somebody could miss us.

In third place is 'snowfall' by Jo Peters:-

**snowfall**

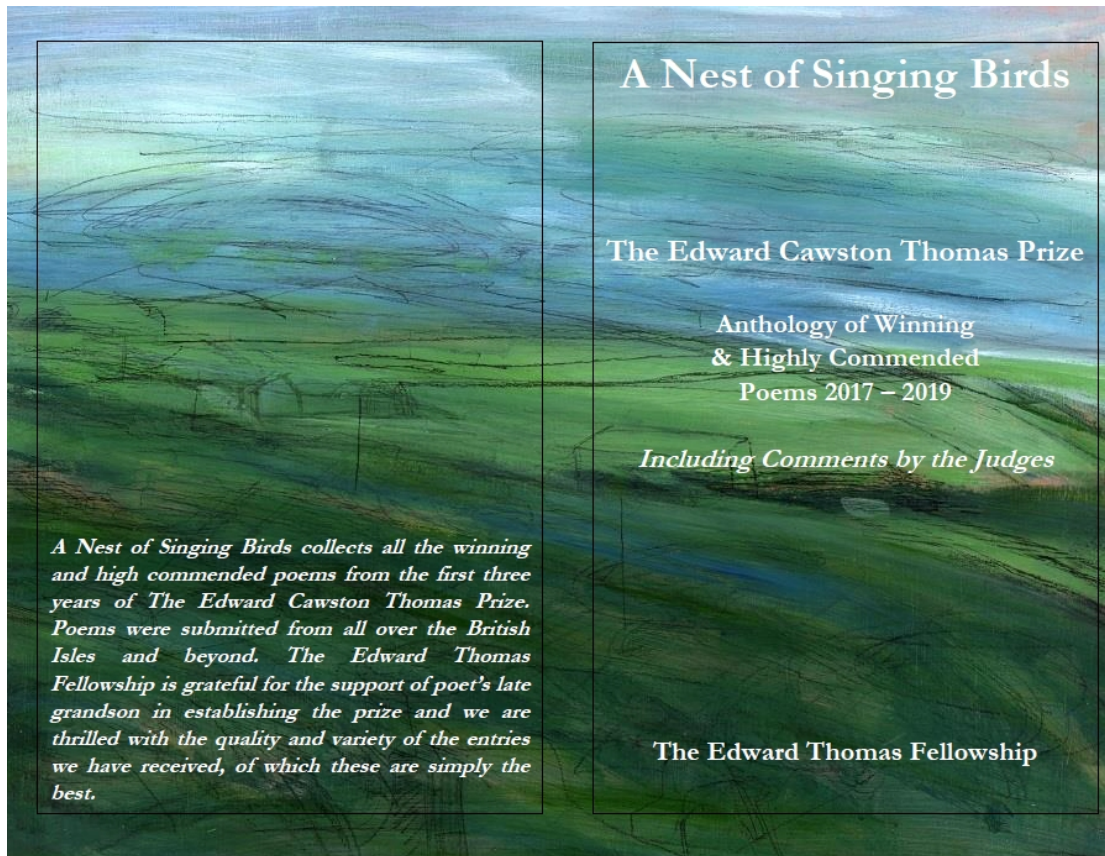
there's  
something old-fashioned  
                  about snow  
a strange light  
                  an odd quiet

we wake to a world  
                  returned to childhood's  
black and white  
                  go out  
where flighty pieces  
                                  of sky  
dawdle down  
                  chilly dithering  
patiently  
                  a flake at a time  
spread smooth  
                  altar cloth  
alter  
                  soften edges  
                                  of wall and path  
blossom  
                  on black branches

we look out  
                  as that child did  
                                  wild  
with white excitement  
                  when stout snowmen grew  
and we scooped snow  
                  scrunched it  
                                  with sopping gloves  
and threw  
                  and threw

                                  so children  
when your great  
                  grandchildren ask you  
what was it like  
                  snow  
you can show them this  
                  but they still won't  
                                  know

Poems by James Driver, Peter Challis, Karin van Heerden, Laura Potts, Virginia Astley and Wendy Manning were all Highly Commended.



*A Nest of Singing Birds*, published by the Fellowship is a collection of poems chosen from entries to the Edward Thomas Fellowship's 2017, 2018 and 2019 Poetry Competitions. It includes the prizewinning and highly commended poems of each year.

The natural world, including human life as one element in it, together with memory and the past, inspires many of the poets. Not surprisingly, many poems showed that their authors had learned from Thomas. The qualities identified by Edna Longley and Andrew Motion, among others, were often apparent – that sense of thinking aloud, the quiet spoken voice, attention to small details and a modern sensibility.

We have included the Judges' Reports (by poets Jenny Lewis and Jane Draycott) for their very instructive commentaries and insights, which will be of special value to those thinking of submitting poems to magazines or competitions in future.

Copies are available from David Kerslake, 3 Bream Close, Calne, Wiltshire, SN11 9UF for 5 GBP, (plus 1.50 for postage and packing) or from Margaret Keeping, Competition Coordinator, 66 Fairacres Road, Oxford OX4 1TG.

## **THE BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE THAT NEVER WAS**

In common with nearly everything else, the 2020 Birthday Walk had to be cancelled, and as regular attenders will know, after tea in Steep Church, there is an AGM followed by a Birthday Tribute to Edward Thomas. Over the years this has taken many different forms, and in 2020 we decided to celebrate a notable publication. The following is what I was to have said at the time with the kind support of Julia Maxted and Stephen Stuart-Smith as readers.

'A hundred years ago in 1920, the first edition of Edward Thomas's Collected Poems was published by Selwyn and Blount. A second edition was published in 1928 and a third in 1936, by which time Faber had taken on its publication. The draft agreement between Helen and Faber is in the papers left by Myfanwy, which are deposited in the University of

Gloucestershire's archive. It seems timely to celebrate the centenary by reminding ourselves of some of the poems and reactions at the time.

The publication was unusual in coming so soon after the first printing of any of Thomas's verse. *Poems* was published in 1917, the year of his death, and *Last Poems* in 1918. He had seen neither. Less than three years from the appearance of a first book to a *Collected Poems* is most unusual if not unique. Perhaps this can be explained in part by the near adulatory reviews of *Poems*, in which his real name appeared on the title page.

Here are extracts from some of the reviews to give a flavour:

From the *Manchester Guardian*: 'The *Poems* are the last word in English poetry.' In case that might appear ambiguous, *The Times Literary Supplement* said, 'They are among the rarest fruits of these strange years.' More expansively the reviewer of *The New Statesman* ... 'No other book of English verse, published within my own times, shares the same vivid spirit of love, the same saturation with English country life and tradition.' From *The Daily News* we have, 'Edward Thomas's *Poems* is a book that gives the essence of all that he spent his life in trying to say in prose. It is a beautiful book.'

Just two more: first from *The Nation*, 'In his poetry, the happiest reflection of the passion of his intellectual life- Nature- that delicacy found its true orbit. And pursued its appointed pilgrimage. And those poems are certainly the best things he ever did.' Finally, from another resident of Steep a few years later, T. Sturge Moore's article in the *English Review*, 'He leaves us more than we deserved, something that will be treasured by posterity for ever. As his body fell its cloak melted off the soul and we caught a glimpse which confounded our poor recollection of the man...'

Since those reviews, I don't believe anyone has put it better.

'The first edition of *Collected Poems* consisted of 136 poems, eight more being added in subsequent editions. The *Collected Poems* included all the poems in the first two books with one addition, *Up In The Wind*, the first poem he ever wrote in December 1914. The other addition was de la Mare's famous Introduction.'

The poems which should have been read included *Up In The Wind*, *Birds' Nests*, *The Gallows*, *The Child in the Orchard*, *There was a time*, *Home*, *The Manor Farm*, *Haymaking*, *Lights Out* and several others. It was not to be, and if the Fellowship is still in existence for the second centenary, there will be different readers and no doubt different opinions of his work.

Richard Emeny, June 2020.

## **THE BIRTHDAY WALK – Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

**Note: The rescheduled Birthday Walk will take place on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October, subject to the Covid-19 restrictions being lifted. Social distancing guidelines will be adhered to at all times. Further guidance on social distancing and the use of toilet facilities will be available on the ETF website from early September onwards.**

As in previous years, there will be two walks during the day, and you are welcome to join either or both walks. The walks will be led by Mike Cope and will start at the car park of Bedales School. Parking and toilets will be available throughout the day.

Those coming on the morning walk should meet in the car park of Bedales School, Church Road, Steep, GU32 2DG, between 10:00 and 10:15 am. The morning walk (a fairly strenuous

5 ½ miles) will start at 10:30 am prompt, and will include a visit to the memorial stone on the Shoulder of Mutton Hill. The afternoon walk will start at 2:30 pm from the car park and will be a more leisurely stroll of around 2 ½ miles.

Members of the Fellowship will read appropriate poems and prose during the walks.

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

<https://edward-thomas-fellowship.org.uk/event/edward-thomas-birthday-walk/>

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

Our lunch stop this year will be at Bedales. Please note that there will be no buffet lunch provided. Bring your own packed lunch to eat in the room; there will be beer, wine and soft drinks available for purchase.

We shall end the day at Steep Church around 3:45 pm, where tea will be available at a modest cost. This will be followed by the Fellowship's short AGM.

### **EDWARD THOMAS DIGITAL FESTIVAL - 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2020**

This is a summary of plans and progress towards the creation of an Edward Thomas Digital Festival, which was mentioned earlier in the Chair's welcome.

Originally Petersfield Museum was going to run some activities alongside the Fellowship's Study Day on 12th June, but of course the Study Day was postponed due to COVID for 12 months (this was the preference of participants).

As the Museum team are now seeking to engage digitally with a wider audience, the Education Officer spoke to me recently about an Edward Thomas Digital Festival they would be producing, as part of this delivery programme, between 1st - 3rd October.

I was asked if I could help with finding participants for the Saturday and both I and your Committee have agreed that this would be an excellent opportunity for a partnership project of this nature between the Museum and the Fellowship.

This is considered to be an ideal way in which the Fellowship could celebrate its fortieth anniversary.

This also seems to be an excellent opportunity to bring Edward Thomas, the Fellowship, the Study Centre and Petersfield Museum to the attention of a wider audience, through the involvement of some high profile names (some of whom might also be participants next June and give a foretaste of that event).

The Fellowship's direct participation, at this stage, would likely be the opening slot on 3<sup>rd</sup> October (Saturday morning and the 'main' Festival day) to introduce Edward Thomas and the Fellowship, the work it does, perhaps with a look back over the past 40 years and, more importantly, to look forward.

At the time of writing the format of the Festival day is still to be finalised, but is likely to take the form of live (or pre-recorded) by Zoom talks, poetry readings, lectures and similar, with each followed by a live Q&A.

Interested (and mostly confirmed) participants so far include Alison Brackenbury, Elizabeth Black, Alice D. Cooper (whose *Home to the Hangers* film is still collecting awards), Guy Cuthbertson, Nick Denton, Tom Durham, Richard Emeny, Toby Faber (talking about Faber & Faber and poetry), Adrian Grafe, Matthew Hollis, Edna Longley, Michael Longley, Lucy Milner, Andrew Motion, Daljit Nagra, Matthew Oates, Anna Stenning and The Robert Frost Society.



It will be a varied, and ambitious, programme and the event will dovetail with other work the Fellowship has underway to further raise awareness and appreciation of the work of Edward Thomas, particularly his relevance today.

Thursday 1st October, which is National Poetry Day, will feature workshops and poetry readings through the day and one of the participants will be the Hampshire Poet Laureate, Kathryn Bevis who, a while ago, was a tenant of 2B Yew Tree Cottage.

Friday 2nd will be a Museum-led Twitter takeover day, digital access to various of Thomas's books and an open-mic spot in the evening.

Full details of the programme for the Festival will follow in a 'Festival Special' e-Bulletin in September and also on the Fellowship's website.

## OBITUARY

KENNETH WATTS (Ken), 15<sup>th</sup> July 1933 – 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020

Ken Watts, who died in February at the age of 86, was born in Devizes, but the family moved to Trowbridge when he was three years old to the house that he lived in for the rest of his life. After school, where he discovered a lifelong love of cricket, at which he was a fine player, he trained as an architect, and joined the Architects' Department of Wiltshire County Council. He worked principally on schools and other council property, while his most notable work was in the restoration of Georgian buildings in Bath. In his unassuming way, he was proud of his achievements in that city.

Cricket aside, Ken had several great interests. of which Wiltshire was first and foremost, including its history, geology, landscape, people, villages, towns, buildings, footpaths, drove roads and all its hidden ways. His knowledge was encyclopaedic, ranging from the smallest detail: what plants grew in which wall, to the flora and fauna of Salisbury Plain. Such knowledge resulted in several books and many articles, all very well illustrated by Ken, an excellent photographer and mapper.

He read the work of Richard Jefferies, and via him came to Edward Thomas, who he immediately recognised as an important writer. He told me that discovering him was like opening a door and finding an old friend there. Of course, they had Wiltshire in common, and there was nor a location in that county visited by Thomas that has not been identified by Ken, even the whereabouts of anonymous sketches. Fascinating as that was to him, it was the poetry and its depth of meaning, which struck the strongest chord.

Ken led several Autumn Walks for the Fellowship, one over the Marlborough Downs in heavy rain, another from West Hatch, following Thomas's journey on his last night in England, to Codford and the last remnants of the army camp where he was stationed. These and others were accompanied by extraordinary erudition, as Ken put what we were passing into historical and literary context.

I recall walking on the Marlborough Downs with him, and, as we neared Avebury seeing a flock of birds above a solitary ploughman ploughing a large sloping field. Nothing unusual about that, except that the birds were not seagulls but swifts. Neither of us had seen that before, or in my case, since, but the memory remains.

When Ken approached a topic, he did so with great thoroughness, and with the attention to detail and presentation that would be expected from an architect, and one could always rely on the accuracy of his research whether about Edward Thomas, Richard Jefferies, Alfred Williams, the Ridgeway (of which he was a Warden for many years) or some remote farmstead.

He was a kind, generous and helpful man. There are many members of the Fellowship who were recipients of his time and energy in assisting them with their researches and queries, and there must be many more non-members who had a similar experience. His researches led him to discover the precise location of 'Dad' Uzzell's grave in Radnor Road cemetery in Swindon. Previously, he had discovered the fictional nature of the Thomas's honeymoon in the old gamekeeper's cottage at Hodson Bottom, where in fact Uzzell had never lived. Through

these researches, Ken came to know descendants of David Uzzell, descendants who he would drive to East Garston to have tea with Myfanwy, thus renewing an old friendship between the two families.

It was typical of the man that a couple of years before his death, he passed many of his papers to the Edward Thomas Centre in Petersfield Museum. There are not many like Ken in the world and there are many who will miss him greatly. In these difficult times, his example gives hope, just as the man himself bred affection.

We send our condolences to his family.

Richard Emeny, April 2020.

Selection of books by Ken:

*Exploring Historic Wiltshire* (two vols, Ex Libris Press); *Figures in a Wiltshire Landscape* (Hobnob Press); *The Marlborough Downs* (Ex Libris Press); *The Wiltshire Cotswolds* (Hobnob Press).

Ken also wrote many articles, some of which were published in *The Hatcher Review*, and an unfinished biography of Edward Thomas, the typescript of which is in the Edward Thomas Centre.

My sister and I met Ken in 1999. I had found a story in the Wiltshire Life Magazine and phoned the Editor, who put me in touch with Myfanwy Thomas. It was the relationship between Edward Thomas and my great grandfather David Uzzell, which interested me. Myfanwy wrote back to me and she also contacted Ken who came to see me in Wiltshire.

We became great friends through our love of E.T.'s works and his connection with David Uzzell. We would visit Myfanwy often with Ken. He once said it was one of the greatest highlights of his life to meet Myfanwy. She referred to him as 'Dear kind Ken'.

He was a wonderful companion on any walk, a true Wiltshire man. When he could no longer drive his car, we would meet him in Salisbury or Warminster. He is very much missed by Shirley and Janet.

Shirley Reynolds

I only knew Ken Watts for his last three years. I met him, on Richard Emeny's encouragement, to mine his experience and memory towards the creation of some Wiltshire walks relating to sections of *In Pursuit of Spring*. Thereafter we would meet from time to time, explore places like Rudge, Broughton Gifford, Tellisford, chatting about literary and historical associations over a pub lunch or tea in his home, surrounded by his beloved books, maps and documents.

His Trowbridge home (it had belonged to his parents and he had lived there since he was 3) was backed by a long, narrow garden which was full of shrubs and trees, the odd seat, a Wattsian shed for secluded thinking and a pond. One of his prized shrubs was an *artemisia*, Lad's Love, which Myfanwy had given him. He was an Edward Thomas enthusiast, but then he was also very familiar with the lives of others who lived in and loved his County – just read his *Figures in a Wiltshire Scene*.

During our conversations, he was always animated and he had an inner encyclopaedia of information derived from his work as an architect, as a Wiltshire warden for the Countryside Commission and author of many works relating to the region. He was a terrier in following up hunches, the location of places – such as exactly where Edward Thomas's Swindon relatives lived, where Dad Uzzell was buried or where in Oare Gordon Bottomley had died. He exclaimed, "I know the *very* gate over which Edward Thomas leaned in his village reverie near Challimead, described in *In Pursuit!*" He quoted the passage from memory. "I can show you!" And he did.

His knowledge of literature was great as was his love of local, county and national history, topography and geology. He knew intimately the byways, trackways, green lanes and footpaths; his book on drovers in Wiltshire, sadly not in general publication, showed utter and literally grounded intimacy with his subject. The hand-drawn maps are meticulous and informative. His academic enquiries led him right back to the sources and he was relentless in his curiosity, conjectures and verifications.

An office *contretemps* over the use of computers led him to leave his job and to avoid the burgeoning technology. Nevertheless, he achieved so much by painstaking manual archival research – his many books are evidence enough. I encouraged him to open online access – so much more would have yielded to his enquiries – but he was unwilling to backtrack on his longstanding research habits and fieldwork. His word processor was sufficient for his purposes. Much of his music, which included his above-all favourite Mozart, was kept on magnetic tapes.

Nobody could ever have told of this man as being other than his hardworking, companionable and no-fuss self. It's a measure of him that, put 'Ken Watts' into Google and you will find all his books but not a single personal photograph. Given his idiosyncrasies and personal integrity, unpretentiousness, his willingness to share the fruits of his life's work, and his good-natured discussion, Ken was a lovable man who will be missed by those who knew him.

