

Edward Thomas

Edward Thomas:
A Mirror of England

By

Jacek Wiśniewski

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Edward Thomas: A Mirror of England, by Jacek Wiśniewski

This book first published 2009

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-0210-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0210-9

For Ewa

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements are due to the following publishers for material quoted:

The Clarendon Press, Oxford: *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*, edited and introduced by R. George Thomas; Bloodaxe Books, Tarsset, Northumberland: *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems*, edited by Edna Longley; Faber and Faber, London: *The Collected Poems and War Diary, 1917*, edited by R. George Thomas, with an introduction by Peter Sacks; Laurel Books, Holt, Wiltshire: *In Pursuit of Spring* by Edward Thomas; Handsel Books, New York: *Elected Friends: Robert Frost and Edward Thomas to One Another*; Henry Holt and Company, New York: *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem; The Macmillan Company, New York: *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*; Penguin Books, Harmondsworth: *Georgian Poetry*, edited by James Reeves. I have followed R. George Thomas's standard edition for quotation of Edward Thomas's poems, with the exception of "Interval", "Adlestrop", "Song", and "The Chalk-Pit" where I have followed Edna Longley's recent *The Annotated Collected Poems*.

My subtitle, *A Mirror of England*, is taken from Walter de la Mare's "Foreword" to the first edition (1920) of *Collected Poems*, printed as "Appendix 3" in the 2004 Faber and Faber edition of *Edward Thomas: The Collected Poems*.

I owe intellectual debts to Desmond Graham, Peter Howarth, Samuel Hynes, Edna Longley, Andrew Motion, and Vernon Scannell. Their essays and books, listed in my Bibliography, opened my eyes to important aspects of Edward Thomas's art – its context of the Great War, and the poetry wars between Georgians and Modernists, as well as its complex relationship to the poetry of Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost. This book would not have been possible without the friendly support of Professor Desmond Graham who assisted me in the initial stages of my research in the summer of 2007 in Northumberland, and a year later in Rheinland-Palatinate read the entire manuscript, providing a most insightful critique.

For permission to quote unpublished material, I am grateful to Professor Samuel Hynes, who also provided me with a large shipment of priceless books by and on Edward Thomas, just as I was embarking on my project three years ago. This book was completed during my sabbatical leave, 2007-2008, funded by the University of Warsaw. Particular thanks are due to the staff of The Literary and Philosophical Society Library, Newcastle-upon-Tyne; Durham University Library (Abbott Literary Manuscripts); Warsaw University Library, and particularly its Centre of British Studies.

I am grateful to my students at the Institute of English Studies, Warsaw University, who shared my enthusiasm for Edward Thomas's poems, and especially those who attempted to translate them into Polish.

From beginning to end, my wife Ewa has shared with me the many frustrations and satisfactions, and this book is dedicated to her, with my love.

INTRODUCTION

The reputation of Philip Edward Thomas (1878-1917) rests almost entirely today on his poetry, the one hundred and forty four poems which he wrote in the last two years of his life, between December 1914 (when the first fifteen poems were written) and December 1916. In January 1917 he embarked for France and the Battle of Arras in which he was killed on April 9th, 1917. His “Last Poem”, written just two weeks before embarkation from Southampton and discovered on the last page of his War Diary, is dated January 13th, 1917. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* opens its entry on Thomas with this statement: “**Edward Thomas** - English writer who turned to poetry only after a long career spent producing nature studies and critical works on such 19th-century writers as *Richard Jefferies*, *George Borrow*, *Algernon Charles Swinburne*, and *Walter Pater*”.¹ While there is no obvious mistake in the statement, it can mislead anyone interested in Thomas’s work. It gives no indication of the place Thomas’s poetry occupies between antiquated traditionalism and elitist Modernism. While it is undoubtedly true that the poetry of Edward Thomas is frequently praised for its “Englishness”, and his poem “Adlestrop” is one of the most frequently anthologized pieces of poetry in the English language, the term “English writer” neglects the considerable influence of Thomas’s Welsh roots on his imagination and his attitude to nature. These Welsh roots were not as strong perhaps as those of the younger Welsh poets, such as Dylan Thomas, Alun Lewis and R.S. Thomas, but he often spent his holidays with relatives in Wales; as a child he loved reading “The Mabinogion”; one of his close friends was John Jenkins (Gwili); and his love of nature dates back to those years of early boyhood. Some of his best travel books, like *The Icknield Way*, 1913, and *In Pursuit of Spring*, 1914, take the reader west along the old highways of the South Country from London to the Welsh border. After a three-week vacation in Pontardulais he wrote in his field notebook (August 31st, 1899):

¹ “Thomas, Edward.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. Accessed on 29 May 2008,
<<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9126190>>

Day by day grows my passion for Wales. It is like a homesickness, but stronger than any homesickness I ever felt – stronger than any passion. Wales indeed, is my soul's native land, if the soul can be said to have a *patria* – or rather, a *matria*, a home with the warm sweetness of a mother's love, and with her influence, too.²

It is significant that many of the critical essays on his poetry have been published in *Poetry Wales*, which produced a centenary issue, vol. 13, no. 4 (Spring 1978). Sally Robert Jones mentions in her essay “Edward Thomas and Wales” Thomas's life-long friendship with the Welsh-language poet Gwili, but also declares that “it would probably be pointless to look for the use of technical innovations based on Welsh forms in his poems.”³ I think Peter Levi is right when he disagrees with this opinion: technical innovation is one thing, but strong reliance on the characteristically musical, springing line, the frequent use of internal rhyme, half rhyme, onomatopoeia, and deliberate irregularities or hesitations in the use of the “footed line”, is quite another. Levi claims that “some spark of Welshness lived in him, and it may well be that a Welsh sense of sound-values runs through all his poetry.”⁴

On the other hand, there are several poems like “Adlestrop” and “Tears”, which attempt to capture the essence of Englishness. “Tears”, with its disturbing opening line, “It seems I have no tears left”, is trying to capture the essence of Englishness by juxtaposing two poignant scenes that Thomas salvages from the depths of memory: the scene of the fox-hunt (in the opening passage where “twenty hounds” in their “rage of gladness” become one “great dragon” bent on capturing and killing the fox), and “that other day” when he witnessed the traditional ceremony of changing the guard in the Tower. The curious juxtaposition might be explained not only by the emblematic significance of those two scenes (Englishness captured in the images of the country and the city: the fox-hunt and the changing of the guard, both accompanied by the dogs' barking and the piercing and thrilling fife music), but also by a complex connection between the hounds “upon the scent” (ready to chase and kill) and the “soldiers in line, young English countrymen” training to become

² Edward Thomas, unpublished nature notebook, in private hands. Quoted after R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas: A Portrait*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 78.