Benedict Mackay

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## IN PURSUIT OF EDWARD THOMAS

**Alexandra Harris**

Spring arrives in Britain from the southwest, and makes a slanting progress across the country at the pace of between one and two miles an hour. So the phenologists tell us. In sheltered pockets of Devon, and then Wiltshire, primrose shoots push up between the dead leaves that have covered the ground all winter.

Edward Thomas went out in March 1913 to look for Spring. He set out from his parents' house at Balham in the suburbs of South London, and travelled, 'on or with a bicycle', through Surrey and Hampshire, towards the Somerset coast. From their different directions they would converge, he hoped, among the Quantock hills: Spring from the west meeting a man of thirty-five, a literary critic and country writer, a lover of books and places, a husband and father, a man on the road after a long winter's pressure and melancholy. Since boyhood he had watched for the first hedgerow flowers and noted the date when he heard the chiffchaff. Always, even when tied to deadlines and the city, he had a barometric sensitivity to changes in the air and in the light at dusk. He could detect the turn of the year before it became visible to other eyes, when it was only a moment of 'lucidity in the arms of gloom', a fleeting window, 'a pane of light in the western sky'.

He would listen in on the conversation of winds, as the balance of power shifted, 'very meekly' or in quarrelling fights, from north-easterlies to southerlies. *In Pursuit of Spring* would be about long, uncertain transitions, returning storms, and human moods which fluctuate as much as the weather.

Thomas chose to perform his spring ritual at Easter time. He started out in lowering storm clouds and a black mood on Good Friday, and his journey was a form of uneasy ascent from this low point. It was his agnostic alternative to the Christian ceremonies taking place in the village churches past which he cycled. Out on the road, while others gathered together as families and congregations, he knowingly weighed up his search for natural renewal with the Christian story of death and resurrection. Easter was very early that year: Good Friday was March 21. It was ambitious to expect Spring so soon. But Thomas caught the song of the chiffchaff as he crossed into Hampshire, and primroses grew thicker on the banks as he proceeded, glimmering in the shadows of roadside trees.

Thomas' precisely evocative prose carries us from London through the Home Counties, into open country, and across Salisbury Plain. Town by town we go, then village by village. Morden, Epsom, Guildford. West Lavington, Steeple Ashton, Cutteridge (where cows stand quietly in what used to be the manor house chapel, 'an excellent congregation, free from all the disadvantages of believing, or wanting to believe, in the immortality of the soul'). If I were any kind of cyclist I would follow him, but I abandoned my bicycle years ago after a few uncertain outings, and now follow in imagination through places I know a little but not well. Reading Thomas, I can feel the cushioned ground of the North Downs, where shallow pine roots trip up walkers on sandy commons, where rhododendrons grow dark and glossy at the ends of private gardens, and paths lead up through gorse and bracken onto heaths. I have never been through Bishop's Sutton but when Thomas describes the shrubberies by which 'the village hushes the road', I am vividly aware of laurel hedges and can hear the quality of the quiet.

It matters that Thomas is as good on shrubberies as on open country, and as good on village ponds as ancient houses. This is a kind of place-writing very different from most guidebooks or gazetteers, and indeed as a tour guide Thomas is audaciously remiss. He has little to say about Winchester, and speeds straight past established beauty spots. When a famous building appeals to him, it is more likely to be as an organic landscape than as a fine example of Early English style. Salisbury Cathedral in the early morning holds him enraptured because it seems 'struck out of glaucous rock at one divine stroke', a cliff or mountain habitat for the doves cooing among carved saints.

Most of all, Thomas writes about the road, the verges, the light and the sky; wet-worn flagstones as they 'answer the returning sun'. He writes about nature tensing and relaxing, as

here, on Saturday evening in the Test Valley: ‘The earth was quiet, dark and beautiful. The owl was beginning to hunt over the fields, while the blackbird finished his song.’ Such moments of calm orderliness expand suddenly from between the press of doubts and intermittent rain. Calm and anxiety live together in the same scene and the same sentence. Above the quiet earth, ‘Venus glared like a madman’s eye’.

The American poet Robert Frost, whose friendship would change Thomas’ life in the year after the Easter journey, thought this ‘the loveliest book on Spring in England’, and it convinced him that Thomas should write poetry. ‘I referred him to paragraphs in *In The Pursuit of Spring*,’ Frost recalled, ‘and told him to write it in verse form in exactly the same cadence.’ Thomas took the advice and began to write poems in late 1914. Among the first was ‘March’, and the whole of Spring seems to be there in the concentration of those thirty-two lines which find ‘tenderness, almost warmth, where the hail dripped.’ The following March, 1915, Thomas wrote of ‘All the white things a man mistakes / For earliest violets’, and honoured these things (a chip of flint, a mite of chalk) as genuinely Spring’s, not merely the stuff of illusions and false hopes. They belong to both Spring and Winter, which co-exist. In the short period between receiving encouragement from Frost and his death at the Battle of Arras in March 1917 – at Easter, exactly four years after his Spring pilgrimage – Thomas wrote an extraordinary body of lyric poetry. It endures while much of the prose lies unread. For many readers, then, *In Pursuit of Spring* will be fascinating as a work in progress, the material from which poetry emerged. Thomas the poet is already present in it, like the face in stone that is revealed by a sculptor’s chipping away of what surrounds it. But I wouldn’t want to chip away anything too soon. What seems to me so beguilingly strange in the book is its mixture of poetry and prosiness. It moves between passages so condensed one has to read them four times, and others which loiter in redundancy. Leaving Shepton Mallet Thomas pays ‘the usual bill’ for his accommodation, and then, he writes, ‘I tried to get into the churchyard again; but it was locked.’



Turner's Tower - Hemington, Radstock Avon [with Jesse Berridge]

The expansiveness of his book is part of its point. It is his habit, at almost every village, to read the inscriptions on the graves. He is a collector of epitaphs, and he finds room in his text for an improbable number of them. The long-forgotten rhyme on a stranger's tomb can prompt wry inventions of unknown lives, or the recollection and recital of some story remembered by chance, inserted in the book as if for safekeeping. Wandering between grand tombs and meagre crosses, he conjures the sounds of a village through its families. At Holybourne there are 'Lillywhites, Warners, Mays, Fidlers, Knights, Inwoods and Burningshams', which makes this a different world from Stapleford, where the names are 'Goodfellow, Pavie, Barnett, Brown, Rowden, Gamlen, Leversuch'. These family names make up the language of the book as much as the place names which announce each stop along the way. We are with the writer who would remember Adlestrop, 'only the name / And willows, willow-herb, and grass'.

There is nothing morbid in his graveyard visiting. There's even a touch of the farcical: at Berwick St James there are 'ivy-covered box tombs lying around . . . like unclaimed luggage on a railway platform'. The luggage may be unclaimed, but Thomas remembers without fail that it once belonged to real people with loves, hopes, scores to settle. He smiles sadly at the epitaphs of those 'awaiting the resurrection of the just', fairly sure that they are waiting in vain. He cannot feel in these churchyards what Stanley Spencer would feel when he showed in *Resurrection at Cookham* generations of people waking and stretching into eternal life. All

the more important, then, that Thomas should say over their names. It is a way of honouring all that continuity of past life in the places he passes. And it is also a way of putting into longer perspective his own solitary struggles.

The Mays, Fidlers, Knights and Inwoods of the old villages might well have been surprised to find a solitary Spring pilgrim standing alone in quiet churchyards. It seems out of step with the chatty, boisterous mood established by so much Spring writing through the centuries. It is nearly April after all, the time when Chaucer's travellers crowd together, shouting and laughing at each other. Spring is a social time after winter isolation, and Spring is a time for lovers. 'Lenten is come with love to towne' sang the poets in fourteenth-century March and every March since then. Thomas' Lent passes into Easter with no word of love, except for love of the earth and the road.



Near Croscombe, Wells, Somerset

[“The left side is a low, steep thicket rising from the stream, which spreads out here into a sedgy pool before a weir, and was at this moment bordered by sheaves of silver-catkined sallow, fresh-cut. But the right side became high and precipitous, mostly bare at first, then hanging before me a rocky barrier thinly populated by oaks.” In Pursuit of Spring, Chapter V111, Shepton Mallet to Bridgwater. Ed.]

In the agricultural year, March is a time of intense busyness. Medieval and renaissance almanacs list the daunting tasks of preparation for the new growing season: ploughing and sowing, hedging, ditching and pruning. All that industry still shaped country life in the 1820s.

John Clare's poem for March in his *Shepherd's Calendar* is all action, both for the elements and for living things – from the 'headlong hurry' of late-Winter floods to the sower whose ankles sink in 'pudgy sloughs and clay'; it's a poem of stooping, splashing, chopping, leaping, striding, slinging, strewing, in which hands and feet are constantly moving through the 'many weathers' of the season. Early primroses are crushed under the boot of the hurrying woodsman – unless he catches sight of the cheering flowers in time.

Thomas' book is meditative by contrast; its action is the psychological movement of the spirit in response to the sky. Thomas is all receptive eye and nerves. If Clare's workers are an integral part of the Spring, defining the season as much as the nesting rooks and ragged clouds, Thomas is a visitor riding through it, feeling his way into its secret life and at the mercy of its moods. Those who are not farmers, and that's most of us now, admire the Georgic songs of practical labour, but cannot write them for ourselves and must acknowledge different kinds of Spring experience. As he rides through countryside which is not his home, Thomas gives little attention to what needs to be banked or pruned, but looks for the unspoken life of plants, birds and winds which know nothing of him and require no intervention.

Those in the twenty-first century who watch for the first March flowers often feel differently again. The average date for the first oak leaves is earlier and earlier; bluebells now are common in March where in 1913 they were rare; in some years chiffchaffs have overwintered in the new warmth of Hampshire. (These 'Indications of Spring' are registered and made available in a survey called Nature's Calendar, which observes the unfolding of the season very much as Robert Marsham observed it for more than sixty years in the eighteenth century, and as naturalists have done ever since.) There have been some very backward Springs, Aprils deep in snow, but these too seem to indicate a shifting climate, more liable to extremes. The age-old joy in first flowerings and first bird-calls is now mixed up with anxiety; the old signs of repetition and return are now also registered as signs of change. There will be new forms of Spring writing to come.

Thomas carried a camera in his pannier, probably the one he had been given in 1911 when he told his friend Edward Garnett that it would save him from the need to make memory-jogging sketches on his travels. And so, more than a century later, we can peer into sepia images and make out the first leaves forming on the winter branches of 1913.

There are photographs of dishevelled-looking orchards, and nests in the high trees above Wells Cathedral; photographs of hedges, and field boundaries, and fenced avenues and wide bare views over Salisbury Plain. There are a few landmark buildings like the ruins at Glastonbury, and a few curiosities – like Turner's Tower near Radstock, which is odd-looking, attenuated, a cross between a church belfry and a castle turret tacked on to a row of workers'



houses. It had been built to rival a neighbour's tower, but had lost its top in a lightning strike by the time Thomas saw it – and has now been demolished altogether.

The most beautiful and unusual photographs are those of the road: that 'majestic road' called the Hog's Back running high on the ridge of the North Downs, the road as it bends into Rudge near Frome, the smartly tree-lined road near Shapwick. Thomas kept noticing the fall of light on different road surfaces: the patchy damp of paving after rain, or the glint in the puddles between muddy tyre tracks. He loved to see the sheen of a wet road curving ahead of him. It flickers in the distance between bare trees at Nettlebridge. In the photograph he took near Croscombe, the road looks so fluid and smoothly reflective that it might be a narrow river. In his happiest moments, Thomas felt more as if he were floating or sailing rather than cycling on solid ground.

A cyclist on a dark afternoon today will see taillights and headlights negotiating between cars double-parked along tight village streets. The tarmac is painted with give-ways and speed-hump warnings. These roads in the 1910s were plain and open, appearing fluid to the eye. The photographs are so empty of cars and people that this England looks deserted. But Thomas' text suggests all the lively sounds the camera could not record. There are rooks cawing all along the route from rookeries now lost, often in elm trees. There are the chi-chas, marsh-tits, and blackbirds. There is the sound, too, of the telegraph wires, humming and whining, Aeolian harps in the wind above the road.

Only one of the pictures (of Turner's Tower) reveals that Thomas was not alone on his travels. His younger brother Julian had accompanied him on preparatory research trips through Wiltshire, and his friend Jesse Berridge was at his side into Somerset. Had we passed some village pond that March, we might have glimpsed them smiling and talking. Long after Thomas' death, when Berridge remembered him, it was as a life-giving companion who made the sights and sounds of an English journey seem luminous. He even dreamed of Thomas: 'in my dream he was coming down a road, in loose dark clothes, to meet me, with his long purposeful stride and his face alight with pleasure and gaiety.' Berridge treasured up memories from their joint pursuit of Spring. There was the moment, for example, when they were both lying on the beach at Kilve. Thomas spotted a meadow pipit swooping over the sands, 'and the moment became unforgettable'.

The mysterious 'Other Man' who appears in the book is quite different from the friendly and appreciative Berridge. He is both a complete stranger and a part of Thomas himself. We meet him first when Thomas takes shelter outside a bird shop. Another man goes in, buys a chaffinch, cycles a little way with it in a paper bag, and then releases it. Thomas follows, for it appears that they are set on the same route. Again and again these two cyclists converge, noticing different features of the places they pass, swapping notes. There can be no final summing up of the relationship between them. Did Thomas release a bird from a paper bag in

Wimbledon? Perhaps he did and partly mocked himself, or perhaps he didn't and partly wished he had. The bird flies off into the open, but Thomas cannot get free of the other man who persists in travelling the same way.

If he is haunted by this second self, it is not a very elegiac kind of haunting. It is more an oppression or an irritation. The Other Man appears when it would be more peaceful to be alone on the road, and at night in the inns he is frankly a bore, talking on and on about subjects that obsessed Edward Thomas. He has a taste for pub signs and weathervanes, of which he makes drawings in his notebook. He is a perfectionist, like Thomas, in the matter of clay pipes. He is an inner voice externalised, and will not easily let up. When Thomas wrote his poem 'The Other' in December 1914 he was still caught in this long, exhausting negotiation, and had lost hope of ever freeing himself: 'He goes: I follow: no release / Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease.'

Thomas preferred, and depended upon, the company of writers who had lived in England before him. He had a head full of other people's words and rhythms, and they were associated in his mind with distinctive landscapes. Wherever he travelled, he was on a literary pilgrimage, and indeed much of what he saw at Easter 1913 went into the book he finished the following summer, *A Literary Pilgrim in England*. He was the most topographically alert of readers, and the most readerly of topographers, so that in cycling through different landscapes he was aware of crossing from one writer's imaginative territory into another's. He never found for himself a satisfactory home in which he could feel permanent, but these wide literary allegiances gave him a sense of company and belonging in the places he passed. We are dealing here with a pilgrim who needs no recourse to reference books to know what John Skelton wrote in Leatherhead and who can quote John Helston as he looks into the River Mole. George Meredith is the poet most in Thomas' mind as he cycles through Surrey: 'Meredith of Box Hill', both earthly and swift-winged, whose poems were 'saturated with English sun and wind'. On Salisbury Plain he feels for lines of connection back to Philip Sidney, whose Arcadia was both Wiltshire and nowhere. And he comes at times so close to W.H. Hudson it is as if the elder and the younger naturalist are travelling together. Hudson often set out on his long (sometimes months-long) walks at Eastertime, listening for the first of the migrant birds. At Easter 1903 he had waited in Salisbury for late arrivals in a cold spring, and what cheered him most in the city were the thrushes calling across the cathedral green, and stock-doves on the West Front, as on 'the ledges of some ocean-fronting cliff'. When Thomas hears those doves' descendants a decade on, he is in Hudson's company.

Thomas' goal is the author of 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan'. His route is towards the Quantocks, which is Coleridge's country. He suggested in *A Literary Pilgrim in England* that the Mariner comes home to somewhere near East Quantoxhead, and he felt that in describing the landscape between Stowey and the Quantocks he was also evoking the

imaginative topography of Coleridge's poems: 'the rocks, the firs and slender oaks and birches, the whortle-berries, the waterfall, the spring'. The spring? It is a freshwater spring he means: 'that beautiful fountain at Upper Stowey', one of the secret springs, overhung with vegetation, welling up between cleft rocks in this country of woods and coombes and caverns measureless to man. Coleridge soon went with Wordsworth north to Cumbria, but Thomas does not read him as a Lake Poet. In the mountains he was 'a man in exile, and had been once he decided to follow Wordsworth out of the West'. For Thomas he is always among the mossy outcrops of the Somerset coast, with their fusion of the mild and the wild, their nooks of domesticity and their places of austere exposure.

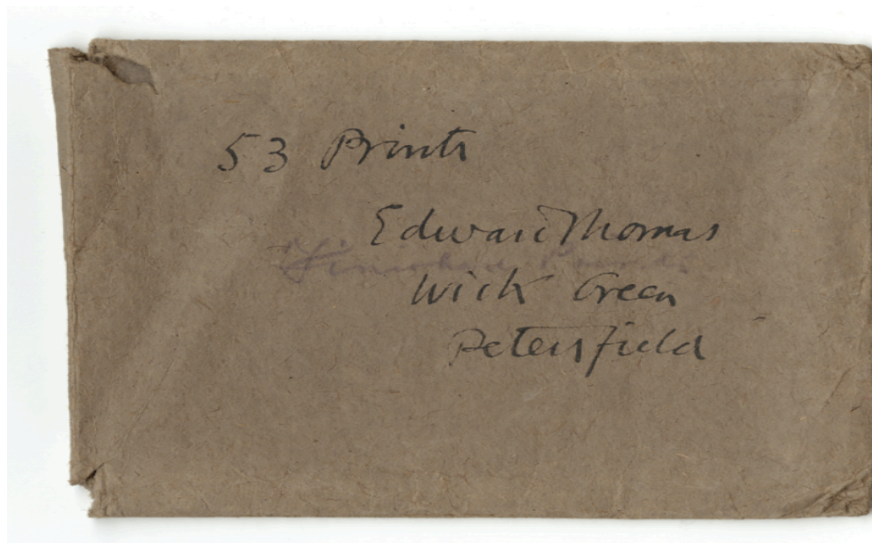
So Thomas goes west to Coleridge and to Spring, an odd doubling since Coleridge's Springs are darkly uncertain times. Thomas has the ghostly ballad 'Christabel' in mind, a poem set in April, but an April so ominous it cannot be named and is not yet Spring. 'Tis a month before the month of May / And the Spring comes slowly up this way.' In the dark windless night of 'Christabel', the revenants of winter hang on in the woods. What moves is not alive: 'The one red leaf, the last of its clan / That dances as often as dance it can.' It must be the most vivid dead leaf in literature, twirling on its thread, suspended between seasons.

Coleridge's ode 'Dejection' is also a Spring poem, written in April 1802, but its subjects are storm and numbness, night and pain. Thomas, too, feels something uncanny in the suspension between seasons, and responds with all his body and mind to the quarrelling winds and the earth's tense negotiation between death and life. 'I had a wish of a mildly imperative nature', he explains at the outset, 'that Spring should be arriving among the Quantocks at the same time as myself.' The whole journey is undertaken in this 'mildly imperative' way, at a pace not too hurried (there are all those epitaphs to read), but with a certain urgency – like the steady, addictive pace of Coleridge's ballads themselves.

Will it spoil the reader's pursuit if I say that Thomas gets his wish? I don't think so. We have to travel with him in order to enjoy what he finds in Somerset, in the deep lanes where 'the exuberant young herbage, the pure flowers such as stitchwort and the pink and silver white cuckoo flowers, but above all the abounding honeysuckle, produced an effect of wildness and richness, purity and softness, so vivid that the association of Nether Stowey was hardly needed to summon up Coleridge.' Once we are embarked on the journey, and caught in the insistent Good Friday rain, the movement towards those cuckoo flowers may well start to feel mildly imperative. With a little urgency in the pace, we follow him west.

Essay from 'The Clearing' March 23, 2016 (<https://www.littletoller.co.uk/the-clearing/alexandra-harris-in-pursuit-of-edward-thomas/>). Published with permission. Alexandra Harris wrote this piece for Little Toller's recent edition of Edward Thomas' *In Pursuit of Spring*

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The envelope containing Edward Thomas' photographs from *In Pursuit of Spring*, 1913.

## THE PILGRIM

### Edward Thomas

[“But with a fine morning I shall certainly get away from here for a day or two to St. David’s.” Letter from Edward Thomas to Edward Garnett from Laugharne in October, 1911. Tragara Press. 1981.]

The ‘Dark Lane’ is the final half-mile of a Pilgrim’s Way to St David’s. It may be seen turning out of the Cardiganshire coast road a little north of the city. Presently it crosses the ‘Roman road’ to Whitesand Bay, and then goes down into the little quiet valley that holds the cathedral and a farm and a mill or two. Travel has hollowed out this descent; bramble and furze bushes on the banks help to darken it. Yet the name of ‘Dark Lane’ is due rather to the sense of its ancientness than to an extremity of shade. Perhaps on account of the shadow it may cast on the spirits of men it is now little used, unless by the winter rains; and some days of storm had made it more a river than a road when I walked up it, away from St David’s. I looked back once or twice at the valley, its rook- the Alan- its cathedral, and the geese on its rushy and stony pasture. I had no conscious thought of antiquity, or of anything older than the wet green money-wort leaves on the stone of the banks beside me, or the points of gorse blossom, or a jackdaw’s laughter in the keen air. If the pilgrims never entered my mind, neither did living people. The lane itself, just for what it was, absorbed and quietened me.

I was therefore disturbed when suddenly, among the gorse bushes, I saw a young man kneeling on the ground, his back turned towards me. If he had not heard me approaching he knew, as soon as I stopped, that some one was there. He was more surprised and far more disturbed than I, for in a flash I had seen what he was kneeling for; and he knew it. He was

cutting a cross on a piece of rock which had been left uncovered by money-wort. Obviously he felt that I must think it odd employment for him on that December day.

He was not a workman carving a sign or a boundary stone, or anything of that sort. He was nothing like a workman, but was clearly a young man on a walk. A knapsack and a thick stick lay at his side. He was dressed in clothes of a rough homespun, dark sandy in colour, good, and the better for wear, and with nothing remarkable about them except that the coat was not divided and buttoned down the front, but made to put on over his head. As he wore breeches he showed a sufficient pair of rather long legs. His head was bare, and his brown hair was untidy, and longer than is considered necessary for whatever purposes hair may be supposed to serve. He might have been twenty-five, and I put him down as perhaps a poet of a kind, who made a living out of prose.

He looked at me with his proud, helpless, blue eyes; his lips moving with unspoken words. He shut the knife he had been using as a chisel, and opened it again. I knew that he would have given anything for me to go on after saying 'Good morning,' but I did not go. I asked him how far it was to Llanrhian, and if the main road beyond here was the original continuation of the 'Dark Lane', or if part of it was missing, and so on. He answered, probably, by no means as best he could, for he was thinking hard about himself. In a few minutes he could no longer keep himself to himself, but began to talk.

'I suppose you wonder what I was doing, cutting that cross?' he said in a defensive tone.

'Was there an old pilgrim's cross there?' I asked innocently. 'I have heard they carved crosses on some of the stones along the road.'

'I have heard so, too,' said he; 'but I have been looking out for them all the way from Cardigan and have not found any.'

'Then you have carved this yourself?'

'Yes; and I suppose you wonder why. Well, I don't know; I can't tell you; I don't suppose you would understand; I am not sure if I do myself; and at any rate it is no good now.'

'I hope my interrupting you...'

'Oh no, I don't think so. But when I began I thought it would be a good thing. I got as far as this at daybreak, and I was feeling... what is it to you? Seeing this old stone, which is perhaps the last before I reach the cathedral, and no cross on it any more than on the others, an idea came to me. I had been thinking about those pilgrims, some of them with torn feet, some hungry, or old, or friendless, or with an incurable disease. And yet they came here to St David's shrine. They must have thought there was some good in doing so; they would be better, even though their feet might still be torn, or they might still be old, or hungry, or friendless, or have their incurable disease. But the shrine is now empty. I did think that perhaps the place where the relics used to be, when they were not carried out to battle, would

have some power. All that faith would have given it some quality above common stone. But I doubted. Then I thought. "But faith is the thing. If those pilgrims had faith there was no special good in St David's bones, except, again, that they believed there was." I tried to think in what spirit one of them would have carved a cross. Perhaps just as a boy cuts his name or whatever it may be on a bridge, thinking about anything or nothing all the time, or sucking at a pebble to quench his thirst. At the sight of this stone- I may have been a fool- I thought- I had a feeling that while I was doing as the pilgrims did I might become like one of them. So I threw off my knapsack and chiselled away.... Please don't apologize. In any case it would have been no good. The knife was already too blunt, and I was cold an aching and also thinking of a wretched poem. Do you think a pilgrim ever had such thoughts? If there was such a one he would never have got far on his road.'

I tried hard to lure him into a Socratic dialogue to disclose what had brought him so far. He went on:

'The quickest city in the world is St Pierre, which was overwhelmed by the volcano on Mount Pelée. But one cannot easily become a citizen of St Pierre. Well, well, what is it to you that I want in some way to be better than I am? I must be born again: that is certain. So far as it is in my power, I have tried hard. For example, there is no ordinary food or drink or article of clothing I have not given up at some time, and no extraordinary one that I have not adopted. There remains only to wear a silk hat and to drink beer for breakfast.

'I have been to physicians, surgeons, and enchanters, but they all want to know what is the matter with me. I answer that I came to them to find out. Then they listen gravely while I tell them about a hundredth part of the outline of my life. They write out prescriptions; they order me to eat more or eat less, or to be very careful in every way, or not to worry about anything. They shake hands, saying: "I was just like you when I was your age. You will be all right before long. Good-bye."

'My family paid a specialist to come to see me at the house once. He and I had the usual conversation. Then he was given lunch, which he ate in complete silence, except for a complaint about the steak. After receiving his cheque my mother asked him rather tragically what to do. "Don't hurry him on, Mrs Jones," he said, "and don't keep him back, Mrs Jones."

'For forty days I visited an enchanter continually. He did not promise to cure me, though he also said that at my age he was just like me- which was untrue, for he had a Yorkshire accent. Day after day in his room I sat with closed eyes, repeating "Lycidas" silently with the object of not thinking about anything, especially the incantation. This consisted of a whispered, slightly hesitating assertion that I should get well, that I should be happy, that I should have faith, that I should have no more doubt, but confidence, concentration, self-control, and good sleep. After several minutes I always heard the enchanter take out his watch to see if he had given me enough. From that time until the end I

was doing little but listening to the crackle of his shirt-front and cuffs. It was so funny that I was even more serious about it than he; but after forty days I had had enough. My rebirth did not take place in the house of the enchanter.'

'When I was your age...' I began; but luckily I was inaudible.

'I have tried many medicines,' he continued. 'I have been to a physician who offers to cure men who are suffering from many medicines. All in vain. I tried a medicine which all great writers take, and which presumably makes them greater or keeps them great; but it had no effect on me - my literary ambition died.'

Here he took out his watch.

'Zeus!' he said. 'I have been two hours at this thing,' and he rose up. 'I must photograph that cross and put it in my book. That will pay for the wasted time.'

He photographed the stone and cross, and departed with long strides down the 'Dark Lane' before I could ask him about his book, but I see no reason to doubt that he was writing a book.

Edward Thomas (*The Last Sheaf*, 1928. J. Cape)

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## AN EDWARD THOMAS COLLECTION

### Claude Prince

IT IS appropriate that my interest in Edward Thomas first arose when I was living in Wales, for although he was born in England his parents were Welsh and he always thought of himself as a Welshman. Shortly after my release from the R.A.F. in 1946, good fortune took me to a bookshop in North Wales, which yielded a copy of *Collected Poems* by Edward Thomas, with a foreword by Walter de la Mare. I knew little of Edward Thomas then, but I had only recently come to Wales and I had found the Welsh most attractive and friendly people; so I rather haphazardly acquired the book by an author with a Welsh name, whose work I had seen praised somewhere.

At home my fancy was soon caught by the contents of the volume, particularly by poems such as 'If I should Ever by Chance grow rich'. Then there was de la Mare's fascinating foreword. I knew his poetry and felt that anyone he had praised was worthy of keen attention. My second acquisition was John Moore's *Life & Letters of Edward Thomas*, which whetted my appetite for more of Thomas's work.

Before the end of the year I had *Horae Solitariae*, one of his early books, for some of the essays were written while he was still at Oxford. It is full of the talk of old books, of nature

and the contemplative life. The first essay 'Horae Solitariae' bears the title of a book by Ambrose Serle published in 1776 and Thomas says 'is it not a title under which many might expect a record of their daintiest pleasures'. He adds that a friend had told him Serle's book was theological, but he likes to think of the title as regulating his life at that time, and the book occupies a place of honour on his shelf. It was reprinted six times in the nineteenth century and I have a copy of the 1834 edition of Serle's book sufficiently well bound to look attractive on one's shelves. I bought it from a bookseller formerly in Leather Lane near Holborn, from whom I also bought some of Edward Thomas's books containing the signature of his friend E. S. P. Haynes. Is it too much to hope that this is the copy from Thomas's shelves? They must have had many talks about old books when he was an undergraduate at Lincoln College and Haynes was a brilliant Balliol man.

Edward Thomas's *Horae Solitariae* has come to be one of my favourite books. It has been criticised as too consciously a literary production and I suppose it is, but I find the atmosphere it creates most attractive. Perhaps the second favourite is the book on Oxford. I have the first edition of 1903 with John Fulleylove's illustrations, but in some ways find the 1932 reprint in dark blue marbled linen a more attractive edition to handle and re-read.

One of the scarcest of Thomas's books must be the slim *Rose Acre Papers* published in 1904. John Moore in the *Life & Letters* says 'You could buy it, then, for one-and-six. To-day neither love nor money will buy it.' It contains four essays, two of which have never been reprinted. My copy has inserted at the end a newspaper cutting from the Daily Chronicle of 25 April 1905 containing a review by Edward Thomas of the *Poems* of Michael Drayton. Underneath the printed initials E. T. at the end of the review a hand very like Thomas's own has added the full name and it may well be his signature.

In his early years Thomas came very much under the influence of Richard Jefferies, and when Hutchinsons commissioned him to write a life of Jefferies he looked forward to the task greatly. Although having to write it against time, he did, in fact, make an excellent job of it, and dedicated it to W. H. Hudson. My copy is inscribed 'E. S. P. Haynes from Edward Thomas' in Haynes's handwriting and is one of the books from the Leather Lane bookseller.

An author's first book is something rather special in his development, particularly if it is published when he is only sixteen. Edward Thomas's first book was issued as a result of encouragement from James Ashcroft Noble, an established writer, who saw merit in the schoolboy author. Following a visit to Swindon and the Jefferies country, young Thomas had kept a diary of country events and this was incorporated in his first book, *The Woodland Life*, published in 1897. William Blackwood thought well enough of the manuscript to issue it and it even went into a second edition. I have both editions, but it is a book which is not often seen.



Although he frequently had to work against time in his efforts to keep to the ridiculously tight schedules that the publishers gave him, Thomas produced much good work, and the years 1905 to 1909 saw *Beautiful Wales*, *The Heart of England* and *The South Country*, besides the *Life of Jefferies*. All these were good, and I have first editions of all of them. If I were writing a criticism of his work instead of an account of my collection of his books I should want to praise them greatly.

The year 1910 saw Thomas producing some surprisingly good potboilers, but he also published a volume of essays written not at a publisher's request, but as something he wanted to do for himself, *Rest and Unrest*. An attractive volume, uniform in format with *Horae Solitariae*, it contains some of the best of Thomas's prose. There was a first and a second issue containing minor differences of binding. I have both, but perhaps my copy of the second issue is the more interesting for it contains a label stating that it is 'From the library of T. E. Lawrence, Clouds Hill', and I am reminded of Lawrence's comment on Thomas 'He must have been a beautiful person'. Although one thinks of Thomas as an earlier writer than Lawrence there was only ten years difference in their ages and both were at Oxford.

The next year saw another volume of essays *Light and Twilight*, an almost better book than *Rest and Unrest*. There was a first and second issue here as in the earlier book and I have both in green cloth, as well as the second issue in orange cloth. I have also seen a copy of this issue in buff-coloured cloth.

A book which contains some fine work is *The South Country* first issued in 1909. It was published in Dent's 'The Heart of England Series' with a decorative binding. Another volume in the same series was Hilaire Belloc's *The Historic Thames*, and I have a copy of this in which the similar style of binding has so misled the binder that he has lettered it on the spine 'The Historic Thames by Edward Thomas'. A fine edition of *The South Country* was published in 1932 with wood engravings by Eric Fitch Darglish and an introduction by Helen Thomas. In it she says that it was written at a time of comparative tranquillity in her husband's life and is one of his happiest prose works. It is indeed an attractive book.

Edward Thomas continued to write prose until his last few years when he turned to poetry, but during his life he published only one novel *The Happy Go-Lucky Morgans* issued in 1913. It was not a success as a novel and has never been reprinted, but it is a pleasing book in some ways. It is very difficult to find and I have only once come across a copy, which I thankfully purchased from Griff's shop in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road, where they specialise in Welsh books and often accumulate a number of Thomas's books.

*Six Poems by Edward Eastaway* is a most desirable book, not only from its being one of the earliest publications of Thomas's poetry, but also because of its format. It was published by James Guthrie at his Pear Tree Press and less than a hundred copies were printed. It is a good

piece of work, entirely hand made with the result that copies differ slightly from one another. My copy is signed at the end 'Of 100 copies No. 50. James Guthrie. May 1927'. Since the book was first issued in 1916 the date raises a question in one's mind, and inserted in the book is a letter from Guthrie to Percy Muir on this point. Guthrie says the date 'represents when the copy was done, or when it was sent.' He adds that Thomas remarked that the figure on the title page was 'a mixture of Christ and Walt Whitman.' Although this book is an attractive piece of work, it is not one of which Guthrie was proud, and he rightly said that his later work was much better.

An example of this is Edward Thomas's *The Friend of the Blackbird* which Guthrie published from his Pear Tree Press in 1938. The format is the same as *Six Poems*, but the work is of a higher standard. Of 100 copies printed, mine is No. 7. Originally published in *The Nation*, this delightful sketch was also reprinted in *The Last Sheaf* in 1928.

Robert Eckert in his first class bibliography describes in detail an early version of *Poems* by Edward Thomas 1917, but as this is one of two proof copies, collectors are unlikely to find it. The real first edition is scarce enough, in fact my copy is the second impression, although only minor differences occur between the two; the chief of which are the printing on the verso of the title the words 'First printed, Oct., 1917. Reprinted, Nov., 1917', and the addition of two pages of advertisements at the end. It contains some of the best of Thomas's poetry. Unlike *Last Poems* it is printed on excellent paper. The latter volume coming in December 1918 when paper was scarce is printed on inferior paper, but also has fine poetry in it.

At the same time as *Last Poems* there appeared another book of poetry printed on the same poor quality paper. Entitled *Twelve Poets. A Miscellany of New Verse* it included ten poems by Edward Thomas, all included in *Last Poems*. The other eleven poets were W. H. Davies, Walter de la Mare, Vivian Locke Ellis, A. Hugh Fisher, Robin Flower, John Freeman, James Guthrie, Ruth Manning Sanders, J. C. Squire, Rowland Thirlmere and W. J. Turner. It was published by Selwyn and Blount and dedicated to W. H. Hudson. My copy is inscribed on the fly-leaf 'W. H. Hudson from Roger Ingpen'. A number of poems are marked in pencil and someone, presumably Hudson, has written scathing comments against some of the poems, although not against those of Thomas.

Another interesting and uncommon volume is *An Annual of New Poetry, 1917* which contains eighteen poems by 'Edward Eastaway', besides poems by Gordon Bottomley, W. H. Davies, Robert Frost and others. It was published in March 1917 just before Thomas's death.

The year 1920 saw the *Collected Poems* with its valuable foreword by Walter de la Mare. In addition to the trade edition there was a de luxe edition on Japon paper which has an additional portrait of Thomas inserted. Of 100 copies mine is No. 86. One of the handsomest editions of Thomas's poems is the Gregynog Press Selected Poems published in 1927, with an

excellent introduction by Edward Garnett. The edition was limited to 275 copies, of which mine is No. 83.

After Thomas's death several collections and selections of his essays were published. In 1922 came *Cloud Castle* with an unfinished foreword by W. H. Hudson - he died before he could complete it. The book contains two pieces from *The Happy Go-Lucky Morgans*, but the rest were new, some of them written when Thomas was young: for example 'A Colloquy in a Library' is dated 1900 and is reminiscent of the papers in *Horae Solitariae*.

Another handsome volume from the Gregynog Press was *Chosen Essays by Edward Thomas* published in 1926. The selection was made by Ernest Rhys and it contained wood engravings by Robert Ashwin Maynard and Horace Walter Bray. Again it was a limited edition, this time to 350 copies, of which mine is No. 131. This is a fine selection of Edward Thomas's prose.