³ Sally Roberts Jones, “Edward Thomas and Wales”, in: *The Art of Edward Thomas*, ed. by Jonathan Barker. Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press, 1987, p. 81.

⁴ Peter Levi, “Notes on Edward Thomas”, in: *The Art of Edward Thomas*, op. cit., p. 34.

defenders of England. In an interesting aside referring to this poem, Stan Smith associates the image of “a great dragon” in the opening passage with St George’s, and therefore England’s rival; in the second passage “young English countrymen” are being seduced “to an unnecessary and pointless death” by “hypnotic ideological magic” of the ceremony and the music.

Britannica’s phrase “turning to poetry” might suggest there was no poetic element in Edward Thomas’s earlier work, or little interest in poetry, or even that there are two separate and watertight periods of his writing, prose and verse. It will be one of the aims here to show the presence of the poetic element in his earlier prose books, essays and autobiographical fragments, and continuity and consistency in Thomas’s growth from poetic prose to verse. His erudition as far as English poetry ancient and modern is concerned cannot be overestimated; his reviews of the most important critical books of the decade after 1900, from A.C. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* and *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, to Arthur Symonds’s *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* and *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, and even the huge volumes of *The Cambridge History of English Literature* when they started appearing after 1907 – he read them all with great attention and wrote perceptively about them. His essays on English poets – (some of them, like *Swinburne*, *Pater* and *Keats*, book-length studies still worth reading, after almost a hundred years) and detailed reviews of new editions – Tennyson in 1902 (with witty and sarcastic conclusions which anticipate Auden’s scorn), Blake in 1904 (with succinct judgments every lecturer would love to repeat and quote), Shelley in 1905, Francis Thompson in 1908, Hardy in 1909, Burns in 1910, Morris in 1911, D.H. Lawrence in 1913, numerous reviews of W.B. Yeats’s poetry published between 1902 and 1909, Ezra Pound in 1909 and 1910, the Imagists’ anthology in 1914, as well as many of his contemporaries, the Georgian poets – Brooke, de la Mare, Davies, Abercrombie after 1912, when the Georgian Anthologies started to appear – are all well researched and eloquently argued pieces of criticism. He was also a painstaking editor of English poetry: John Dyer’s in 1903, George Herbert’s in 1908, and Christopher Marlowe’s in 1909: this kind of scholarly editorial work suited him best, but the University presses had their own erudite editors, and Thomas could only expect commissions from *Everyman’s Library* or *The People’s Books* series published by Jack and Jack.

The *Encyclopaedia*’s “a long career”, might imply that Thomas was a successful writer, while he himself often complained about his desperate attempts to provide for his family by accepting commission work from

commercial publishers, about the drudgery of his occupation and the extreme mental exhaustion it caused. In letters to friends he often expressed very disparaging opinions of some of his own non-fiction books, among them country books and nature studies, historical and biographical sketches, even the so called coffee-table books with illustrations and photographs which became very popular in the 1900s, as well as countless reviews and notices in the daily press, which he called his “hack work”. This suggestion of inferior writing gets confirmed by the curious telltale phrase “spent producing nature studies”, which too easily accepts I think Thomas’s frequently expressed complaint that his prose books, about thirty of which he wrote between 1897 and 1916, are just “bread and butter commissions” produced in great haste, with little artistic merit, and for which he was not properly rewarded – some of his nature studies are wonderfully vivid, and many passages in them (especially in *The Heart of England*, *The Icknield Way*, and *In Pursuit of Spring*) are the cradle of his later poetry – this is not difficult to demonstrate, and I will attempt to do it in Chapter Two. The last phrase in this entry, “critical work on 19th-century writers” might suggest that Thomas as a literary critic was conservative, unaware of or hostile to new trends and developments in 20th century literature, while as we have seen, he was one of the first critics to recognize the accomplishment of William Butler Yeats’s poetry and drama, to take very seriously John Millington Synge’s endorsement of “poetry of ordinary things”, one of the first to get thoroughly familiar with the Symbolists’ movement in France (as his study of Maurice Maeterlinck’s art proves), the very first English reviewer to praise the early work of Ezra Pound and the Imagists, to the amazement and horror of some of his fellow-critics, the first to recognize the modest proposal for the revitalization of the language of poetry of the Georgian anthologies, and also the first to recognize the greatness of his American friend, Robert Frost. Thomas’s achievements as a critic of earlier English literature (Keats, Swinburne, Pater, Hardy) will be presented in Chapter Three, together with his work as a critic of contemporary poetry (Yeats, Pound, Frost, Brooke and the Georgians).