In 1927 Messrs. Ingpen and Grant published *Two Poems* which comprised Thomas's 'The Lane' and 'The Watchers, both hitherto unpublished. Only 85 copies were printed by The Curwen Press. Mine is No. 39 and it has the bookplate of Oliver Brett (Viscount Esher). The Last Sheaf which appeared in 1928 contains essays not published before, but well worthy of preservation. Thomas Seccombe's letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* was printed as a foreword. My copy has the signature of E. S. P. Haynes in it.

I also have three uncommon items written in memory of Edward Thomas. The first is a small pamphlet *In Memoriam: Edward Thomas*. This was published in July 1919 as No. 2 of the Green Pastures Series by The Morland Press. It contains tributes by friends, by his brother Julian and the first publication of his poem 'Up in the Wind. The designs are by James Guthrie. This copy came to me through the kindness of Miss Teresa Hooky and Rowland Watson, the secretary of the Edward Thomas Memorial Committee. The second item is entitled *These Things the Poets Said*, again issued from the Pear Tree Press, this time in 1935. Poems in memory of Thomas by twelve poets are printed with a foreword by R. P. Eckert, Jr., and the edition was limited to 150 copies, of which mine is No. 56. The third of these items *To the Memory of Edward Thomas* 1937 is a particularly fine volume produced by Guthrie and containing an account of his friendship with Thomas. It also includes the letters to W. H. Hudson, originally printed in *The London Mercury*, and a new portrait of Thomas by Robin Guthrie. My copy is No. 25 of 250 copies.

Two of the most exquisite books ever written about an author are surely Helen Thomas's volumes about her husband. *As It Was* was published in 1926 and *World Without End* in 1931. Since then they have been reprinted in one volume more than once. The first issue of *As It Was* is said to have been suppressed before publication, and pages 53-6 of the second issue are cancels attached to the stubs of the cancellands. The passages omitted from pages 54 and 55 were printed in the 1931 reprint and they are said to have been included in the American

edition of 1927. Helen Thomas is a daughter of James Ashcroft Noble, who encouraged Thomas as a youthful writer. Noble was himself the author of two interesting books *The Pelican Papers* and *The Sonnet in England*, both of which I have, and the former of which belonged to Thomas Hutchinson, an editor of Charles Lamb's works.

Edward Thomas published many books, some of which are not mentioned in this article, but I have copies of all of them, together with those I could find about him. After Helen Thomas's books, two of the most valuable are Robert P. Eckert's *Edward Thomas: A Biography and a Bibliography* 1937 and John Moore's *The Life & Letters of Edward Thomas* 1939. Eckert's book particularly deserves praise for the excellence of its bibliography. On the later years Eleanor Farjeon's *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* 1958 is fascinating, while a recent excellent study of Thomas and his work is that by H. Coombes.

Thomas contributed much to periodicals and it would be difficult if not impossible, to acquire copies of all of them. I have, however, a few odd numbers of Guthrie's little magazine *Root and Branch* which contained contributions from Thomas, copies of *The Thrush* and *The Open Window*, and a nearly complete set of *The Bookman* 1891-1934. I have had this set for many years, but it was only after I had started to collect Edward Thomas's books that I realised *The Bookman* contains more than seventy contributions by Thomas. Most are reviews, but one is an essay on 'Richard Jefferies and London' and another is an article on William Morris. His reviews include books by W. H. Davies, W. B. Yeats, W. H. Hudson and Walter de la Mare. *The Bookman* also contains reviews of Thomas's own books and articles on him.

My collection includes some books by Thomas's friends, particularly those which mention him. One such is Gordon Bottomley's *The Riding to Lithend*. It was published by James Guthrie at The Pear Tree Press in 1909 and contains a 52-line poem dedicated to Edward Thomas. My copy has Walter de la Mare's bookplate which was designed by Guthrie. Other books in my possession which mention Thomas include those by E. S. P. Haynes, Clifford Bax and Walter de la Mare.

Perhaps a rather unexpected find was an odd volume of *The Dictionary of National Biography*-the 1912-21 volume which contains Edward Garnett's article on Thomas. This particular copy has the bookplate of Thomas James Wise, who contributed to the volume part of the article on Henry Buxton Forman. During his lifetime Edward Thomas must have received many copies of books from editors to whom publishers had sent them, hoping for a favourable review. One such stamped 'Presentation Copy' is in my possession. It is *The Second Post* by E. V. Lucas, and it is inscribed on the fly-leaf 'Irene & Hugh McArthur from Edward Thomas'. Mrs McArthur was Helen Thomas's sister. I feel that the contents of this book are likely to have pleased Edward Thomas greatly, and no doubt he sent it with a strong letter of recommendation to his brother- and sister-in-law.

This article is reprinted courtesy of the Private Libraries Association, in whose journal – *The Private Library* – it first appeared. Collectors interested in joining the PLA (annual subscription £30) should contact Jim Maslen, 29 Eden Drive, Hull HU8 8JQ, email [maslen@maslen.karoo.co.uk](mailto:maslen@maslen.karoo.co.uk). The author, Claude Prance, has died and the PLA is unable to trace his heirs.

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## EDWARD THOMAS AND GORDON BOTTOMLEY

### William Cooke

It was perhaps an unlikely friendship. Thomas, the eldest of six sons and ‘a cockney Welshman’, was born at Lambeth in 1878 and educated at St Paul’s and Oxford University. He married early and, in trying to live by his pen, had little time for his own writing. Though physically strong and a marathon walker, he was prone to depression, and it was not until he was ‘36 in the shade’ that he began writing the poetry for which he is now best known.

Bottomley was four years his senior and an only child with Scottish blood from his mother, Maria Gordon. He had left his local grammar school in Keighley at sixteen to work as a junior bank clerk, though chronic illness forced him to quit two years later. His parents, seeking a better climate for his sake, fled the thick smog of Keighley and moved to Grange-over-Sands and then to Cartmel, occupying a seventeenth-century house called Well Knowe. There he settled down in enforced leisure to write poetry and, like W. B. Yeats and Lascelles Abercrombie and others, to try and revive the verse play. He had all the time in the world (illness permitting) and published his first book of verse in 1896 when he was twenty-two. Despite his perilous condition, his optimism and *joie de vivre* rarely failed him, due in no small measure to Emily Burton, whom he married in 1905 after a long engagement.

Thomas first came across Bottomley’s work in 1895 at the home of the writer James Ashcroft Noble who was helping with his own early essays. Bottomley had also asked him for an opinion, and after Noble’s death in 1896 he continued to keep in touch with his widow and his daughters, especially Helen who married Thomas in 1899. It was not until 1902 that Thomas first wrote to Bottomley, hoping that he would some day ‘write a letter specially to me’. It was the beginning of a profound friendship that would endure until Thomas’s death, and since the two men met only occasionally, their relationship was sustained mainly by correspondence. Over the fifteen years of their acquaintance, there are 238 extant letters and postcards from Thomas, 182 of which were published by R. G. Thomas in 1968.<sup>1</sup> A further 14 letters appeared in the *Edward Thomas Fellowship Newsletter* 59 in 2008. Only a small number of Bottomley’s letters survived.

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<sup>1</sup>*Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley* (hereafter referred to as *Letters*).

In the words of one recipient, Bottomley was ‘a jolly, humane, and often unexpectedly frisky correspondent’.<sup>2</sup> His letters were leisurely and expansive, often overflowing into the margins – unless he was prostrate in bed when even a letter was beyond him; Thomas’s were usually dashed off at midnight after a day’s writing to stop himself from falling asleep and he regularly apologises for their brevity and poor quality. They are though direct and personal, and with the benefit of hindsight it is possible to see how extracts may foreshadow certain passages in his poetry. In one letter Thomas light-heartedly tells Bottomley that he is covered against the tribulations of life:

I am now, being just 29, insured against death, accident and disease – I shall get £500 if I lose both eyes or even both legs (but I am not sure about the legs).<sup>3</sup>

This inevitably brings to mind his more sombre reflections in ‘As the Team’s Head-Brass’ when a ploughman talks to him about the war:

‘Have you been out?’ ‘No.’ ‘And don’t want to,  
perhaps?’  
‘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 ...’

Sometimes an image occurs that was subsequently developed in both prose and poems. Writing to him in 1907 of some reservations about Yeats’s *Deirdre*, Thomas declared: ‘But it was so perfect in its kind I couldn’t throw stones, though glass houses are really meant for stones.’<sup>4</sup> In *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds* (1915) the proverb ‘People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones’ is given a nightmarish intensity before the image recurs in ‘I Built Myself a House of Glass’ to symbolise Thomas’s inhibiting self-consciousness:

I built myself a house of glass:  
It took me years to make it:  
And I was proud. But now, alas!  
Would God someone would break it.

But it looks too magnificent.  
No neighbour casts a stone  
From where he dwells, in tenement  
Or palace of glass, alone.

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Snaith to author, 16 September 1967.

<sup>3</sup>*Letters*, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup>*Letters*, p. 152.

As the last two lines indicate, the problem is not only Thomas's but also part of the human condition, potentially affecting the whole spectrum from 'a poor man of any sort, down to a king'.<sup>5</sup>

There are numerous descriptions of real houses in Thomas's poems, not least his own. When he moved into Berryfield Cottage he told Bottomley:

This house and the country about it make the most beautiful place we ever lived in. We are now become people of whom passers-by stop to think: How fortunate are they within those walls. I know it. I have thought the same as I came to the house and forgot it was my own.<sup>6</sup>

After moving into an even more imposing house at Wick Green (though one in which he never felt at ease and where he suffered a breakdown), he wrote several times to Bottomley lamenting their exposure to the elements and his difficulties in trying to establish a garden:

I wish I were with you now or could come at once. I am back again with the intolerable swishing of the trees in rain and wind which I have had ever since I came here last Christmas.<sup>7</sup>

The weather – I won't continue, but we *think* of nothing else practically. The wind and rain knock at all our windows all day and night.<sup>8</sup>

The garden improves but the clay breaks first the back and then the heart.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas eventually brought these components together to describe his 'cloud castle' in 'Wind and Mist', in which he converses with a passer-by, just as he once did with Bottomley. In the poem he 'elaborates his symbolism of house and weather to dramatise a mind under siege'<sup>10</sup>:

'I have seen that house  
Through mist look lovely as a castle in Spain,  
And airier. I have thought: 'Twere happy there  
To live.' And I have laughed at that  
Because I lived there then.'

'You had a garden  
Of flint and clay, too.' 'True; that was real enough.  
The flint was the one crop that never failed.  
The clay first broke my heart, and then my back;  
And the back heals not.'

'I had forgot the wind.  
Pray do not let me get on to the wind.  
You would not understand about the wind.'

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Sign-Post'.

<sup>6</sup> *Letters*, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> *Letters*, p. 206.

<sup>8</sup> *Edward Thomas Fellowship Newsletter* 59, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Letters*, p. 211.

<sup>10</sup> Edna Longley, *Under the Same Moon: Edward Thomas and the English Lyric* (2017), p. 206.

It is my subject, and compared with me  
Those who have always lived on the firm ground  
Are quite unreal in this matter of the wind.'

Their next move in 1913 took them to Yewtree Cottage and another garden to furnish. 'By the only door into the house,' wrote Helen, 'we planted the herbs which [Edward] so loved. Rosemary, thyme, lavender, bergamot and old man were there, all direct descendants of our first country garden, which we had propagated from cuttings each time we moved.'<sup>11</sup> It was in fact the Bottomleys who had provided some of the original cuttings and so, indirectly, helped to inspire one of Thomas's best-loved poems.

In their correspondence there are several references to the herbs, which created yet another link between Thomas's various houses in the south and Well Knowe, Bottomley's home in the north. Thomas could easily have obtained the plants elsewhere but he cherished the association, as can be seen from the following extracts:

Thank you for the Bergamot. It has survived frost, sun, rain, wind and weeding and therefore may be supposed to think well of us as we of it. I think of sunny rain and the whiteness of Well Knowe whenever I see it.<sup>12</sup>

The Old Man or Lad's Love you gave me is now a beautiful great bush at my study door. The Bergamot is multiplied and sweetens three corners of the garden. The Rosemary disappeared. Have you any seedlings of it – or of anything that specially belongs to you and Emily and your garden – that you could send us? If so, please do.<sup>13</sup>

Thank you for a promise of Rosemary etc. We would like some Peruvian Lily and Larkspur seed. The Larkspur is easy to get but I should like some of yours and Cartmel's.<sup>14</sup>

Emily Bottomley eventually sent him 'a tree of rosemary and a lad's love', and the properties of the opening of the poem were then in place:

Old Man, or Lad's-love, – in the name there's nothing  
To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man,  
The hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree,  
Growing with rosemary and lavender.

It is hardly surprising that the poem became a favourite with the Bottomleys – and with Thomas, for the sight of the herbs immediately made him remember his friends in the north. In the poem, however, the scent of the bush stimulates thoughts of 'what I should, yet never can, remember', leaving Thomas 'lying in wait'. It is interesting to note that in their correspondence Bottomley used the phrase twice, once in relation to the poet and critic Arthur

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<sup>11</sup> Helen Thomas, *World Without End* (1972edn), pp. 144-5.

<sup>12</sup> *Letters*, p. 162.

<sup>13</sup> *Letters*, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> *Letters*, p. 203.



Symons<sup>15</sup> and then in relation to himself when he wrote to Thomas: ‘As soon as you are middle-aged yourself I shall be lying in wait for you, to transfix you with the first dilemma you tread on.’<sup>16</sup> At the climax of the poem it is Thomas who is ‘lying in wait’, as if to ambush the tantalisingly elusive memories:

As for myself,  
Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.  
I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,  
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try  
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,  
Always in vain. [...]

I 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.

Jem Poster describes the final stanza as ‘a masterly articulation of the inarticulable’.<sup>17</sup> The best gloss on the lines, though, was probably written by Thomas himself. In 1902, after Bottomley had sent him a copy of his first verse play *The Crier by Night*, Thomas characterised it as ‘magical’, though this did not stop him from criticising the lyrics. Commenting on one line in particular<sup>18</sup>, he wrote: ‘I know exactly what you mean, but I think the expression does not properly clothe the fancy. Still it is a terribly difficult thing to express; it is a fancy that would come to anybody else almost as elusively and untranslatably as for example a scent. That is your danger; you hover continually on the verge of what is probably inexpressible. Your success is all the more brilliant.’<sup>19</sup>

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Thomas saw only the early work of Bottomley and much preferred the plays to the poetry. *The Crier by Night* was based on a local legend of a Celtic water-spirit and gave Thomas ‘an unbroken wave of pleasure’. Bottomley’s second play *Midsummer Eve* (1905) merged the country life at Cartmel with the supernatural, and Thomas told him he had read it ‘with

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<sup>15</sup> ‘But by lying in wait for himself (as I do for myself in the unexpected mirrors of a restaurant), and by treating himself with an elaborate artifice of politeness when he caught himself, he really did get something of a jaded pathetic personality into some of the later poems.’ (8 April 1909)

<sup>16</sup> Bottomley to Thomas, 1 August 1909.

<sup>17</sup> *Branch-Lines*, edited by Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn (2014 edn), p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> ‘My bare cry shivers along the shiny rushes of the drowned lake’.

<sup>19</sup> *Letters*, p. 41.

complete delight'.<sup>20</sup> He went on to devote the whole of a long review to it, but made no mention of the supernatural element that occurs when the five young women of the play decide to keep watch during the Eve when it was said that images of their future husbands might appear. The spectral apparition that is eventually seen, however, is a 'fetch' – a wraith or double – whose appearance portends death. The 'fetch' is of Nan, a kitchen girl, who is horrified and collapses at the end of the play. Some years later Thomas would himself exploit the concept of the *doppelgänger* in both his prose books and poetry in his restless quest for self-knowledge.

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During Bottomley's lifetime 'reviewers were mostly respectful, sometimes kind, rarely enthusiastic'.<sup>21</sup> Over the years since Bottomley's death his work has fallen out of fashion and today he is little known. This is regretted by some critics. Cyril Connolly, writing in 1967, expressed surprise at the quality of *King Lear's Wife* (1915): 'This verse drama of macabre horror is written in an astringent blank verse of considerable originality and power.'<sup>22</sup> More recently, Helen Phillips lamented the neglect of Bottomley's literary output, especially that of his final phase: 'The quality of his work varies enormously: some of it, particularly among the early poems, is quite bizarrely bad, but much of it is by any standards extraordinarily good – in particular, much of the later poetry and the many plays he wrote on Scottish themes in a style based on Japanese *Noh* drama. [...] There is much that is original and much that, particularly in a feminist era, deserves new attention.'<sup>23</sup>

Arthur Ransome also noted this progressive improvement in his friend's work: 'As he grew older he outlived the affectations of his youth, wrote many good plays and some lovely poems, such as 'Cartmel Bells', the simplicity of which was in complete contrast to the orchid-house atmosphere of his early verse.'<sup>24</sup> That verse was 'strewn with corpses, drowned nuns, wraiths, and sadistic *belles dames sans merci*'.<sup>25</sup> It had been markedly influenced by the Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites, and there was a prolific use of archaisms, hyphenated phrases and words that only Bottomley would use, as a few extracts demonstrate:

They spit and flash as the breakers crash  
On the trembling, treacherous sands,  
But the churned foam flies and knits in the air  
And lo, a meinie of wraiths is there,

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<sup>20</sup> *Letters*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> Claude Collier Abbott, Introduction to Bottomley's *Poems and Plays* (1953), p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> 'Jewels amid the junk', *The Sunday Times*, 5 March 1967.

<sup>23</sup> 'Arts and Kindliness: Gordon Bottomley and his Circle' (1992), pp. 94 and 109.

<sup>24</sup> *Autobiography of Arthur Ransome* (1976), p. 108.

<sup>25</sup> Helen Phillips, op.cit., p. 103.

With their soul-flames in their hands.<sup>26</sup>

Come, swing my old ancestral palls about me [...]  
That I may fitly meet my vassal Death,  
Imperial in impearled and purpurate pomp,  
Mid this hushed loftiness majestic.<sup>27</sup>

VINE-ROW ON VINE-ROW CLUSTER-PIED  
LIKE A FEAST-PROGRESS WORSHIP-TIED,  
BROIDERED AND HUNG WITH FILIGREE,  
NIELLO, SMARAGDINE TAPESTRY,  
SKIM-SHADOWS INLAID DAEDALLY...<sup>28</sup>

A little of this goes a long way and it was small wonder that it had a very mixed response from Thomas. Referring to *Smaragdus*, he told Bottomley: ‘At first I confess I was astonished in an unsympathetic and uninterested way by what I read. Evening after evening I took it up and threw it aside sometimes in sorrow and sometimes in anger. [...] I can’t like everything you do, though I like everything you are.’<sup>29</sup> Thomas had no liking whatsoever for what he called his friend’s ‘regrettable diction’, his ‘jewelled and blossomy vocabulary’. If he learned anything from Bottomley’s early work, it was how not to write poetry.

There was no review of *Smaragdus*, though he did review Bottomley’s next book of verse, *Chambers of Imagery* (1907). This may well have disappointed its author. It is perhaps ironic that Bottomley, who had been advising Thomas that some of his prose would have been better if it had been conceived in poetry from the outset, now found that his friend was suggesting that the opposite might be true in his case: ‘Mr Bottomley’s newest verses are difficult, we think, because they are not always wrought up to the condition of poetry, but seem to have been left in a raw state that can appeal to the intelligence only, except in a few places. [...] They seem to us to be in their present stage short of poetry, to demand the amplification of prose, and not the sensuous and elliptical forms of verse.’<sup>30</sup>

Although he never quite lost his taste for the *outré*, within a few years Bottomley was writing with greater economy and sparseness, as in ‘To Iron-Founders and Others’, his once much-anthologised protest against Carnforth Ironworks, which begins:

When you destroy a blade of grass  
You poison England at her roots:  
Remember no man’s feet can pass  
Where evermore no green life shoots.

You force the birds to wing too high  
Where your unnatural vapours creep:

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<sup>26</sup> From *The Mickle Drede* (1896).

<sup>27</sup> From *Poems at White Nights* (1899).

<sup>28</sup> From *The Gate of Smaragdus* (1904). The text is in capitals throughout.

<sup>29</sup> *Letters*, p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, 5 August 1907.

Surely the living rocks shall die  
When birds no rightful distance keep.

In 'The End of the World' there are lines of blank verse with imagery and observation that would not be out of place in a poem by Thomas or Frost:

For more than three days now the snow had thatched  
That cow-house roof where it had ever melted  
With yellow stains from the beasts' breath inside ...

Another rural scene described in 'The Ploughman' seems like a forerunner in minor key of a more significant poem by Thomas:

Under the long fell's stony eaves  
The Ploughman, going up and down,  
Ridge after ridge man's tide-mark leaves,  
And turns the hard grey soil to brown.

Striding, he measures out the earth  
In lines of life, to rain and sun;  
And every year that comes to birth  
Sees him still striding on and on.

Against this picture of seasonal continuity and renewal, Bottomley, the invalid spectator, is led to muse on his own 'life-line':

Five times the young corn's pallid green  
I have seen spread and change and thrill;  
Five times the reapers I have seen  
Go creeping up the far-off hill:

And, as the unknowing ploughman climbs  
Slowly and inveterately,  
I wonder long how many times  
The corn will spring again for me.

In 'As the Team's Head-Brass', the peaceful scene above had been transformed by the war, and Thomas, an enlisted soldier, was contemplating his own chances of survival.

In 1913 Bottomley was wintering at the home of Robert and Elizabeth Trevelyan on Leith Hill in Surrey, and it was there as the year drew to a close that he wrote one of his most popular poems. Far from home and with a house move of his own on his mind to The Sheiling in Silverdale, he recalled his beloved Cartmel with nostalgia and affection in 'New Year's Eve, 1913':

O, Cartmel bells ring soft tonight,  
And Cartmel bells ring clear,  
But I lie far away tonight,  
Listening with my dear;

Listening in a frosty land  
Where all the bells are still  
And the small-windowed bell-towers stand  
Dark under heath and hill.

I thought that, with each dying year,  
As long as life should last  
The bells of Cartmel I should hear  
Ring out an aged past.

The mournful note resonates throughout the poem, especially its close with its evocation of darkness, loss and unexpected change:

Earth is not ours; no cherished space  
Can hold us from life's flow,  
That bears us thither and thence by ways  
We knew not we should go.

O, Cartmel bells ring loud, ring clear,  
Through midnight deep and hoar,  
A year new-born, and I shall hear  
The Cartmel bells no more.

The poem seems almost to transcend Bottomley's personal situation into a foreshadowing of the upheaval that would shortly engulf nations, with the bells silenced and the lamps going out all over Europe.

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Bottomley came to recognise how 'indiscreet' he had been to publish his early books and eventually withdrew most of them from sale. As a critic of his work over many years, Thomas's influence on this development cannot be discounted.

Apart from his criticism, Thomas promoted Bottomley's work whenever he could by including it in anthologies and other works that he was editing. He also sent Bottomley many books and magazines to help make up for his isolation from the London literary scene.

Their relationship was not, however, one-sided but mutually beneficial. As their friendship developed, he began to rely on Bottomley for possible sources of information for his commissioned books, and Bottomley's replies show that the former bank clerk's reading had been extensive and that he could more than hold his own with the Oxford graduate.

From 1903 onwards he also greatly relieved some of his friend's burden by proof-reading all of his books systematically. Thomas was enormously grateful for his assistance, though somewhat defensively warned him: 'You will find yourself lowering your standard of English

and of sense as you go along, or there will be nothing but corrections.’<sup>31</sup> Bottomley proved to be an accomplished editor, as Thomas frequently acknowledged. After he had returned the proofs of *The Heart of England* (1906), Thomas wrote: ‘The way you have corrected the proofs is wonderful. I adopt every suggestion that you make.’<sup>32</sup> And after he had proof-read his *Richard Jefferies* (1909), Thomas told him: ‘You are excellent. I adopt your suggestions shamelessly and with no intention of announcing to the world that you wrote the book.’<sup>33</sup> Bottomley was becoming ‘a bearded patriarchal figure’<sup>34</sup> and may well have reminded Thomas of James Ashcroft Noble, whom he seems to have replaced to some extent.

Bottomley may also have influenced Thomas’s work in other ways. The dedications made by Thomas in his books were simple and straightforward – that to *Rose Acre Papers* (1904) read ‘For Gordon Bottomley, Poet’. Bottomley, on the other hand, would invariably include dedicatory poems to family and friends in which he was naturally more direct and personal than when he was addressing mythological figures.

Thomas would have read with interest Bottomley’s poems to his parents and to Sarah Gordon (his aunt), all of whom Thomas had met on his visits. The poems reflect Bottomley’s deep affection, and Thomas must have envied the close familial bond that he had witnessed at first hand. In 1916 he may have recalled these verses when he came to write his own group of ‘household poems’ (as he described them to Bottomley<sup>35</sup>), the first two of which were addressed to his own parents – though they were radically different in tone and content.

Bottomley also wrote a number of poems to Emily before and during their marriage, poems that reflect their ‘selfless devotion’ that was apparent to all who met them. Claude Colleer Abbott described it thus: ‘No one who saw husband and wife together is likely to forget the beauty of a relationship in which even the faintest discord was undreamed of.’<sup>36</sup>

Thomas’s life with Helen was rather different, as he had confessed to Bottomley: ‘Helen usually gets a share of my depression, and in fact has done so for so many years now that she is always too near the edge, has lost her buoyancy and is thin and often poor-spirited: but she still has a lot of courage and whenever I let her, gets hopeful again.’<sup>37</sup>

Both men produced poems that reflect these differences. In a dedication to *A Vision of Giorgione* (1910) entitled ‘To My Wife, an Old Gift and New’, Bottomley wrote:

Where all is yours  
What virtue lies in giving?  
Though nought endures,

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<sup>31</sup>*Edward Thomas Fellowship Newsletter* 59, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup>*Letters*, p. 120.

<sup>33</sup>*Letters*, p.173.

<sup>34</sup>R. George Thomas’s description, *Letters*, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup>*Letters*, p. 266.

<sup>36</sup>Introduction to Gordon Bottomley’s *Poems and Plays*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup>*Letters*, p. 162.

In writing as in living  
I have given myself to you;  
And, as you take me,  
My poems grow more true,  
More true you make me.

Bottomley's giving of himself is unconditional and rewarding, his debt to Emily fully recognised.

Thomas's letters to Helen were tender and loving and he would often end 'I am ever and wholly yours' or 'All and always yours' (his final letter), similar in expression to Bottomley's opening line. However, his poem 'And You, Helen' is altogether more complex. Like Bottomley, Thomas mentions his own writing (though more diffidently) as he takes up the theme of giving – and of giving back:

[I would give you ...] a far better art  
Than mine can be, all you have lost  
    Upon the travelling waters tossed  
Or given to me.

Helen's turbulent life – the opposite of the sedate existence of the Bottomleys – is acknowledged, as is Thomas's part in it. At the climax of the poem, he concludes his wish-list by addressing these issues directly:

I would give you back yourself,  
And power to discriminate  
What you want and want it not too late,  
Many fair days free from care  
And heart to enjoy both foul and fair,  
And myself, too, if I could find  
Where it lay hidden and it proved kind.

However, the ominous Shakespearian echo ('foul and fair'), the seeming paradox of 'enjoying' both of them and the double qualification of the final lines might cast doubt on this outcome.

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In addition to family poems, Bottomley wrote a series of poems to his friends, one of the earliest being to Thomas himself. On an extended visit to Well Knowe in 1907, the latter had encouraged Bottomley to write his play *The Riding to Lithend* (1909), based on a thirteenth-century saga. Bottomley decided therefore that this was to be Thomas's play and wrote a 52-line dedication 'To Edward Thomas' that delighted its recipient. The poem encapsulates much of the friendship and mutual support of the two writers, and the opening lines picture Thomas arriving at Well Knowe:

Here in the North we speak of you,  
And dream (and wish the dream were true)  
That when the evening has grown late  
You will appear outside our gate –  
As though some Gipsy-Scholar yet  
Sought this far place that men forget;  
Or some tall hero still unknown,  
Out of the Mabinogion  
Were seen at nightfall looking in ...

Thomas wrote only two such poems, the first being 'The Sun Used to Shine' which tells of his friendship with Robert Frost. The second was 'The Sheiling', written after Thomas's final visit to the Bottomleys in November 1916, a poem ostensibly about their house:

It stands alone  
Up in a land of stone  
All worn like ancient stairs,  
A land of rocks and trees  
Nourished on wind and stone.

And all within  
Long delicate has been;  
By arts and kindness  
Coloured, sweetened, and warmed  
For many years has been.

Safe resting there  
Men hear in the travelling air  
But music, pictures see  
In the same daily land  
Painted by the wild air.

One maker's mind  
Made both, and the house is kind  
To the land that gave it peace,  
And the stone has taken the house  
To its cold heart and is kind.

The middle sections evoke the comfortable artistic ambience that Thomas associated with both of Bottomley's houses, which was certainly attractive on one level. However, 'long delicate' may suggest not only the refinement of such a life but also the chronic ill-health of one of the occupants, in sharp contrast to the intrinsic strength of the surrounding landscape, 'nourished on wind and stone'. 'Safe (originally 'Soft') resting there' portrays the house as haven, proof against the storms raging outside, both literal and metaphorical. The phrase, though, again recalls Bottomley ('who lies in bed or on a chair', Thomas had told Eleanor Farjeon in describing another visit<sup>38</sup>) while the word 'but' may imply the limited vision of

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<sup>38</sup>*Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* (1979 edn).



such an existence. Thomas had described his own earlier position as a map-reading instructor as ‘this safe job, only too safe’.<sup>39</sup>

Bottomley may also have been in Thomas’s thoughts (along with the ‘myriads’ of others) in ‘Rain’, written earlier that year:

But here I pray that none whom once I loved  
Is dying tonight or lying still awake  
Solitary, listening to the rain,  
Either in pain or thus in sympathy  
Helpless among the living and the dead ...

Bottomley was often thought to be ‘dying’<sup>40</sup>, while the words ‘lying’ and ‘helpless’ were often associated with him, not least by himself: ‘I lie helpless’, he had written to Paul Nash on the latter’s enlistment.<sup>41</sup>

In the final verse of ‘The Sheiling’, ‘maker’ may not only be ‘a pun on the Scottish word for poet, but also a tribute to Emily’s gifts as a home-maker’.<sup>42</sup> In addition, as Edna Longley points out, ‘the house may partly represent Bottomley’s benign therapy, the “land of stone”, with its “cold heart”, Thomas’s isolation and desolation’.<sup>43</sup> The repetition of ‘kind’, applied once to the house and once to the stone, perhaps reflects the reciprocal nature of the men’s relationship. Bottomley talked of ‘the blessing and illumination of knowing him’,<sup>44</sup> while Thomas was quick to acknowledge the benefits of his visits: ‘Helen would tell you now [...] I am much nicer and cheerfuller than I was [...] because of you and your house’.<sup>45</sup>

Thomas left for France in January 1917 and was killed on Easter Monday of that year. Emily Bottomley fell seriously ill and died on a visit to Scotland in 1947. Bottomley did not long survive the death of his ‘rare and wonderful companion’ and the following year died suddenly on a first visit to Thomas’s beloved Wiltshire. His body was taken to Scotland for cremation and his ashes interred with Emily’s in the medieval graveyard of Dundurn in Perthshire. Helen Thomas lived on until her ninetieth year, dying in 1967. She was buried at Eastbury, separated from her husband by the Channel and more than 50 years.

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<sup>39</sup>*Letters*, p. 258. He also described it to Frost as ‘the soft job’ that luck had placed in his way.

<sup>40</sup> ‘There was often blood on his handkerchief and he was supposed to be dying.’ *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, p. 108.

<sup>41</sup>*Poet and Painter*, p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> R.G.Thomas, *Collected Poems of Edward Thomas* (1978), p. 421. Bottomley used the Scottish word ‘makar’ (poet) in his unpublished autobiography.

<sup>43</sup> *Poems and Last Poems*, edited by Edna Longley (1973), p. 378.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in *The Last Four Years*, p. 239.

<sup>45</sup>*Letters*, p. 142.

## EDWARD THOMAS AND GEOFFREY LUPTON – walk along the South Downs

Ben Mackay



Ashford Hanger from Harting Down on the South Downs Way (Ben Mackay)

In *World Without End*, Helen Thomas wrote of her work at Bedales school where,

Among those I met was a young man who had been a pupil there. He was now settled in the neighbourhood, and occupied himself making furniture. He had means of his own, but being a disciple of Ruskin and Morris, he determined to live a simple and useful life, making strong and beautiful things. At the time I met him he was building a workshop at the top of the hill to the left of our [Berryfield] cottage, and he intended later to build himself a house there.

This young man, though uncouth and brusque, attracted me by his sincerity, and I expect by his good looks, too. He was magnificently built: tall and straight with a large well-shaped head covered with fair hair made fairer by his exposure to the weather. His eyes were bright blue and very clear, his skin was tanned, and he had a reddish beard. He was like a Viking or a young demi-god.

... I introduced him to [Edward] and they took to each other, though it was difficult to understand why, except that a certain uncompromising sincerity and hatred of affectation and humbug were common to both. I think the genuine simplicity of our life, enforced by our means, and its rather happy-go-lucky ways, contrasted for him favourably with the thought-out simplicity of the school people.

This young man was Geoffrey Lupton (1882 – 1949). He had learned architecture and furniture design from Ernest Gimson, an admirer of William Morris and one of the greatest Arts and Craft exponents of the age. Lupton offered to design and build a home for the

Thomasases to rent and this was where the family lived from the birth of Myfanwy in 1910 to 1913.

It was, wrote Helen, *long and low, facing the south towards which most of the windows looked. The east end was taken up by the living-room, which had windows on all sides but the north. The land sloped so steeply away from the house towards the south that from the windows there was no foreground for the eye to rest on – nothing until the downs seven miles away; and when the downs were hidden by the mists that sometimes filled the coombe we felt as if we were on a ship at sea.* Edward Thomas called it Wick Green and it was here that he wrote, amongst other works, *Feminine Influence on the Poets, Light and Twilight*, lives of Algernon Swinburne, George Borrow, Walter Pater and Maurice Maeterlinck and *The Icknield Way*.

The family came to dislike the house – not least because of its incorrigibly tough flint-studded soil in the garden and its draughty nature, isolation in mists and noise in storms. It inspired Edward's poems *The New House* and *Wind and Mist*. Nevertheless, like others living along the ridge, they were heartened by the view across the valley to the South Downs about which he made frequent comment in his Fieldwork Books.



Author photo. Note Helen's alcove in the centre, overlooking the gardens and on to the South Downs.

On 16 August 1910, the morning of Myfanwy's birth, for instance, Thomas noted in Fieldwork Book 44,

A cold pale dawn w a space of lighted cold blue in E for a few minutes then cross<sup>d</sup>  
at last + at last obscured by a drift of grey low cloud down fr S.E. for hours. Downs  
hid in paleness w silver clouds agst it moving continually.

Helen further recalls, *Below the terrace at the end of the garden Edward worked in a tiny study which Lupton had built with a thatched roof, a big fireplace and a long window.* This was Lupton's Bee House, so named because here he kept his bee-keeping equipment. In its other half Thomas found a retreat from family noise and clutter. In his book-lined study he worked in solitude, reading hundreds of review books and writing endless reviews. Here he drafted elements of *In Pursuit of Spring* and other works. But perhaps its greatest

significance is that it was here, on 3 December 1914, that Thomas drafted his first poem, *Up in the wind*, and the Bee House became the birthplace of many of his poems<sup>46</sup>.

Thomas's fieldwork books contain several descriptions of the changing view from the Bee House across the valley to the South Downs, seen in all weathers and light, and at different times of the day and night, always lovingly and perceptively described. For example, on 12 October 1912 he noted,

Whole week of cloudless still starry nights misty later, till at dawn the whole vale is full of mist & so continues all thro the sunny day but with many changes, now concentrating into white many blocks that let the Downs come free and dark, now drifting in loose whirls all up the coombe, now dividing in thin horizontal scarps, now spreading up & forming a wall for about 300 yds away, inseparable fr the sky and all white & bright w sun

Lupton shared a love of the ridge-view across to the favoured walking ground of Butser Hill and the South Downs and in FWB 49, starting an entry on Saturday 11 March 1911, Thomas included an account of a Downs walk shared with Lupton [corrections in brackets]. Such is his detail, that the route's greater part can be planned with accuracy on an OS map, at least as far as Bepton. Beyond that, their way back to Steep "over fields to Turkey Island and down to Goose Green and home at 2.15." has to be conjectural.