On the other hand, Thomas’s name is noticed among those which had been engraved upon the memorial stone of the Great War poets in Westminster Abbey; Ted Hughes’s praise of Thomas’s poetry at the unveiling ceremony, “he is the father of us all”, is recorded and often quoted; his steadily growing reputation among the poets of the inter-war period is another factor to be considered: Alun Lewis’s poems, written during the Second World War, are said to be inspired by the work of Edward Thomas. Like so many poets of his generation, Rupert Brooke,

Julian Grenfell, Francis Ledwidge, Charles Sorley, Isaac Rosenberg, Leslie Coulson, Wilfred Owen, Arthur Graeme West, Robert Vernede (an acquaintance from Oxford who was killed on the same day as Thomas, during the spring offensive in 1917), Edward Thomas was one of the casualties of the Great War. Was he, like Wilfred Owen who volunteered a month after him and became a young subaltern in the same training regiment, the Artists' Rifles, *made* by war? Would it be right to say that when he started writing poems in December 1914, his intention was to respond to the challenge? Was the subject of war something that historical circumstances imposed on him? How true is some early biographers' claim that Thomas was saved from his depression, and curiously reinvigorated by the outbreak of war and his decision to enlist in spite of his age and uncertain health? Equally, how seriously can we accept Thomas's claim (recorded in his letters to friends and in his last conversations with them before leaving for France) that his decision to serve overseas with the notoriously dangerous Royal Siege Artillery, was to make sure his family would get a high pension after his death? And if we do accept it as such, how justified is the suggestion one can find in some biographies of the poet, that his decision to enlist with the Siege Artillery amounts to a premeditated suicide? Had he survived, would he proceed after the war, like Robert Graves and David Jones in the years after 1918, to other subjects and other forms? It seems impossible to decide whether some, not very many, of his poems which directly relate to war – to its politics (patriotic, nationalist or pacifist), to his psychological and soldierly preparation for the fight qualify him as one of the poets of the Great War; it is as difficult as deciding whether he did or did not belong to the school of Georgian Poetry between December 1914, when he wrote his first mature poems, and December 1916, when he wrote all but one of his 144 poems. These questions will be discussed in Chapters Five (Edward Thomas and Georgian Poetry) and Six (Edward Thomas as a Poet of War).

In her "Introduction" to a selection of Edward Thomas's prose, *A Language Not to Be Betrayed*, Edna Longley claims that Thomas was "at least as well-read as Eliot (and in European literature too)", and that his "reviews are evidence of the enormous literary meal he digested".⁵ This erudition alone of course did not make him a poet, but it must be remembered for two reasons: first, because the inviting simplicity of Thomas's poetic diction, after he shed the last traces of Aesthetic

⁵ Edna Longley, ed., *A Language Not to Be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas*. New York: Persea Books, 1981, p. iv.

mannerism, might to some readers suggest a simplicity or even shallowness of his preoccupations; and second, after the Modernist breakthrough the fashionable attitude was often “I would not bother with poetry which I can understand.” We must also remember that in his role of regular reviewer for the leading literary periodicals like *The English Review*, *The New Statesman*, *Poetry and Drama*, *The Bookman*, and daily papers like *Daily Chronicle* and *Morning Post*, he had to write countless reviews of countless little volumes of worthless poetry, and this knowledge was probably one of the reasons why he himself was reluctant to start writing poems, though many of his friends urged him to do it, years before finally Robert Frost managed to give him that “jog” of encouragement (the phrase is F.R. Leavis’s). Thomas wrote in 1908:

...the multiplication of authors, and of writers in verse in particular, makes choice very difficult. Any imbecile with ten pounds in his pocket can easily add one to the number of the volumes from which the lover of poetry has to choose.⁶

In her Introduction to *Edward Thomas: A Poet for his Country*, published thirty years ago, Jan Marsh says:

For one of the finest English poets of the twentieth century, and one of the most consistently popular with the reading public – his poems have not been out of print since they were first published – Edward Thomas has received curiously little attention from the academic world. The number of critical studies has been small; Thomas remains a poet more read outside than inside the universities – though when his work is academically discussed it is with admiration.⁷

Further the critic adds that because his poetry is lucid and direct, and for that reason not obviously difficult to understand, and because this poetry uses no private or public symbolism, elliptical or perplexing style, “it therefore does not require, nor will it bear the weight of much critical exegesis and interpretative analysis” (Marsh, *ibidem*). While it is certainly true Thomas’s poetry is accessible and has little of the convolutedness of the Modernists, it is simply not true to say it does not invite poets, academic critics and biographers to reconsider and re-interpret his poetry; a quick review of critical work on Thomas’s poetry and prose published

⁶ Edward Thomas, from a review in *Daily Chronicle*, January 13th, 1908; quoted after *A Language Not to Be Betrayed*, op. cit., p. 66.

⁷ Jan Marsh, *Edward Thomas: A Poet for his Country*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978, p. xii.

after 1978, when Marsh's book was finished, will show time has proved her wrong.

The critics' and readers' interest in Edward Thomas's poetry and his other work as nature writer, critic of poetry, short story writer, novelist, collector of songs and ballads, writer of biography, historical books, essays, letters, autobiography and books for children, has been steadily growing. More than ninety years after his death in battle in the spring of 1917, and the first significant publication of his poems which he never had the opportunity to see in print,⁸ several new printings of his verse and prose are in preparation. In 2005 Cambridge University Press published an important study of *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* by Peter Howarth, one of the English critics interested in "the poetry wars" and the extremely complex forms of co-existence and rivalry of High Modernism with the non-modernist "English line". The book tries to persuade its reader that in "the poetry wars' shifting battle-lines over common ground", the poetry of Edward Thomas, similarly to Robert Graves's, D.H. Lawrence's, Charlotte Mew's, William Butler Yeats's, or even Robert Frost's, must not be situated "exclusively on one side or the other". Howarth is primarily interested in the work of "the poets outside modernism",⁹ and devotes one detailed chapter to each of the significant poets of the "English line": Edward Thomas, Walter de la Mare, W.H. Davies, Thomas Hardy, and Wilfred Owen. In Chapter Three I discuss Thomas's achievement as critic of English literature, stressing especially those ideas and opinions which might contribute to the reader's deeper understanding of his poetry. I will draw on Howarth's work in his chapter on "Edward Thomas in ecstasy". Here he uses the only text (still unpublished and available only in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library) which can be treated as his attempt, unfinished and abandoned, of formulating his poetic manifesto.