Starting at 6.15 took train with Lupton to Brighton and after seeing a Crafts Exhibition took train to Shoreham and started walking at 11.20, over the Old Bridge and off the road at Lancing College, up and along the track at Allington [Annington] Hill Barn – a very little drizzle in a moderate SW wind with a cloudy sky with a bright bar midway up the grey high wall of sea rising from by Worthing to the horizon – smoke of limeworks on over right near Bramber and on over left Cissbury – the cloud black by Chanctonbury in front, sometimes hid by undulations. A good straightforward lightly rutted track over grass

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<sup>46</sup> Lupton enlisted in 1915 as a private in the Army Service Corps, later rising to the rank of Captain. His wife wanted to rent out the Bee House, so asked Thomas to leave, which he regretted having to do. He wrote in July 1916, *Yes, I was hustled out of my study 2 months ago. My landlord was at the front. His wife did what he never would have done.* Lupton retired from furniture making in 1923 and Barnsley took over the tenancy, living and working there till his death. The cottage and its connected workshops and associated outbuildings were part of Lupton's original project. Today the Edward Barnsley Educational Trust continues furniture making and training. The study in the Bee House has lost its independence and is now connected to a later private house

but touching some arable and one newly ploughed stretch of turf – a little gorse especially in deep hollows towards Cissbury. No trees after Lancing Ring until we got to Hill Barn where are a few thorns and elders and ash[?] surrounding a cowfold (2 or 3 cows) and a big newish barn, no house near. Therein we ate.

Then on to Chanctonbury with its crowd of ash, beech and larch all in poor condition crowded and dripping. Then westward making a little south of Washington, down to the Worthing Rd (very deeply worn) and up past chalk pit on to Downs, Sallington [Sullington] Hill etc and with woods on south slope and a big house in a coombe and presently another [illegible] of Downs between us and the sea (Black Patch Hill, Harrow Hill camp etc) juniper peppered smooth roundish topped hills with scarce a farm in hollows.

On straight on a fairly level ridge down to Amberley at 4.30 and had some tea and then past the Early English church and under the ruined castle walls and the ivied natural wall of clunch above the edge of the Wild Brooks, to the ferry where we shouted long to the church and cottages by Bury before the ferryman came out, a heavy rambling grey man with a kind face and very soft rich brown cheeks and light moustache – hadn't had a call to the ferry since Sunday (now Saturday) – then thro Bury, a very old seeming place with a few houses up on banks above the deep worn roads from Amberley to the church (shingled sharp spire) and a long low milking shed with slanting ridge and a very black cloud of yew against the church and a few cottages round about make a perfect group a little above the river and the green marsh. A very good new stone house – of some size with a slight bay at one side, good pale stone and a little level lawn and stone terrace: but too high a wall between it and road – with Horsham slates at west side of Bury looking seawards with Waltham Hill on East and the curves of Downs pale and clear, and Chanctonbury near and Ditchling and Firle clear but with no modelling and a pale steely sea.

Bury very still + dead till [?] we crossed, then all the women were at doors to see us passing on through Westburton + Bignor – black birds in the cloudy eve – + in the dark at last, under high smooth Bognor Hill, to Sutton + stayed at White Horse (3/- for double bed, bread cheese + butter, + for Lupton milk).

Away at 6.45 in still cold cloudy morn w missel thrushes songs singing + all the dark woods pale warm brown where touched by level light behind us, smoke drifting slowly + mildly in hollows + a big volume of smoke over in NW., at Barlavington off on the Chichester R<sup>d</sup> up for  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile.

Up and then above Littleton farm off to the right by lime pits and then up to rather dreary flat top of Graffham Down and with woods on either side often cutting off view, and almost always the South view of Goodwood etc – then down steep to Cocking thorns and

hazels with chaffinches singing on top of Downs and little heaps of bright new chalk under the branches turned up by rabbits.

At Cocking a cup of tea and then on through Bepton etc and over fields to Turkey Island and down to Goose Green and home at 2.15. Some cuckoo flowers and white dead nettle. This walk undertaken with an old arrangement, in spite of my being much exhausted lately (? after change to strict vegetarianism)

My legs served me well but at Amberley on 1<sup>st</sup> day, my head was very tired and sad, but still I kept on and was better at Sutton.

2<sup>nd</sup> day very tired and hungry (only ate oranges) by end of 2<sup>nd</sup> hour but tea and oranges at Cocking: my head gave way again at Elsted but I kept on and was not exceptionally nervous etc on reaching home and glad of dinner.

*[40 miles, from 1120h on Saturday to 1415h on Sunday]*

With acknowledgements to the Berg Library, New York

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### **‘THE WHITE HORSE’**

**Edward Thomas**

Tall beeches overhang the inn, dwarfing and half hiding it, for it lies back a field's breadth from the byroad. The field is divided from the road by a hedge and only a path from one corner and a cart track from the other which meet under the beeches connect the inn with the road. But for a sign board or rather the post and empty frame of a signboard close to the road behind the hedge, the traveller could not guess it an inn. The low dirty-white building looks like a farmhouse, with a lean-to, a rick and a shed of black boarding at one side; and in fact the landlord is more than half farmer. Except from the cottages which are scattered far around, only one of them visible from the inn, customers are few. And yet it is almost at a crossing of roads. One field away from the field with the signpost the byroad crosses a main road at a high point on the table land: the inn itself stands so high that its beeches mark it for those who know and form a station for the eyes of strangers, many miles on 3 sides. But both roads lack houses and travellers, especially on the main road, are motorists from the ends of the earth and farmers going to market from remote villages. The main road runs for one length of 4 miles without a house of any sort. Once the land was all common. Many acres of it are still possessed by the gorse and inhabited chiefly by linnets and a pair of stone curlews. The name of Common clings to it though it is hedged. Gorse and bracken mingle with the hedgerow hawthorns and keep memories of the old waste alive. Few trees of any age stand alongside the

road, and as the hedges are low and broken, and everywhere gorse is visible, even the [traveller] stranger has whiffs of the past and tastes something like the olden sensation of journeying over wide common, high and unpopulated, higher than anything except Butser Hill far behind him and Inkpen far before him northward.

The farm houses naturally then are placed far back behind the gorse or the fields once belonging to it and are reached by lanes of various lengths out of the main road. Once, I think, the roads crosses in the midst of a tract of common which perhaps ended where now the inn is. But as things are it might well seem to have hidden there out of someone's perversity. 'I should like to wring the old [thing's] girl's neck for coming away here'. So said the [girl] woman who [served me] fetched my beer when I found myself at the inn first. She was the daughter of the house, fresh from a long absence in service in London, a bright [active] wildish slattern with a cockney accent and her hair half down. She spoke angrily. If she did not get away before long, she said, she would go mad with the loneliness. She looked out sharply: [there was nothing for her to see but] all she could see was the beeches and the tiny pond beneath them and the calves standing in it drinking, alternately grazing the water here and there and thinking, and at last going out and standing still on the bank thinking. Who the 'old girl' was, whether she had built the house here, or what, I did not inquire. It was just the loneliness of the high placed little inn isolated under those tall beeches that pleased me. Every year I used to go there once or twice, never so often as to overcome the original feeling it had given me. I was always on the verge of turning that feeling or having it turned by a natural process, into a story. Whoever the characters would have been I do not think they would have included either the 'old girl' or the landlord's [mysterious] indignant cockney daughter. The story that was to [explain] interpret the look that the house had as you came up to it under the trees never took shape. The daughter stayed on several years, bearing it so well that her wildish looks and cockney accent seemed to fit the scene, and I used to look forward to meeting her again. She would come in with her hair half down as at first or I would find her scrubbing the bricks or getting dinner ready in the taproom which was kitchen also. But before I had learnt anything from her she went. [I can only trust] I have to be content with what the landlord told me years afterwards, when he left his wheelbarrow standing in profile like a pig and came into his taproom out of his farmyard for a glass and stood drinking outside the door.

Originally or as far back as he knew of, the house was a blacksmith's, the lean-to taproom was the smithy as you can tell by the height of it, and the man was remembered and still spoken of for his skill. The landlord spoke of him yet had never seen him. The smith died and left a widow and as she could not use hammer and tongs and as no 2<sup>nd</sup> smith arrived to marry her, she turned the smithy into a [taproom] shop and had an off-licence to sell beer. Presently

a man came along from the Chiltern beech country with a two-cylinder engine for sawing timber. At that day the land here carried far more woodland. The beech trunks were cut up to make chairs. The branches were burned for charcoal, and the circular black floors of the charcoal-burners' fires are still now and then cut into by the farmer's plough. The man from the Chilterns came here to saw the beech planks and brought with him a little boy, his nephew, who had to pick up chips to feed the fire of the engine. 'My uncle' said the landlord 'fell in love, I suppose, with the widow and married her'. He continued to go about the country with his engine sawing timber. But the beeches overhanging the house were spared. The boy stayed on and farmed. The shop was turned into a taproom with a full licence and the widow sold ale until she died. The man grew old and gave up sawing and then he died. Now the nephew farms the land. It is worth a guinea a mile he says, but he has grown fat on the beer which his daughters draw. On the wall of the taproom is a list of the officers of a slate club and also coloured diagrams illustrating certain diseases of the cow. The room smells as much of bacon and boiled vegetables as of ale and shag, and is often silent and empty except for a painted wooden clock ticking loudly above the fire. Yet it is one of the pleasantest rooms in Hampshire, well deserving the footpaths which lead men to it from all directions over ploughland and meadow, and deserving as good a story as a man could write. [Not every erasure has been transcribed].

From Field notebook, 16 November 1914 pp. 143-144 in Edna Longley, Editor. *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems* (2008: Bloodaxe Books).

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## A PUB, A POET AND A POEM

**Andrew Sargent**

“I could wring the old thing's neck that put it here!  
A public-house! it may be public for birds,  
Squirrels and such-like, ghosts of charcoal-burners  
And highwaymen”. The wild girl laughed. “But I  
Hate it since I came back from Kennington.  
I gave up a good place”.

It has to be said that the poem, *Up in the wind*, does not begin very encouragingly for pub enthusiasts. The pub which so dissatisfies the “wild girl” is the White Horse at Priors Dean (sometimes Priorsdean) in Hampshire.



Thomas's work would come to be intensely admired by poets of the stature of Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney and Andrew Motion. For Edna Longley he was one of the half-dozen poets who “remade English poetry “ in the early twentieth century<sup>47</sup>. He was a poet “of strong gentleness, long in quick thinking. His poems rarely resolve; they avoid convenience, mistrust rhetoric and ostentation, and have the effect of lingering on the senses....”<sup>48</sup>.

His most famous poem, often claimed as one of the nation's favourites, is *Adlestrop*. It begins in conversational tone - “Yes, I remember Adlestrop - / The name, because one afternoon / Of heat the express-train drew up there / Unwontedly. It was late June” - and ends in a moment of transient happiness: “And for that minute a blackbird sang / Close by, and round him, mistier, / Farther and farther, all the birds / Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire”.

Edward Thomas was born in Lambeth in March 1878 to lower middle class Welsh parents. He was educated at local board and private schools and for a time at St Paul's School. From there he progressed to Lincoln College, Oxford. While still an undergraduate he married Helen Noble, who was expecting their first child, but often felt ill at ease within married and family life. Cursed with “a tendency to a destructive melancholy”<sup>49</sup> he contemplated suicide on several occasions. He nonetheless inspired a great deal of affection among his friends and fellow authors.

Thomas supported himself and his family by writing reviews, articles, and commissioned books of various kinds. Many drew on his passion for nature, first nurtured during childhood explorations of Wandsworth Common. He loved to walk, regularly and over long distances; possibly, says one of his recent biographers, no poet since Wordsworth has walked as far<sup>50</sup>.

So it is perhaps not surprising that pubs played a significant part in his life. Many references to pubs can be found in his writings and letters, whether this be bunking off from a school cross-country run to eat bread and cheese with a friend at a pub in Merton, drinking as an undergraduate at The Fox at Boar's Hill “where the scent of hawthorn comes in through the window with the sound of the rain and the nightingale”<sup>51</sup> or living opposite The Shant public house in Weald Village. Helen Thomas later recalled her husband being patronised by staff at

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas: From Adlestrop to Arras: A Biography* (London, 2015) p 2

<sup>48</sup> Matthew Hollis in *Edward Thomas: Poems Selected by Matthew Hollis* (London, 2011) p xiv. This includes *Adlestrop*, *Up in the Wind* and the prose piece *The White Horse*.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Emeny, *Edward Thomas: A Life in Pictures* (London, 2017) p ix

<sup>50</sup> Hollis p ix

<sup>51</sup> , Quoted in Wilson p 59

Bedales School as “a solitary wandering creature who worked irregularly [and] who drank and smoked in village inns”<sup>52</sup>.

In 1901 Edward and Helen Thomas and their two children left London for Kent where they lived in a succession of rented houses. Five years later they moved further afield to the village of Steep near Petersfield, in the midst of the East Hampshire Hangers on the eastern edge of the Hampshire Downs. They stayed there, again in a series of rented properties, until 1915. Their third child, Myfanwy, was born in 1910.

By now Thomas's prose writing had won him a good deal of admiration. But it was only in late 1914, urged on by his close friend the American poet Robert Frost (and, according to one biographer, in an attempt to combat despair<sup>53</sup>) that he began to write verse. The result was a body of work – 140 poems written in little more than two years - of “subdued intensity”<sup>54</sup> and lasting impact.

The White Horse Inn, three miles north west of Steep, was the setting for Thomas's first poem. This drew on, and seems to have been developed alongside, a prose piece he wrote in November. In the latter he describes the pub as being set back a field's breadth from the road and overhung by tall beeches. Indeed “but for a sign-board or rather the post and empty iron frame of a sign-board close to the road behind the hedge a traveller could not guess it an inn”.

The inn itself, “a low dirty white building”, resembles a farmhouse, “with a lean-to, a rick and a shed of black boarding on one side; and in fact the landlord is more than half farmer”. Having “left his wheelbarrow standing in profile like a pig”, the landlord recounts the history of the pub and explains that the taproom had once been a smithy. On the wall is “a list of the officers of a slate club and also coloured diagrams illustrating certain diseases of the cow”. But Thomas's conclusion is sympathetic and upbeat:

“The room smells as much of bacon and boiled vegetables as of ale and shag, and it is often silent and empty except for a painted wooden clock ticking loudly above the fire. Yet it is one of the pleasantest rooms in Hampshire, well deserving the footpaths which lead men to it from all directions over ploughland and meadow, and deserving as good a story as a man could write.”

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Wilson p 154

<sup>53</sup> Wilson p 238

<sup>54</sup> John Bayley quoted in Wilson p 314

The author of “Highways and Byways in Hampshire”, writing at about the time Thomas first visited the inn, describes it more prosaically:

“One turns off the roadway by the White Horse Inn, a quiet lonely little place hidden among trees in quite a unique situation for an inn, as it stands back in the meadow, but despite seeming isolation it is said to do a good trade”<sup>55</sup>.

The landlord was certainly right that the White Horse Inn, which dated back to the seventeenth century, had once adjoined a smithy. In September 1868, when the Hampshire Chronicle carried an advertisement for a new tenant, the inn was described as having a “wheelwright and a blacksmith's shop attached. A good grocery and baking business has also been carried on for many years by the present tenant”<sup>56</sup>. Expressions of interest were invited to George Allen at the Brewery, Winchester; Allen was then owner of the Lion Brewery, and the White Horse, leased from Sir Henry Tichborne, formed part of the brewery estate.

Thomas explains that he had visited the White Horse once or twice a year, though “never so often as to overcome the original feeling it had given me”, and remembers in particular being fetched beer by the daughter of the house “fresh from a long absence in service in London, a bright wildish slattern with a cockney accent and her hair half down. She spoke angrily. If she did not away before long, she said, she would go mad with loneliness”.

In the event the daughter remained for several more years “bearing it so well that her wildish looks and cockney accent seemed to fit the scene and I used to look forward to meeting her again. She would come in with her hair halfdown as at first or I would find her scrubbing the bricks or getting dinner ready in the taproom which was kitchen also. But before I had learnt anything from her she went”.

From the raw material of the inn and the landlord's dissatisfied daughter Edward Thomas crafted his first poem. It tells of a “wild girl” previously working - in service, one assumes - in Kennington but now toiling away, unhappy and resentful, in an isolated country inn “low and small among the towering beeches”. The narrator, drinking his beer, “might have mused of coaches and highwaymen / Charcoal-burners and life that loves the wild”, but reckons that few now travelled the roads which passed some distance away and from where the inn was hidden from view: “it's the trees you see, and not the house”.

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<sup>55</sup> D H Moutray Read, *Highways and Byways of Hampshire* (London, 1908) p 385  
<sup>56</sup> Hampshire Chronicle 12 September 1868

The girl then bitterly recounts her version of the history of the pub: it had previously been a smithy, but on the death of the smith his widow began to sell ale and later married a sawyer; the sawyer's young nephew, her father, became landlord in due course but particularly enjoyed working the land near the inn ("a mile of it is worth a guinea"). And now the daughter was stuck there, in windy solitude, and blaming the widow's decision to set up an alehouse - "I could wring the old thing's neck for thinking of it".

The wind has repeatedly blown the sign board down and it now lies at the bottom on the pond. But as the poem moves to a close the girl's tone begins to change. She doubts she will return to Kennington: "Here I was born / And I've a notion on these windy nights / Here I shall die. Perhaps I want to die here. / I reckon I shall stay. But I do wish / The road was nearer and the wind farther off." The poem ends with the sight of two calves wading in the pond "sipping and thinking, both happily, neither long..." and with an exhortation to "Look at those calves. Hark at the trees again."

None of Thomas's other poems focuses squarely on a public house, but in several they form an important part of the rural and poetic context. In *Over the Hills*, for example, the poet remembers a walk one "harvest evening that seemed endless" which rounds off at an inn "where all were kind, / All were strangers". In *The Owl* he finds "food, fire and rest" at an inn. In his short poignant poem *A Private* he includes a gentle tease when the speaker tells fellow drinkers that he plans to spend that night at "Mrs Greenland's Hawthorn Bush". This sounds as if it should be a pub or a beerhouse but is exactly what he says – a bush.

In July 1915 Thomas decided to enlist. He had dithered for several months, and in so doing inspired one of Robert Frost's most famous poems, *The Road Not Taken*. When his friend Eleanor Farjeon asked him what he was fighting for "he stopped and picked up a pinch of earth. "Literally, for this", he said"<sup>57</sup>. Thomas served with the Artists Rifles before transferring to the Royal Garrison Artillery. It was as Second Lieutenant Thomas that he arrived in France in January 1917, and on 9 April - Easter Monday - was killed on the first day of the Battle of Arras aged 39.

The White Horse Inn – the highest pub in Hampshire - is still going strong. Few twentieth century references can be found on-line in local papers other than to its role as an occasional meeting place for the Hambleton Hunt or the Gosport Cycling Club. But a sad exception is the report in December 1922 of the death by suicide of the 53 year old landlord Richard Brown. He is described as weighing 20 stone, and sounds like the genial host who explained

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Wilson p 309

the recent history of the pub to Thomas. He is described in the latter's prose piece, a shade uncharitably, as “grown fat on the beer his daughters draw”.

Brown had lived there since the 1880s. He appears in the 1891 census as an agricultural labourer, in 1901 as a farmer and in 1911 as “assisting in the business”. The licensee in each case is his mother Charlotte, 81 years old in 1911. She certainly passes muster as the old widow – the “old thing” in the first line of the poem – and she had indeed been married to a sawyer turned innkeeper. But some real life elements do not quite match the story as recounted by Thomas and, in his poem, by the wild girl. Richard Brown, for example, was unmarried. So the “daughter” who so caught Thomas's attention may in fact have been Charlotte's granddaughter Violet, aged 26, then living at the inn with her sister Millie aged 14.

Nor does it quite fit that, as Thomas puts it, the widow “turned the smithy into a shop and had an off licence to sell beer”. As we have seen, the White Horse had been a fully licensed public house, with a smithy attached, long before Charlotte Brown arrived, and also functioned as a shop well before 1868. On the other hand the inn at that point did stand within 10 acres of land, which squares with Thomas's comment that the landlord was as much a farmer as an inn keeper. But, of course, to judge a poem against the accuracy of its “facts” is to look in pretty squarely the wrong direction.

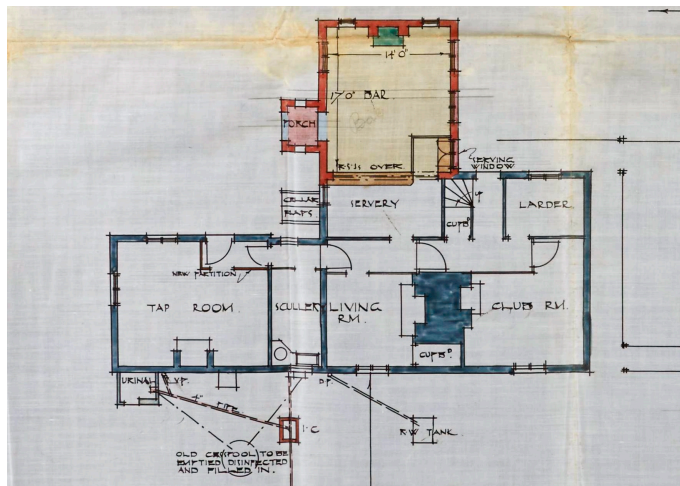
A year before the suicide of Richard Brown the Lion Brewery of Winchester had purchased the lease of the White Horse, together with the surrounding meadows, from Sir Joseph Tichborne for £1,300. The ground floor then consisted of the tap room and, in the main building, a scullery, servery, larder, club room and sitting room. Upstairs were four bedrooms. An inventory from 1925 recorded that the furniture in the tap room (which, as we have seen, Thomas reckoned “one of the pleasantest rooms in Hampshire”) consisted of an 8ft and a 6ft Deal table, an 8ft Deal form and a 9ft high back settle. There was also “an American 30 hour clock” - perhaps the same “painted wooden clock” Thomas noted “ticking loudly above the fire”.

In 1928 the Lion Brewery added a single-storey bar extension to the east side of the building. But the brewery did not long remain in possession. In 1931 they sold the house to Amey's Brewery in Petersfield for £1,450 and the Lion Brewery itself was bought later that year by Strong & Co of Romsey and demolished. Amey's owned the house until 1951. In that year the brewery, together with the White Horse, 19 other public houses and 12 off-licences, was acquired by Whitbread. In due course the premises of the White Horse were extended to the south and, more recently, to the west.

The White Horse is today owned by Fullers, the London brewers. It serves excellent beer and food. But the sign board of “The Pub With No Name” is as absent as it was in Thomas's time. The old smithy turned tap room, jutting forward from the main building, was christened the Edward Thomas Bar in 1978 and a carved wooden plaque was erected by the Edward Thomas Fellowship to mark the centenary of the poet's birth. Still standing in front of the pub is the pond in which two calves stood “sipping and thinking” at the conclusion of *Up in the wind*.

*With thanks to the Edward Thomas Fellowship, the Hampshire Record Office and the Petersfield Museum.*

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Picture 1. Plan of the White Horse in 1928, showing the bar extension soon to be built on the east side of the house (top of the plan)

Hampshire Record Office 21M73/XP166



Picture 2. The pub in 1954, anonymous except for the sign of the Whitbread tankard near the front door. Hampshire Record Office 79A01/H2/1/1



Picture 3. The White Horse in 2018, with the Edward Thomas Bar to the right. : Andrew Sargent

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## THE 'WILD' GIRL

**Chris Heal**

The 'Pub with No Name' at Priors Dean, the highest public house in Hampshire, is one of the county's iconic hostelries. Inside, it is a rambling affair with a large wooden bar that dominates the two drinking rooms. Its given name was, and still is to some, the *White Horse*. Locals delight in pointing out the empty pub signpost.

Near the start of the Great War, Edward Thomas, the pub's most celebrated drinker, often walked along the track below the road from his home in Steep and occasionally to the *White Horse*.

It is difficult to catch the breath of the place: the loneliness of Priors Dean, the women who gave birth to and nurtured the alehouse, the dramatic late-in-career transition of Thomas from critic and writer to a poet who became the 'father of us all'. Emerging from the story is a barmaid, the 'wild girl', who helped spark Thomas to the profession that he had always evaded.

Thomas's many admirers make pilgrimages to the *White Horse*, the subject of his first poem, but academia has ignored the young woman who inadvertently played such an important literary role.

In the 1840s, the blacksmith at Priors Dean was William White from Ropley. He was married to Elizabeth, from Wiltshire, and every year or two they produced another child. The dew pond at their door at Locke Cottage provided water for the forge and was a friend to the cows and visiting horses. Water from the house came from a backyard well, never dry. The business prospered and, by 1851, William held ten acres and was able to call himself a farmer which placed him nearer to superior neighbours. His wife died and he remarried, a second Elizabeth, from Froxfield across the turnpike, who gave him another five children. She was also the mother of the *White Horse*.

The land across this part of the Hampshire Downs through Colemore, Froxfield, Privett and Hawkley was all small farms and their workers. The Froxfield Plateau was thought the 'wildest and most beautiful' in the county.<sup>58</sup> Here's William Cobbett in *Rural Rides* in 1823:

*The lane had a little turn towards the end; so that, out we came, all in a moment at the very edge of the hanger! And, never, in all my life was I so surprised and so delighted! I pulled up my horse, and sat and looked; and it was like looking from the top of a castle down into the sea, except that the valley was land and not water ... Those who had so strenuously dwelt on the dirt and dangers of this route, had not said a word about the beauties, the matchless beauties of the scenery.*

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<sup>58</sup> Harvey, *United Parishes*.



Much of Priors Dean had been medieval rabbit warrens. The soil was good to poor, suited to wheat, oats and sheep, depending on its facing position on the hill. Avaricious landlords enclosed the land after 1800, reduced the Commons, slew much of the beech and increased the land under cultivation. The old woods were once the haunt of charcoal burners.

The area was largely self-sufficient with long-term families and social order, slow and distrusting of incomers. Cobbett's disgust with the rapid growth of towns and the sufferings of the exploited rural poor was in harmony with life around Priors Dean. With the high food prices following the Napoleonic wars, a surge of labourers moved in to live among the ruins and outhouses.<sup>59</sup> Close by Locke Cottage was a wheezing windmill, the nearest thing locally to industrial machinery.

Neighbouring Colemore today is an almost deserted village, hardly worthy of the name; nearby Hartley Mauditt, tucked behind Chawton, lies abandoned, one of over ninety such places in rural Hampshire. Priors Dean and its blacksmith occupied a separated corner of a largely agricultural county.

Edward Thomas was an incomer as were all the foreign landlords at the *White Horse* after the second Elizabeth, as were Thomas's devotees, and all the modern-day, early evening drinkers and diners, more professionals with mobile phones than woodsmen with callouses. Over a hundred years, the few local men who could walk to the *No Name* were driven deeper into the public bar that used to be the smithy.

W H Hudson in *Hampshire Days* caught the separation, deep-set in 1903. He went with a friend to find the small church at Priors Dean, reportedly hidden behind nettles:

*It was an excessively hot day in July ... through roads so deep and narrow and roofed over with branches as to seem in places like tunnels ... it was strangely still, and gave one the feeling of being in a country long deserted by man ... We saw two cottages and two women and a boy standing talking by a gate, and of these people we asked the way to Priors Dean. They could not tell us ... A middle-aged man was digging about thirty yards away, and to him one of the women now called, 'Can you tell them the way to Priors Dean?' ...*

*The man left off digging, straightened himself, and gazed steadily at us for some moments ... When he had had his long gaze, he said, 'Priors Dean?'*

*Then, at last, he stuck his spade into the soil, and leaving it, slowly advanced to the gate and told us to follow a path which he pointed out, and when we got on the hill we would see Priors Dean before us. And that was how we found it.*

One sees the Whites as hard-working people looking to better themselves. William added a wheelwright business to his blacksmith's shop and the ten acres. Elizabeth developed a bakery, a grocery shop and a small alehouse. As the beer shop became established, William's landlord sold the lease to the Southgate Brewery in Winchester, run for many years by the Barnes family, deep city establishment.

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<sup>59</sup> Harvey, *United Parishes*.

William White died in 1867, aged fifty-eight. The next year, the *White Horse* was offered for let by the brewery with early possession.<sup>60</sup> In July 1870, the Barnes brothers, in difficulties, put to auction all moveable stock: 100 hogsheads, 2,000 gallons of beer, sacks of hops, even their draught horse. Two weeks later, the brewery buildings were for sale or let, an engine house, a mill house, waggon sheds and the private residence.<sup>61</sup>

Elizabeth survived the storm. She was the acknowledged publican in 1871; two of her sons, Frank and Herbert, took over their father's smithy.

The way over Froxfield Plateau was a connection between the Portsmouth and Gosport turnpikes.<sup>62</sup> From 1802, passengers from Alton were picked up daily from the *Crown* and taken 'two miles beyond East Tisted' to turn left 'over Prior's Dean Common' to the *Red Lion* at Petersfield.<sup>63</sup> The *White Horse* was no coaching inn. No sweating teams of four turned of and threaded down the narrow lanes with passengers demanding appropriate toilets and dinner and wine all to be finished within the half hour. The obvious halt was the *White Horse's* near neighbour, the *Trooper Inn* at Froxfield, two miles closer to Thomas's home. The *Jolly Trooper* in 1830 did have its roots in the seventeenth century and had the space and size for an ostlery. The inn became a popular centre for the Hunt, a recruiting centre in the First World War, and the village Post Office with its own grocery and bakery business. The *Trooper* was not competition to the *White Horse*; it lived in a different world.

Within three years, Elizabeth remarried to Joseph Saunders, her first husband twelve years her senior, her second ten years her junior. Saunders was a chair turner from Tylers Green, born in Buckland, one among the many craftsmen supplying the great English furniture centre at High Wycombe. He brought with him to Priors Dean a little boy, his nephew, who had to pick up chips to feed the fire of his two-cylinder engine.

'My uncle,' the landlord, Leonard, told Thomas, 'fell in love, I suppose, with the widow, and married her.' Joseph continued to go about the country sawing timber with his engine. But the beeches overhanging the house were spared.<sup>64</sup>

Elizabeth Saunders died, with no record found, and Joseph left for his native Buckinghamshire.

Job Brown, sixty-one, and his wife Charlotte, were installed at the *White Horse* before 1891. Both named Buckland as their birth place, as had Joseph Saunders, born within a year of Job. There was a family connection by marriage, unsolved, between the two men or their wives.

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<sup>60</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, 12/9/1868.

<sup>61</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, 23/7/1870.

<sup>62</sup> Freeman, 'Turnpikes and Their Traffic'.

<sup>63</sup> Cary, *Itinerary of the Great Roads*.

<sup>64</sup> Prose notes of Thomas. Hollis, *Collected Poems*. Longley, *Collected Poems*.

With Job and Charlotte were three unmarried children, the youngest of whom, ‘Minnie K’, became the barmaid. There was a six-year-old granddaughter, too, ‘Minnie V’, known as Violet. She was the daughter of Job and Charlotte’s son Leonard whose wife Matilda had died in childbirth in Kingston-upon-Thames. Violet had a firm opinion of her father. ‘I draw the ale and he grows fat,’ she muttered.

Job began work as a bricklayer in his home village. By 1871, he was a sawyer in Chawton, perhaps mirroring Joseph’s work. His home was ‘Four Marks Cottage’, opposite *The Windmill Inn* on the ridge near which he later ran a pub where he was called to give evidence at the death of a tramp to malnutrition and exposure.<sup>65</sup> Two years later, Job was the landlord of the *White Horse* in Alton High Street.<sup>66</sup> By 1881, he was a carter in Long Ditton with Hampshire born children.

The *White Horse* was named by Elizabeth before 1881. The name might have come from a horse visitor to the forge or, more teasingly, might have been a twin of Job’s tenancy in Alton in the 1870s: a family with two *White Horses* and a new pub sign erected in Priors Dean to Violet’s irritation. A thief took it and threw it in the pond, she explained.

Shortly afterwards, the ‘Pub with No Name’ was born.

It is rumoured that the locals were fed up with fleeting visits by foreigners on their day trips from faraway places. The sign signified a welcome the locals did not share and so they continually got rid of it. They preferred what had always been their private, secluded place in Priors Dean. The pub became the Hampshire equivalent of that remote Welsh bar where all conversation stops as the unwelcome English visitor enters.

In late 1909, Edward Thomas and his family moved to Berryfield Cottage at Ashford near Petersfield so that his children could attend Bedales, a new co-educational establishment. Over the next three years, Thomas produced twelve books of what he often called ‘hackwork’, dragging himself to the limits of his physical and mental endurance, in order to earn enough money to support the growing family. His biographers are quick to point out that, far from hack, many of these books, like *The South Country*, *The Heart of England* and *In Pursuit of Spring*, remain classics of their genre. Thomas’s literary reviews often broke new ground. He was the first to recognise the genius of de Walter de la Mare, W H Davies and Robert Frost. Thomas was a close acquaintance of the other literary giants of his time: Hilaire Belloc, who explored locally looking for the Pilgrim’s Way,<sup>67</sup> Rupert Brooke, John Buchan, Joseph Conrad ...

Thomas spent hours, nights, walking to dawn, on the steep chalky paths around the wooded hangers seeking peace, inspiration or the courage to be a poet. Two or three times a

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<sup>65</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser*, 30/10/1872.

<sup>66</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser*, 8/5/1875.

<sup>67</sup> Belloc, *The Road*.

year, he made the climb from his second home, Yew Tree Cottage, a workman's semi-detached house in Steep, to the *White Horse*.<sup>68</sup> In 1914, Thomas described, the pub as 'dirty white', looking like a farmhouse which it 'half was', with a lean-to, rick and shed and only one cottage within sight.

On one November trip, he found the subject for his first and longest poem, 'Up in the Wind'. Violet Brown sparked the transition from prose to poetry that he had never dared face. He wrote in prose followed by two poetic drafts.<sup>69</sup> It was an important watershed in English literature. Matthew Hollis, his biographer, wrote, 'Thomas did something extraordinary that he had not systematically attempted in years. He began a poem.'<sup>70</sup>

In December 1914, on the four days following 'Up in the Wind', Thomas wrote 'November', 'March', 'Old Man', and 'The Sign-Post' – 'poems of a quality rare not only in his generation'.<sup>71</sup>

Violet was twenty-nine-years-old, her hair-half down, a 'wild girl', born near Kingston-upon-Thames, but returned from her 'good' job in Kennington to help run the family pub. In his prose, Thomas called her a 'slattern'. She shrieked. A loud clock ticked, the cabbage bubbled and heaved under a big saucepan lid, the girl poked the fire and bent her back to scrub the bricks. All the while, she told Thomas about the awfulness of the *White Horse* and her 'fat' father, the landlord, Leonard. She wanted to 'ring the old thing's neck that put [the pub] here!'

The wild girl laughed, 'I hate it ...'

Thomas never enquired after the 'old thing that put it here'. We know that it was Elizabeth White, who died as Violet was born. Thomas, an accidental Londoner himself, born in Lambeth but from Wales, felt that Violet's Cockney accent 'made her and the house seem wilder by calling up ... the idea of London, there in that forest parlour.'

Thomas wrote almost 150 poems in a two-year whirl of creativity that ended when he died on the first day of the Battle of Arras in 1917, aged thirty-nine, 'shot clean through the chest'. Thomas's first two slim volumes of poetry, written under a pseudonym, were published some weeks later and have never since been out of print.

One must come to Edward Thomas in one's own way and time. He wrote a review of *North of Boston*, a work by his great American friend Robert Frost which many feel could have been written of Thomas's own work.

*These poems are revolutionary because they lack the exaggeration of rhetoric ...  
Their language is free from the poetical words and forms that are the chief material  
of the secondary poets. The metre avoids not only old fashioned pomp and sweetness,*

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<sup>68</sup> Hollis, Jocelyn, *Collected Poems*.

<sup>69</sup> Wilson, *Thomas*.

<sup>70</sup> Hollis, Matthew, *Now All Roads lead to France*.

<sup>71</sup> Cooke, *Thomas*.

*but the later fashion also of discourse and fuss. In fact the medium is common speech ... With a confidence like genius, he has trusted his conviction that a man will not easily write better than he speaks when some matter has touched him deeply, and he has turned it over until he has no doubt what it means to him, when he has no purpose to serve beyond expressing it, when he has no audience to be bullied or flattered, when he is free, and speech takes one form or another.*

Edna Longley, who spent her life studying Thomas's work saw him as 'situated on the cusp of history and on the brink of modern selfhood',<sup>72</sup> one of the half-dozen poets who 'remade English poetry' in the early twentieth century.<sup>73</sup> Another writer described Thomas's 'unpretentious lucidity, plain language, colloquial speech rhythms and a Hardy-like focus on country life and the natural world'.<sup>74</sup>

One suspects Violet Brown never knew the spark she lit in Thomas and the shock he then had on English literature. She told Thomas of a 'notion on these windy nights' that she would die in Priors Dean.

Minnie Violet Brown did not see her future well. She left the pub and returned to her birth place by 1921 to marry William Wickham, thirteen years her junior. Always the wild girl!