A remarkable book of critical comment on Edward Thomas's poetry, combined with poems addressed to Edward Thomas and the poets' statements about Thomas's impact on their own work, was published in 2007: proceedings of a Symposium held at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, in the summer of 2005. The book, entitled *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, and edited by Lucy Newlyn and Guy Cuthbertson includes, apart from four excellent critical essays by Edna Longley, Jem Poster, Lucy Newlyn and Guy Cuthbertson, and a brief

⁸ *Poems by Edward Thomas* ("Edward Eastaway"), London: Selwyn and Blount, 1917; *Last Poems by Edward Thomas*, London: Selwyn and Blount, 1918.

⁹ Peter Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 63.

Introduction by Andrew Motion, the personal insights about Thomas's poetry from some of the leading poets and critics of our time, Seamus Heaney, Andrew Motion, Gillian Clark, Michael Longley, Geoffrey Hill, Anne Stevenson, Tom Paulin, David Constantine, Paul Muldoon, Vernon Scannell, U.N. Fanthorpe, Jon Stallworthy and almost fifty others, with numerous elegies and poems addressed to Thomas or inspired by his work. In May 2008 Bloodaxe Books published *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems*, edited by Edna Longley, with the full and erudite *apparatus criticus* which helps the reader in viewing Thomas's poems in relation to his life and his earlier prose writings. Oxford University Press are preparing the publication of *Edward Thomas: The Essential Prose* for 2009; one of the editors of the planned volume of his prose is again Edna Longley, who has published one volume of his prose already: *A Language Not to Be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas*, New York: Persea Books, 1981. Longley also devoted three long chapters of her excellent critical study of modern English and Irish poetry, entitled *Poetry in the Wars* (1986) to the examination of Edward Thomas's place in the English line; she examines in them the relationship between his work and Robert Frost's, and claims for Thomas a central position in the development of English poetry from Hardy to Hughes, proving that Thomas is an important "missing link between Hardy and Larkin".¹⁰

This renewed interest in Thomas's whole literary work, not just his poems, can be seen in three different critical approaches: first of all, there are several scholarly editions of Edward Thomas's complete poems, with plentiful and detailed editorial notes which suggest the fertile connection between his earlier prose and the poetry which he wrote in the last two years of his life, before he went to France as an artillery officer. Secondly, at least ten of his prose books have been reprinted in England in the last thirty years. Some of the early commissioned prose books are called by de la Mare, the first editor of Thomas's *Collected Poems* "obligations thrust upon him [...], task work, against the grain",¹¹ but even there Thomas's fine sense of literature is never absent. De la Mare concludes:

¹⁰ Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986, p. 113. The titles of the three chapters devoted to Thomas are: "*Edward Thomas and Robert Frost*", "'Worn New': *Edward Thomas and English Tradition*", and "'Any-angled Light': *Philip Larkin and Edward Thomas*"; the critic also refers to Thomas in about thirty other places, e.g. when she discusses the poetry of Keith Douglas, England's greatest poet of the Second World War.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

When [...] Edward Thomas was killed in Flanders, a mirror of England was shattered of so pure and true a crystal that a clearer and tenderer reflection of it can be found no other where than in these poems. [...] England's roads and heaths and woods, its secret haunts and solitudes, its houses, its people – themselves resembling its thorns and junipers – its very flints and dust, were his freedom and his peace. He pierced to their being, not through dreams, or rhapsodies, not by the strange light of fantasy, rarely with the vision that makes of them a transient veil of the unseen. [...]¹²

De la Mare's Foreword is a tribute written by a friend and fellow-poet barely five years older than Thomas; it is meant as the first appreciation of the poetry which appeared in book form and under the author's real name for the first time. But I think de la Mare succeeded in putting his finger on several key issues concerning Thomas's poetry: first of all, by calling him "a mirror of England" he stressed the central position Thomas occupies in the "English line" (with his Welshness a crucial, but secondary significance; his choice of the name of one of his English ancestors for his pseudonym, an Eastaway from Devon, seems to confirm de la Mare's claim). Secondly, by insisting that Thomas's poetry "must be read slowly, as naturally as if it were talk", he stresses its closeness to the theory and practice of new poetry which Thomas shared not only with his American friend Robert Frost (and no one ever questioned Frost's alignment with Modernism), but also with great poets and playwrights active in other parts of the English-speaking world, including William Butler Yeats and John Millington Synge. Finally, several volumes of Thomas's correspondence with friends and fellow poets, Robert Frost, Gordon Bottomley, Jessie Berridge, Eleanor Farjeon, Walter de la Mare, were published in recent years in Britain and America, suggesting that some of the key notions underlying his views on poetry can be found in his letters.

All the poems by Edward Thomas which appeared in print during his lifetime, in his war-time anthology *This England*, in English literary magazines, and in *An Annual of New Poetry*, 1917, selected and edited by Gordon Bottomley, used the pen-name Edward Eastaway. *Poems by Edward Thomas* ("Edward Eastaway") and *Last Poems by Edward Thomas*, published by Selwyn and Blount of London, in 1917 and 1918 respectively, and published without the author ever reading the proofs, still suffered from numerous misprints, erroneous titles, wrong chronology and

¹² Walter de la Mare, Foreword to the first edition (1920) of *Collected Poems*. Quoted after *Edward Thomas: The Collected Poems and War Diary*, 1917, edited by R. George Thomas. London: Faber and Faber, 2004, pp. 249 – 250.

omissions. Thomas insisted on using a pseudonym in order not to encourage his readers to associate his earlier “hack work” with the new poetry. He even resisted Frost’s attempts to change his mind about this when three of his poems, “Old Man”, “The Word”, and “The Unknown” were accepted for publication by Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry*, *Chicago* magazine in February 1917. Frost wrote in a letter addressed to Helen Thomas:

Dont you think he ought to throw off the pen-name and use his real name under the circumstances? Shall we make him? Tell him I insist.¹³

Thomas, writing to Frost on March 6th (before Frost’s letter to Helen had been forwarded to the headquarters of Heavy Artillery Group in France), informed his friend that his first book of poems (to be published by a London firm of Selwyn and Blount) was “coming out soon.” Two days later he added in a letter that was started on March 8th but posted on March 9th:

My dear Robert,

So you did find a publisher after all. I have just heard. Probably it is too late, but I can do nothing, & I must stick to Edward Eastaway. It would be absurd to call myself one thing here & one thing in America & here it is settled. I don’t want to change. I can’t think about it now but I just feel stubborn on that point.¹⁴

Only a handful of good friends apart from Frost – Walter de la Mare, Edward Garnett, Gordon Bottomley, Eleanor Farjeon and Joseph Conrad – knew that Edward Eastaway was Edward Thomas; some perceptive critics, for instance J.C. Squire in his review of the *Annual*, also guessed the poet’s real name. Finally, it was the poet’s father, soon after the news of his death in battle was confirmed, who proudly announced the real identity of the author. The first edition of *Collected Poems* (presenting all the poems printed earlier in literary magazines, anthologies, and the first two editions of *Poems* and *Last Poems*), with a perceptive *Foreword* by one of the Georgian poets, Walter de la Mare, appeared in 1920, three years after Thomas’s death in battle. The editor says in his *Foreword*:

¹³ Robert Frost in a letter to Helen Thomas, February 6th, 1917. Quoted after *Elected Friends: Robert Frost and Edward Thomas to One Another*, ed. by Matthew Spencer. New York: Handsel Books, 2003, p. 175.

¹⁴ *Elected Friends*, op. cit., p. 183.

There is nothing precious, elaborate, brilliant, esoteric, obscure in his work. The feeling is never “fine”, the thought never curious, or the word far-fetched. Loose-woven, monotonous, unrelieved, the verse, as verse, may appear to a careless reader accustomed to the customary. It must be read slowly, as naturally as if it were talk, without much emphasis; it will then surrender himself, his beautiful world, his compassionate and suffering heart, his fine, lucid, grave and sensitive mind. This is not a poetry that will drug or intoxicate, civicize or edify in the usual meaning of the word, though it rebuilds reality. It ennobles by simplification.¹⁵

De la Mare positions Thomas quite precisely between the “esoteric” and “obscure” Modernists on the one hand, and the “intoxicating” poetry of the Aesthetes or the “edifying” poetry of the Imperialists on the other; he shrewdly identifies Frost’s impact on Thomas’s early poems, with his theory of the “sentence sounds”; he says in his Introductory Note that at least some of Edward Thomas’s prose books written before he started writing verse – one of his nature studies *Light and Twilight*, his autobiographical novel *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans*, and his biography of *Richard Jefferies* – were texts which he himself chose to write, and in which the grains of his future poetry can be found. De la Mare’s *Foreword* is a tribute to a friend and fellow-poet who recently fell in battle; it is not the right place to present a thorough professional critique, and his text is quite predictable, but he manages to single out several aspects of Thomas’s poetry which in later years were taken up and developed by younger critics.

The pioneering editorial work was done a long time after the poet’s death by Edna Longley who produced a very thorough, illuminating and detailed edition of *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems (Arranged in Chronological Order of Composition)*, 1973. Longley’s superbly written *Notes*, almost three hundred pages of them, are not only meant to establish a firm link between his earlier prose and later poetry, but they are also precise and close readings of individual poems. The exceptional level of her analyses, in my opinion superior to what the reader can find in R. George Thomas’s books, can be only compared to passages in Henry Coombes’ and Andrew Motion’s studies.¹⁶

¹⁵ Walter de la Mare, *Foreword* to the first edition of *Collected Poems*; quoted from Appendix 3 in *Edward Thomas: Collected Poems*, op. cit., p. 250.

¹⁶ Edna Longley is also the author of a series of essays in which she is presenting a very convincing case for treating Edward Thomas as an indispensable link in the unbroken line of development of English poetry from the later Victorians, like Thomas Hardy, to our own time and the work of such poets as Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Andrew Motion. In her 1986 book of essays on 20th-

Five years after the 1973 edition of Thomas's poetry prepared by Edna Longley, an equally informative and perhaps definitive edition, with new material obtained by the critic from Helen Thomas, the poet's widow, was prepared by R. George Thomas in 1978: *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*. Like Longley, R. George Thomas published not just one but several important books about Edward Thomas: he edited Thomas's letters to Gordon Bottomley, 1968; he wrote the most recent biography, *Edward Thomas: A Portrait*, Oxford, 1985; edited his letters and his *War Diary*; prepared a very useful summary of the poet's Welsh affinities for the *Writers of Wales* series in 1972, and wrote perceptive essays about his work for a variety of British and American publications in the form of Forewords, Notes and Appendices.

In those two volumes of annotated complete poems, each about five hundred pages long, the text of every poem is accompanied not only by the editors' Notes which provide the biographical context of the moment when they were composed, but also by variant readings from different manuscripts and typescripts, and by extensive quotations taken from the poet's earlier prose work, his letters, and his field notebooks which he kept during all his travels across England and Wales. Those two milestones became the basis for popular paperback editions like the Penguin *Selected Poems and Prose*, Harmondsworth, 1981, with an excellent, incisive *Introduction* by the editor, Professor David Wright. By producing this volume of prose *and* poetry in one volume David Wright is stressing a feature which the current study will emphasize: the link or virtual equivalence between the prose and the poems. Another such selection is by Roland Gant, *Edward Thomas on the Countryside*, 1977, as well as Edna Longley's selection of Thomas's prose entitled *A Language Not to*

century English and Irish poetry, *Poetry in the Wars*, she writes not only about the Parnassian friendship between Thomas and Frost, or about Edward Thomas as a "missing link" in the development of English poetry between Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin, but her Introduction to the whole book contains a very determined attempt to make Edward Thomas a pivotal figure in the development of English poetry from the late Victorian to late 20th century poetry, as a kind of alternative tendency (called by her "the more traditional team") to the one represented by the international Modernist movement. The name of Edward Thomas returns time and time again in the pages of Longley's book. In the Introduction she says:

Overall, the more traditional team makes a formidable bunch. Headed by Yeats, so often inaccurately co-opted for Modernism despite his clear protestations, it contains Hardy, Frost, Thomas, Owen, Graves, Auden, MacNeice, Douglas, Larkin, Heaney, Mahon. Again, what these poets say about poetry should be central to academic syllabuses, displace a few Modernist pundits.

Be Betrayed, 1981. The main British publisher of poetry, Faber and Faber, have kept Edward Thomas's poetry in print for the last thirty years, using the definitive 1978 edition of R. George Thomas. It has been reprinted several times because of the growing interest in the man and his poetry. Other popular editions include *The Works of Edward Thomas*, London: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1999, and *The Complete Poems by Edward Thomas*, edited by Peter Sacks, Handsel Books, 2000.

Edward Thomas' life, his views on literature and on nature, his friendship with Robert Frost, and his final decision, at the age of thirty-seven (a married man with three children) to volunteer for active service with the Artists' Rifles (and later to apply for a commission in the Royal Artillery, and to volunteer for service overseas), gave rise to a series of critical biographies. The first, partly superseded today, was published twenty years after the poet's death, was written by Robert P. Eckert: *Edward Thomas: A Biography and a Bibliography*, London: Dent, 1937. The critic had the opportunity to interview the members of the writer's family, his widow, his children and relatives, as well as several intimate friends among men and women of letters, and to study the papers, documents, letters and notebooks which Thomas left in perfect order when he left for France in January 1917. The book contains a useful listing of all Thomas's writings, including his reviews and essays (over one thousand items between 1897 and 1917) published in the journals and literary magazines. The full list of subsequent biographies of the poet is probably longer than in the case of any 20th-century English poet: John Moore, *The Life and Letters of Edward Thomas*, London: Heinemann, 1939; Henry Coombes, *Edward Thomas: A Critical Study*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1953; Vernon Scannell, *Edward Thomas*, London: Longmans, Green, 1963; William Cooke, *Edward Thomas: A Critical Biography*, Faber and Faber, 1970; Jan Marsh, *Edward Thomas: A Poet for his Country*, New York, 1978; R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas: A Portrait*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.¹⁷

¹⁷ There are also several shorter studies of Thomas's poetry, chapters in books about the poetry of the Great War, or nature poetry, or the poetry of the Georgians (even though he was never one of their number), or in books which discuss the complex situation of "poetry in the wars", the co-existence and rivalry between Modernists and non-Modernists in the 1910s and 1920 (like Peter Howarth's recent study *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*, 2005). There are also isolated attempts, like Stan Smith's 1986 *Edward Thomas*, to discuss the poetry without paying too much attention to biographical facts, which the critic simply takes for granted. Smith's original contribution to the study of Thomas's work is that he pays attention to the poet's preoccupation with social change and economic

I will say more about each of these critical biographies in the second part of the *Introduction*. One cannot forget about books, some in the form of autobiographies, others in the form of memoirs, in which Edward Thomas's family and intimate friends wrote about the man and his poetry. He is remembered in autobiographical books by prominent men of letters of the early 20th century: Norman Douglas, Edward Garnett, Edward Marsh and Gordon Bottomley. Helen Thomas's two volumes of autobiography, *As It Was* (1926) and *World Without End* (1931) caused quite a stir because of the author's great sincerity and openness in her account of the couple's love; both volumes were printed together as one poignant memoir in 1956; a memoir by the poet's daughter Myfanwy Thomas, *One of These Fine Days* was published in 1982. Myfanwy, whose figure and voice appear in quite a number of her father's poems, "Old Man", "Snow", "The Brook", and "Out in the dark", died in 2005. Special mention must be made of Eleanor Farjeon's memoir-cum-letters, *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years*, 1958, which is an indispensable text for anyone interested in the most crucial time when "the poetry began to flow". The author, herself a poet and writer of books for children, became Thomas's intimate friend, amanuensis and typist in the last four years of his life. She makes it very clear in her book that she was in love with Thomas, though their relationship remained platonic till the end. Her lively book is not just a personal memoir of those years, but it also prints most of the letters Thomas wrote to her, containing his comments and explanations, as well as suggestions for corrections and changes in the text of the poems.

Edward Thomas was a great writer of letters, which are always more than just personal notes sent by him to his friends and acquaintances: they often contain incisive remarks about life and art, especially about nature and poetry. The interest in the life and personality of the poet is also confirmed by the fact that most of his letters to friends and fellow-poets are available in volumes containing the record of those friendships. R. George Thomas, the author of one of the biographies listed above, started

situation of those sections of British society which suffered the consequences of rapid industrialization in the second half of the 19th century. This interesting feature of Thomas's understanding of social ills and economic problems of his time, which Stan Smith discusses in detail in his study, has already been noticed by de la Mare in 1920: Thomas's poetry, the editor claims,

will reveal what a friend this man was to the friendless and to them of small report, through not always his own serenest friend – to the greening stoat on the gamekeeper's shed, the weed by the wayside, the wanderer, 'soldiers and poor unable to rejoice'.

his work on Edward Thomas with his edition of *Letters to Gordon Bottomley*, Oxford University Press, 1968, and proceeded to the full critical edition of the poems, and finally to a critical biography. The *Letters to Gordon Bottomley* (only one side of this remarkable correspondence, which lasted over fifteen years, survived, because most of Bottomley's letters to Thomas had been lost, but as it is the 184 letters from Thomas to his friend make up the fat volume of over 250 pages) give their reader a unique opportunity to learn about the times and people of early 20th century literary England. Thomas's correspondence with Robert Frost is a fascinating record of a friendship which in an important sense "made" both poets. However fragmentary and incomplete (since letters presuppose the correspondent's absence, there are only a few short notes from the time when the two poets spent long days together walking and talking about poetry – from March 1914 to February 1915 when the Frosts sailed back to America), it shows the very moment when Thomas is beginning to feel the "flow of poetry". The truly important letters by Thomas in which he mentions the possibility of turning to poetry, belong to the time after the Frosts went back to America. It is also a record of how the two men, both in their later thirties, an American poet desperate to make his name known through acceptance and critical acclaim in England, and an Englishman who is beginning to believe he can stop "hack work" and become a poet with a new understanding of the language of modern poetry, encouraged one another in their efforts. The letters were recently published again in an interesting American edition: *Elected Friends: Robert Frost and Edward Thomas to One Another*, New York, 2003. The letters are chronologically arranged, and for the first time the reader gets both sides of the correspondence in one volume. The editor of the volume, Matthew Spencer, compares the mutual inspiration Frost and Thomas found in each other's theory and practice of poetry, to the friendship between Wordsworth and Coleridge.