Over fifty years later, all was different, yet the same, at the *No Name*. The latest landlord thought to attract more passing motor trade. Misunderstanding the marketing value of the 'Pub with No Name', he paid for a replacement sign with a prancing white horse. The commoners were no longer woodsmen, but skilled decorators, plumbers, electricians and car mechanics who still glowered at the solicitors and business executives across the counter. The landlord was warned by these feral offspring of the old forge:

*There is a post and a wrought iron support, but it is only meant to frame the clouds.  
We like it that way. Leave it well alone.*

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<sup>72</sup> Longley, 'Roads from France', *The Guardian*, 28/6/2008, in Wilson, *Thomas*.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### **A PECULIARLY ENGLISH GENIUS, or A WILTSHIRE TAOIST A Biography of Richard Jefferies, Volume II: The Years of Struggle. 1867 – 1876**

Volume I of Andrew Rossabi's magnum opus covered Richard Jefferies' early life, placing it clearly in the social, economic, and agricultural context of its time. By the end of the volume I felt that I could have walked from Coate Farm to Swindon, knocked on the doors of several houses, and would have known enough about their inhabitants to converse easily with them. The book presented a whole society in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Volume II, also over 700 pages in length, continues in the same way, is just as readable and just as fascinating. Nobody need be put off by its length. It carries the story from Jefferies' attempts in Swindon to be a professional journalist, through his marriage, fatherhood and move to Sydenham in 1876. Before I started to read it, I wondered if it could retain my interest. I need not have worried: Volume Two is as readable, pleasant, informative and thoughtful as Volume One. It also sent me back to my bookshelves to re-read several of Jefferies titles- a good thing.

The book is largely chronological in the way it studies Jefferies' articles, books and life. This could become tedious but doesn't. Rossabi is keen to show how Jefferies' writing during this period, while undertaken to earn a living, shows the early development of his mystical philosophy and skill at portraying natural history and rural subject matter. This was initially tentative, but became more identifiable as the months and years went by. His personal life during this period was often difficult and unhappy: apart from the hostility between his father and him, he suffered early attacks of what would prove to be a fatal illness not many years later. He also had a less than placid relationship with some of the newspaper editors he worked for.

Life at home did not become any easier, with disagreement, particularly with his father an underlying feeling He felt that he was not regarded as a proper person, a judgment that was to echo beyond the family circle. Jefferies tended to avoid his father as much as possible, but repaid his debt as a son to him in many of the sympathetic portraits of small farmers in several of his books. One has to feel sorry for Jefferies Senior, an intelligent and educated man, who had fallen out with his own father, and who was left a farm with such encumbrances that it could not succeed, especially in the days of rapid agricultural change. It was eventually repossessed and Jefferies' father ended his days as a jobbing gardener in Bath. More successful members of the family in Swindon business circles also found the young man difficult to understand or empathise with.

Meanwhile, young Jefferies was observing, wandering and contemplating on nature of course, but also on the people he encountered: shepherds, labourers, small town businessman and gentry. As is well known, he became a journalist with the North Wilts Herald and Swindon Evening Advertiser. Rossabi is particularly good at describing how Jefferies approached this work from the Swindon end of the paper's catchment area. Despite being Swindon based, he had to travel further afield for stories, becoming familiar with places as far away as Cirencester and Malmesbury, about which he wrote a book, and the Badminton country. His horizons were broadened even if only in the counties of Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. He saw courts at work, witnessed elections and noted how rural conditions were changing. Occasionally he would write a short story, perhaps a macabre legend, for the press. Rossabi makes the point that Jefferies' journalistic experience helped to improve and hone his prose style: he discovered 'copy' and deadlines, though he did not always meet them. Journalism was a formative experience and an important part of his life. He was not regarded as a good employee, being unreliable and with a tendency to laziness. Despite this and arguments with editorial staff, he was regarded highly enough to keep in touch and have a friendly relationship with his editors.

Jefferies' early fiction came more or less in parallel with his journalism. Here was no slouch, whatever his reputation. While journalism provided an income of sorts, his purpose in writing fiction was to make a fortune, or at least to allow him to accumulate a decent amount of capital. Fiction, particularly of the Romantic and Gothic type, was popular with the new urban middle class and numerous of its writers had gained not only wealth, but a place in Society, Dickens being the most successful of all.

The possibilities attracted Jefferies. As Rossabi makes clear, critics of the early fiction have understandably concentrated on its literary merits and found it wanting, but he was not aiming at a highly educated market or at literary excellence, but at one that enjoyed melodrama and sensational stories, so the books should be considered as such. In fact, they did not sell well. He failed in that ambition.

Whatever the critics said, Rossabi shows that the early fiction is not a complete failure: it is important in the flashes of quality it shows when Jefferies is writing about nature, and reaching towards his philosophy of nature fully shown in *The Dewy Morn* and *The Story of My Heart*. The characters are frequently cardboard, but some have greater depth and seem to enshrine aspects of his own character. With hindsight and with knowledge of his later books, it seems obvious that his strength lay in writing about natural history, his own observations and the people of the countryside. Hindsight is often a cruel judge, and this would not have been at all obvious to him as he puzzled his way towards his greater works.

It was the letters to The Times that found Jefferies' early market. Agricultural unrest had set farmers, especially small and tenant farmers against their labourers. Low wages, agitation by



the embryonic union and the rapid industrialisation of agriculture, all contributed to this. Little had changed in husbandry for thousands of years until the nineteenth century. His letters on this crisis, largely on the side of the farmers, made his name, albeit not in the way he had planned. He was seen as an intelligent, knowledgeable in a practical sense, countryman. The expertise came from his experience not just in Swindon but from his childhood experience on a farm, and travels as a journalist recording the power structure of rural areas, small town politics and the treatment of the labouring class.

If Jefferies was seen by his neighbours and colleagues as different, he saw himself as different too. He recognised that he had more in common with his relatives in London than with closer family. The Harrilds in Sydenham and their connections were successful in printing and ‘up with things’ intellectually and socially. Their surroundings were stimulating to a young man, who felt starved mentally and emotionally. The Sydenham branch encouraged him in his literary ambitions. Aunt Ellen in particular was consistently his champion in practical financial ways, funding his publications to some extent: she gave him money which he needed for his various schemes, as well as encouragement. For a man reputedly lazy, he showed a remarkable energy in the amount he wrote and what he planned to write.

Daye House Farm was next door to Coate Farm, and Jefferies fell in love with Jessie Baden, the farmer’s daughter, much to the horror of the Baden family, who no doubt regarded him as useless in a farming community, and whose father was failing. To make things worse, Jessie returned his love. There were arguments and even an assault, which ended in court, though it was settled in a reasonably civilised way. The young couple persevered and eventually they were married and a new phase in their lives began. The obstinacy with which he pursued his wife might have surprised the Baden family, but was a sign that he would follow his literary ambitions equally single-mindedly. Again, with hindsight, we know he was successful in that. After a period at Coate, the newly-weds moved to Swindon, thence to London where this volume ends after the birth of a son.

In Volume One Rossabi frequently refers to Edward Thomas’s fine early biography of Jefferies with approbation. In Volume Two, Thomas appears more often and again with strong approval. He finds Thomas very perceptive in his consideration of this period of Jefferies’ life, together with his writing and the difficulties that a struggling writer trying to find his voice encounters, something which Thomas had experienced and suffered just as strongly. He owed Jefferies a great amount: in thought, in observation, love of the country and of beauty, and his influence over rural writers was not only on Thomas, but on many others up to the present day. Hudson, George Sturt (Bourne), Thomas and Jefferies, and many since, all wrote for an urban audience, describing a way of life and a society that was passing fast, to be replaced by increasingly industrialised agriculture: tractors were poised to invade from over the horizon.

None of these writers regretted the passing of the old ways insofar as the changes meant a better life for labourers and others in the rural economy: more money, pensions, less of a near bondage status, and greater independence. Laurie Lee, writing of 1920s Slad caught the mood of the next generation when he identified the motorcycle and the cinema as prime symptoms of the change. Physically, Slad was the same when he retired to it in old age, but unrecognisable in every other respect.

But while change was welcomed by Jefferies and his followers, they also felt a regret at what was lost, and their work often has a dying fall. While they saw that reform was required, they also lamented the passing of a way of life that had lasted for centuries and had many good points. While the old ways had to go, they saw a loss of much of value, of social cohesion, mutual understanding and help. It was a theme, perhaps started by Jefferies that would last through the twentieth century and is still with us. Siegfried Sassoon, a rather naïve socialist, and from a different class, wrote six biographical books, several exhibiting many of the same sentiments. ‘Dawdling’ and ‘homespun’ are the two adjectives he uses to characterise the pre 1914 era. The theme, possibly started by Jefferies continues to the present day. Here is Charles Fry writing in 1939, “With agriculture reorganised on capitalistic lines, the successive booms and depressions of the last hundred years have not made the life of the country population an easy one. The dismemberment of the rural community has laid it open to the attacks of outsiders and parasites of every kind, from the politician down to the ribbon builder.” That would still be true today.

Over 1500 pages from the start, Rossabi’s books still give much pleasure, and it would be a shame if potential readers were put off by their length. Indeed, I hope Volume Three will not be shorter. As the notes are on each page, and integral with the text, the main text is shorter than the number of pages suggest. I prefer this system, and the notes themselves show a remarkable breadth of knowledge, reading and research. The book shows Jefferies’ development from a youth with dreams through work and marriage to a readiness to start the writing for which he is best known. Rossabi shows how even the dismissed early fiction contains seeds of later greatness, and how family support, not in Coate but in Sydenham, helped him stick to the ambitions he had always cherished. Meanwhile, his journalistic work sharpened his style and taught him much about writing. If not the founder of modern country writing, largely for urban people, he was in its vanguard and he has many followers. By 1876 thanks to The Times correspondence, he had found his voice and was poised to express his beliefs and skills.

For over a century Edward Thomas’s biography of Jefferies has deservedly remained the best, most accurate, perceptive and sensitive work about him. Rossabi pays full credit to Thomas and draws on his wisdom, but this work is likely to replace it for its detail, contextualisation and scholarship. Rossabi loves his subject and it shows.

Richard Emeny, July 2020

Andrew Rossabi has kindly donated his correspondence of many years with Ken Watts to the Edward Thomas Centre in Petersfield Museum, where it will join Ken's own material that he donated before his death earlier this year.

### **THE FORWARD BOOK OF POETRY 2020: THE BEST POEMS FROM THE FORWARD PRIZES (2019)**

The Forward Arts Foundation sees its mission as being to deepen the appreciation of poetry's value, to celebrate excellence in poetry and to increase poetry's audience. Their annual publication of the best poems considered for the Forward prizes does much to fulfill all these aims. Along with her fellow judges, this year's Chair of Judges, Shahidha Bari, read her way through 204 volumes of poetry as well as nearly 200 poems from competitions and magazines to arrive at a judgement on the Best Collection, the Best First Collection and the Best Single Poem. The anthology is put together before the final winners are announced. So what we have in this anthology are two poems from each of the five short-listed books selected for the best collection prizes and fifty-six individual poems with a shortlist from which the eventual winner was selected. If, like me, you had forgotten who the winners were you can not only enjoy this feast of varied voices as you thumb through the pages but also make your own judgements and see whether you come to the same decision as the judges.

As someone who is involved in the preliminary sift of entries for our own Edward Cawston Thomas Poetry prize it was reassuring to read that all the judges were plagued by anxiety over their personal selections and relieved to find much common ground in their long lists, whilst individual choices provoked much thoughtful and stimulating discussion. This indeed mirrored my own experience. One has only to look at the list of winners of the Best First Collection, beginning in 1992 with Simon Armitage and continuing through such familiar names as Robin Robertson, Daljit Nagra and Liz Berry, to know that Forward judges down the years have had an eye and an ear for the new, the powerful, the unusual and the accomplished in poetry, many voices all speaking to us in their different ways. As Shahidha Bari assures us at the end of her Foreword, 'We are all poetry people. You read the right line at the right moment and suddenly the world is illuminated with a different light'.

The delight of this yearly volume is that you find poems by already established poets but also discover a range of new poets and almost certainly find new voices from whom you are keen to hear more so that in every sense the anthology takes us forward. The judges have done all the preliminary hard work, so you are given a whole range of riches to mull over, reflect on

and enjoy. I particularly relished ‘The Starfish’ by Isabel Galleymore; a new name to me but the image of the

‘immobile mussel  
whose navy mackintosh is zipped  
Against the anchor of this fat paw,’

stuck in my mind (I love that navy mackintosh!) and has sent me on a search for more of her work. This is undoubtedly what the Forward anthology aims to do; to excite us and thus drive us on to widen our horizons, discovering new poems which speak powerfully to us. That has certainly been my experience and I hope it will be yours too.

Barbara Kinnes, July 2020

*The Forward Book of Poetry 2020: The Best Poems from the Forward Prizes* (2019)

Bookmark in association with Faber & Faber, London, 2019, ISBN 9780571353880

## **WORKING WITH NATURE: SAVING AND USING THE WORLD’S WILD PLACES**

By Jeremy Purseglove

When I was given the opportunity to review this book, even though I have not written a book review before, I leapt at the opportunity as Jeremy Purseglove’s childhood closely resembles mine – maybe not an ideal reason. However, the subject of his book, and the long-term solutions to harmonising land use and nature, are also dear to my heart.

Although not born in East Africa, Jeremy Purseglove (**JP**) was born in Uganda and moved to Singapore at a young age, by the age of 12 I had already lived in East Africa and Singapore, two significant influences on his environmental thinking. His “*heart-stopping thunder claps ..... faded away over the trees with the rumble of retreating aircraft*” and “*veils of warm rain, humming as they came, swarmed across the garden*” took me back to my own days as a young child in Singapore in the early 1960’s and tasting fresh orange juice for the first time whilst sat in the Botanical Gardens – a memory which still rides with me.

Purseglove is considered an environmentalist, but he is also a conservationist, using his environmental consultancy experience and understanding of the way nature works to emphasise the warnings given by those more widely known, such as David Attenborough, and to blend them with practical solutions.

His understanding stems from the countries he has worked in other than the UK (Trinidad, Russia, Nigeria, Singapore, Uzbekistan, Burkina Faso, Iraq, to name a few) with stories told (positive and not so) about water use, forestry, poaching, oil, agribusiness and the dangers of

unintended consequences – “*there is a dangerous fallacy in the assumption that sophisticated agriculture offers the opportunity of unlimited consumption*”. These unintended consequences from agribusiness on the environment include that of Palm Oil plantations destroying rainforests, cottonfield irrigation draining the Aral Sea, rice cultivation destroying mangrove swamps and intensive cereal farming in England creating a landscape without birds or flowers (and don’t mention floods).

He writes wonderfully and eloquently, but in a balanced way – “*If abused, nature can take revenge on us*” (think climate change), “*but it is also wonderfully forgiving*” (think lockdown). “*That redeeming relationship lies at the heart of this book.*”

As the above implies, JP strongly believes solutions are there ‘*using*’ nature, whether that be the *Shambas* (swahili for a small farm) of East Africa or rice growing in the Bay of Bengal, where paddy fields are also fish ponds and “*the landscape is a woven polyculture of bamboo and rice*”, that can be used on a wider scale.

He has a gentle writing style that is easy to read, even for a subject that can be quite technical in places. Having said that, I found I gained more from reading the book in chapters, so I kept ‘in touch’ with what was being written about – to me it is almost a series of mini-books, each with an important story to tell.

He is also clearly very passionate about his subjects, particularly how agriculture in England has changed in the last 100 years when writing about ‘the perils of the plough’:

*“A hundred years ago the poet Edward Thomas sat in a fallen tree watching a ploughman and his team of horses with their shining brasses fixed to the harness. They talked of the Great War then raging in France, how everything was changed and one of the farmer’s mates had been killed. Then*

*The horses started and for the last time  
I watched the clods crumble and topple over  
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.*

*So the poem ends.”*

The landscape then was one “*of mixed farming, with cereals on the best land, cattle in the lush valley bottoms, sheep on the hills and plenty of trees and woodlands*”. This landscape has now largely disappeared since the Second World War and we now have arable intensification with the price of “*the terror of the flood*”.

Fortunately, there are solutions which he reminds us can bring the interests of nature and human needs into relative harmony, and we need people like Jeremy Purseglove to be the environmental arbitrators and conciliators to bridge the divide between the environmental warriors and the engineers.

There has probably never been a better time to read such a book as this with its balances between the extremes of some British nature conservation practice and practical land use. It's last chapter, *Creative Resolutions*, offers some hope – now we just need to get this book onto the reading list of every training body, school, university or industry where environmental impact is on the curriculum (which should be everywhere) and every government and government department.

Personally, and as an example of a creative solution I know well, I was interested to read that “*In 2005 I led the environmental team on a project to replace a major road in Hindhead in Surrey with a tunnel. This had long severed and damaged the outstanding landscape and habitat of the Devil’s Punch Bowl but, only a decade on, peace and beauty are restored*” – I can confirm that from my walks around the area, repeated only a few weeks ago on our daughter’s birthday:

This book covers a subject that is important to us all and above all is well-written and a good read – I thoroughly recommend it.

**Working with Nature: Saving and Using the World’s Wild Places** (2019: Profile Books)  
ISBN: 9781788161596

Jeremy Mitchell

[Editor’s note: Jeremy Purseglove is the godson of a past Co-Chairman of the Edward Thomas Fellowship, Edward Eastaway Thomas whose eulogy to E.E. Thomas was printed in Newsletter 35, August 1996. This book has just been shortlisted for The Wainwright Prize for Writing on Global Conservation 2020].

## NOTICES

### NOEL CRACK, BOOKSELLER

Specialising in those two fine poets of nature, the country-side, its people and their history:-

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I have a large stock of books, both by and about these poets, from first editions and early collections to many of the more recent publications. I issue catalogues from time to time and my latest one contains nearly five hundred items.

I also exhibit at most events that are organized and related to either Edward Thomas or John Clare.

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## **EDWARD THOMAS STUDY CENTRE – PROGRESS UPDATE**

Having been on track for an early July completion of building works, and an October opening, everything stopped on 24<sup>th</sup> March due to the COVID lockdown, and did not restart until 8<sup>th</sup> June with a greatly reduced work force on site (from 24 workmen down to 8 due to social-distancing requirements).

Practical Completion is delayed until 12<sup>th</sup> October, following which the internal fitout will take place until mid-December with the Museum expected to formally re-open in late March 2021.

As the Study Centre is in a stand-alone building it is hoped it should be accessible, by appointment, prior to the Museum's official re-opening. It is still too early to be definite about this and updates will appear on the Fellowship's website, together with photographs showing progress.

Lockdown has also prevented physical work on re-sorting the Tim Wilton-Steer books. However, work has been going on behind the scenes amalgamating Tim's collection with other donations to and acquisitions by the Fellowship, all of which will be accessible in the Study Centre.