For literary interest there is especially the story, in late 1914, of Thomas's blossoming as a poet, a blossoming due partly to Frost's genial and congenial influence. Overlapping with this story is that of Frost's achieving a long-sought-for recognition as a poet, for which he owed some thanks to Thomas and his three insightful reviews of *North of Boston*. By these reviews, as Frost later wrote to Grace Walcott Conkling, Thomas "gave me a standing as a poet – he more than anyone else"; but Thomas also helped himself with these reviews, for his witnessing and testifying to what Frost had done for poetry helped him to firm up and give shape to

critical inclinations he had been moving toward on his own for some time.¹⁸

The friendship between the two poets and the question of mutual influence is something all the critical biographies and all critical studies have to consider. Sometimes, as in the case of John Lehmann's rather disappointing biographical essay *Three Literary Friendships: Byron and Shelley, Rimbaud and Verlaine, Robert Frost and Edward Thomas*, the biographical facts are in the foreground and there is little attempt to show the underlying shared theory of the new poetic language. There is no attempt to analyze the poems or read the letters carefully – Lehmann is happy to repeat the version he probably found in the biographies of the two poets, the not quite trustworthy version Frost was anxious to prompt to critics and scholars writing about his English interlude. Unwilling to admit the considerable debt he owed to Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, his contemporaries and rivals to fame in America, he preferred to stress Thomas's role in "giving him a standing", especially after Thomas's death. I intend to discuss some of the letters and statements in Chapter One, on the relationship between Thomas and Frost.

Because friendship was of great importance to him, Thomas was always a remarkable and conscientious letter writer, whether corresponding with important writers of his time, like Robert Frost, or with minor poets and writers who happened to be his personal friends, like Gordon Bottomley, Eleanor Farjeon or Jesse Berridge. His letters to Helen Noble when she was his friend, lover and then wife, are carefully preserved in the two volumes of autobiography by her: *As It Was*, 1926, and *World Without End*, 1931. One of the books which bring Thomas closest to the reader of his poetry, mainly because personal reminiscence is highlighted and supported by long quotations from the letters and poems, is a memoir by a young woman who became his true friend and confidante during the last four years of his life, Eleanor Farjeon. *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* is a faithful and affectionate memoir of their platonic relationship; the most fascinating pages of the book are the long letters written by both correspondents. Eleanor Farjeon was also an aspiring writer, author of poems and books for children, satires, plays, librettos, hymns and books of history.¹⁹ Thomas, who was not a very outgoing or

¹⁸ *Elected Friends: Robert Frost and Edward Thomas to One Another*, ed. by Matthew Spencer. New York: Handsel Books, 2003.

¹⁹ Thomas thought very highly of some of Farjeon's poetry, especially her poems for children, comic verse and her literary parodies, but he was often blunt and even

garrulous man, indeed he suffered frequent bouts of paralyzing self-consciousness, leading to depression and neurasthenia, opens out in his letters which are always elegantly written, in his crisp and lucid style. It does not really matter whether he is writing about serious concerns, like his endless grappling with prose style or about ideas for new essays, reviews or commissioned books, or whether he is recording his gardening or carpentering jobs, the letters always have “style or whatever we like to call the breath of life in written words”, as he put it himself in his essay on the work of an earlier nature writer he admired, Gilbert White.

Farjeon became not only his closest friend; she insisted on helping him at the time when he started writing poems - sometimes writing several in a week, and having difficulty in keeping all his papers in order; very efficient with the typewriter (which Thomas hated and seldom used), she made multiple copies of his poems from manuscripts he sent her, keeping careful record of all manuscript and typescript poems, some of which exist in multiple revised or rejected versions. Farjeon came from an affluent upper-class family, and she repeatedly offered Thomas financial assistance in the difficult months after the outbreak of the war when new commissions were hard to come by, but he always politely refused (this difficult time is best recorded in Thomas's business correspondence with Frank Cazenove, his literary agent: these unpublished letters are held today in the collection of Durham University Library).

Thirdly, there are several important studies of his poems attempting to redraw the map of 20th-century English poetry. Andrew Motion, in his book *The Poetry of Edward Thomas*, London, 1991 (first published in 1980) suggests that Thomas's “distinctively modern sensibility”²⁰ is profoundly English:

It is this quality which he believed that Hardy and (in theory more than practice) a few Georgians exemplified. By manifesting it himself he came to occupy a crucial place in the development of twentieth-century poetry. [...] He was one of the first, and most subtle, colonizers of the fruitful middle ground on which many subsequent poets have established themselves. W.H. Auden, R.S. Thomas, Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes have all recorded their debts to him. In doing so, they have made clear the

cruel in his criticism of her work – for instance her 1914 collection *The Soul of Kol Nikon*.

²⁰ F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1932, p. 69.

good effect of his originality, and justified his evolutionary rather than revolutionary aims.²¹

Stan Smith's more recent study, *Edward Thomas*, published in the Faber Student Guide series, 1986, takes issue with all the earlier analyses of his work, including Andrew Motion's, which he disputes and in many ways undermines. He is not satisfied with the label many British critics have applied to Thomas's work as "an alternative, native tradition to set against the cosmopolitan Modernism of Eliot, Yeats and Pound."²² Instead of seeing Thomas as one of the nostalgic ruralist poets of the 1910s, he shows him as a writer who was deeply involved in a debate on crucial social issues of his time. Smith also questions the notion of Thomas's "Englishness", reminding his readers of connections with Wales.²³

Edward Thomas's place and importance for English poetry is being reviewed and redefined for the new generations of readers by his frequent and prominent appearance in recent anthologies. One of such anthologies is *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry from Britain and Ireland*, edited by Edna Longley in 2000.²⁴ The eleven poems by Edward Thomas appear right after the poems by Hardy and Yeats, taking up the same space (eight pages), and it is clear that the intention of the editor is to remedy earlier neglect by critics and editors of 20th century poetry. Another similar attempt is *Here to Eternity: An Anthology of Poetry*, 2002, edited by Andrew Motion. Only four poets are represented by a selection of five of their texts: William Shakespeare, William Wordsworth, Seamus Heaney and Edward Thomas. This anthology prints "The New House", "Digging", "As the team's head brass", "Lights Out", and "Adlestrop", perhaps the best known and best loved of Thomas's poems.

In the last three decades of the 20th century and also in the early years of the 21st there have been many serious attempts to place this prolific and tremendously attractive figure back where he clearly belongs: among the greatest English writers of the early 20th century. A mistaken attempt,

²¹ Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1991, p. 11.

²² Stan Smith, *Edward Thomas*, London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 11.

²³ A recent anthology of 20th Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry, edited by Dannie Abse, Seren Books, 2004, places Edward Thomas's poems among the work of other famous Welsh and Anglo-Welsh poets like Wilfred Owen, Alun Lewis, Dylan Thomas, and R.S. Thomas. Each of the poets is represented by a selection of eight pieces.

²⁴ *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry from Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Edna Longley. Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2000.

however, has been to see him as part of 1910s movements, schools and tendencies in English literature: Georgian poetry, the Dymock poets, the poetry of the Great War. While it is true Edward Thomas was friendly with many of the poets associated with these groupings, Walter de la Mare, Rupert Brooke, W.H. Davies, Gordon Bottomley, Ralph Hodgson, Lascelles Abercrombie, John Drinkwater and W.W. Gibson, confusing their aims and poetic practice with Edward Thomas's does more harm than good to his very individual place among English poets of the time. It must be remembered that although Thomas is still often confused with the Georgian movement (cf. Rennie Parker's book, referred to below), he derided their aims and interests as the "modern love of the simple and primitive" (cf. Thomas's review of the first volume of *Georgian Poetry*, quoted in Chapter Five). Howarth reminds us that

He was consistently critical of the poetry that actually appeared in the Georgian anthologies. "The only things I really much like were de la Mare's and perhaps Davies's", he commented to Frost about the second volume, just as he had singled out their work as the only complete achievement in the first.²⁵

The reaction against Georgianism (even if it can be very simply demonstrated Thomas's association with the trend was rather superficial and coincidental), was well presented in James Reeves' *Introduction* to the 1963 Penguin anthology of *Georgian Poetry*:

The word "Georgian", as applied to a body of poetry written in English during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, came into use purely as a descriptive term. By the end of that period it had become a term of critical abuse, and by the beginning of the Second World War it was merely an anachronism. It might on occasions be employed to describe some belated appearance of a kind of poem now irremediably discredited; [...] Yet there was a brief period during which the image of modern poetry in the minds of most educated readers was that presented by the Georgian movement.²⁶

Even though Edward Thomas was never included in any of the five volumes of *Georgian Poetry* anthologies published between 1912 and 1922, it often happened in later decades that his poems were either included in selections of Georgian poetry (as in the case of the above

²⁵ Peter Howarth, op. cit., p. 64.

²⁶ James Reeves, *Introduction* to *Georgian Poetry*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962.

anthology edited by James Reeves himself), or his work was discussed in little textbooks on Georgian poetry whose authors quite obviously do not see that Edward Thomas does not belong to this tendency. This is the case of the rather incompetently written booklet *Georgian Poets*, by Rennie Parker, 1999, published by the British Council in the series *Writers and their Work*. The admirer of Thomas's poetry finds little justification to include his work, and encounters several contradictory statements about it. Edward Thomas's photograph on the book's cover helps to impress on the student's memory the error made by the book's author.

The confusion is made worse by the muddle of opinions surrounding just a handful of his poems which refer to the Great War. Edward Thomas wrote *all* his poems, including the small number among them which refer directly (half a dozen poems) or indirectly (another half a dozen) to the War, *before* he went to France. So he is not a soldier-poet or a trench-poet like Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Robert Graves or Edmund Blunden. None of his poems was written after experience of battle. His last poem, "The Sorrow of True Love", was written more than a fortnight before his Battery settled into position near Arras in February of that year. Also, Thomas was never "made" a poet by the war in the way that Wilfred Owen was, and I want to prove wrong those of his biographers who claim that the outbreak of the war, and Edward Thomas's patriotic though desperate decision to volunteer for active service, made a positive contribution to his becoming a poet. Both early biographers, Eckert and Moore, take a simplistic view of the matter: they claim Edward Thomas was suddenly cured of his melancholy moods and morbid depression, instead, he apparently appeared to his friends more cheerful, self-confident and happy. The analysis of his poems does not confirm this sudden transformation into a happy warrior. Eckert and Moore present his new situation in 1915 and 1916 of a poet in uniform, training for war and writing poems at the same time, as a blessing in disguise. Both Jan Marsh in her biography, *A Poet for his Country*, published in 1978 to celebrate Thomas's centenary, and John Pikoulis in his eloquently argued essay "Edward Thomas as War Poet", 1987, present a more sombre version of events which led Thomas to his decision to volunteer for active service overseas, and in consequence to his death in battle. John Pikoulis first quotes a perceptive remark made in 1941 by Alun Lewis in his review of Thomas's *The Trumpet and Other Poems* (*Horizon*, III, 13, January 1941, pp. 78 and 80):