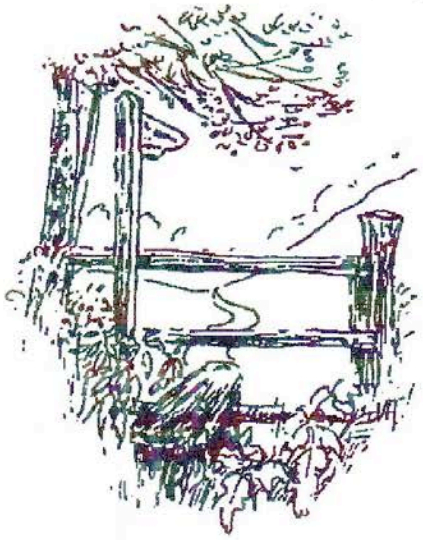
THE EDWARD THOMAS FELLOWSHIP



NEWSLETTER 72 **August 2014**

The last sheet but one of August Bank Holiday paper has been picked up. The dust, though harsh to feet and eyes and nostrils and fingers, is sweet to the mind because it is the dust of summer; and the linnets sweeten it like a fount breaking out of dry sand. This wind, though soft as sleep, is one of the great winds of the world: it touches the cheek with the tip of a light wing dipped in coolness, though the air is as fiery as it should be at St. Bartholomew-tide. It is no mere afterthought from the first illusion of distant sea: this August air extends from sea to sea over the world, linking the streets and these suburb glades to the upland corn, league beyond league, and to the waves shimmering around the coast.

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Study Day 2014

Rewley House proved to be a most pleasant and welcoming venue for the Study Day, with informal courtyard spaces for refreshments and a very acceptable buffet lunch.

Judy Kendall's talk was entitled 'Edward Thomas, Birdsong and Flight'. She spoke of Thomas's "definite vagueness" in his poetry, by which some details are painted in but with an intended vagueness left for another to occupy that space. What was conveyed was rather the state of 'suspense and watchfulness' which allows the perception of the detail and what it means. Judy said that there was something in Thomas's poetry akin to what birdwatchers call the "jizz" of a bird, whereby identification may be enabled by the briefest or most distant of sightings. She illustrated throughout from some of Thomas's many poems with birds in them – or rather with their snatches of song, or shape of their flight, or marks left by their nests.

The talk was a model of clarity for such an ever-dissolving subject.

Before lunch there was a half hour of readings, by eight members, of Thomas's poems and excerpts of his prose from the Childhood, The South Country and The Icknield Way.

Jean Moorcroft-Wilson began her talk, entitled '*Is* a Man's Life of Any Worth a Continual Allegory?', by quoting the first verse of Eliot's East Coker from the Four Quartets. "In my beginning is my end" she thought was particularly apposite for Thomas, the tenor of whose life was set in his upbringing and schooling. She amassed evidence of how much Thomas's "hated" father helped and showed pride in his eldest son; of how his "shyness" was a defence against against revealing his lowly social origins, especially at St Pauls school; and of how his self-deprecation was self-imposed, internal, and not based on the real perceptions of his friends. She spoke of how his writing of the Childhood, not published in his lifetime, allowed a freeing up of his memory and associations that helped to lead the way into his reflective poetry. One felt that an understanding, feminine perspective on the boy Thomas will lead to a full biography rather different from, and perhaps more holistic than, those of the all-male writers who have attempted the task so far.

After tea Jean gave a final reading from a snatch of the forthcoming biography, waving hand-written sheets stuck with addenda, the jizz of a biographer indeed.

The whole day was conducted in the peaceful warmth of a perfect summer's day, curtains only now and again just shifting in the wide-open windows.

David Thomas

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The Birthday Walk, Sunday 2nd March 2014

Despite the rather dreary weather, a large number of walkers arrived in the car park of Bedales School. Pausing for a reading from Under Storm's Wing, which described the entrance to a sunken lane, we were all amazed at the volume of water coursing down and turning streams into torrents and waterfalls! Indeed it was not possible to walk the planned route due to flooding after the wettest winter in living memory. Another highlight was listening to a reading of Thomas' poem 'A Tale' which describes a ruined cottage and discovering some of the blue and white china he mentions close by.

We made our way through the woodlands to the Memorial Stone on the Shoulder of Mutton where the views were surprisingly fine. It was good to be able to listen to Thomas' voice coming through the various poems which were delivered on this beautiful spot. From there it was downhill all the way via Ashford Chace to the War memorial, planted up with lovely spring flowers and on to the Village Hall where lunch was waiting.

A second, shorter walk was enjoyed later in the afternoon, although by this time the weather had deteriorated and had become wet and cold. The highlight of the stroll was a visit to 2,Yew Tree cottage, Thomas' final home in Steep. The reading of the marvellous poem 'Old Man' was very moving, particularly as the bush which Myfanwy plucked is still there by the front door! Thomas had taken cuttings from the original shrub when he lived at Wick Green in 1910.The walk ended at Steep Church where members could admire the replacement window.

The Birthday Tribute reminded us of the centenary of the First World War. Excerpts from Thomas' article entitled 'Tipperary' were read and a verse of the famous song was played, much to the enjoyment of the audience. BBC Radio 4 was in attendance for the morning walk and recorded some of the readings for a programme they are making on the poet's wife, Helen Thomas.

As always, we are indebted to Mike Cope for all his hard work in planning the walks, readings and general organisation and to Cynthia and Terry Lloyd for making the arrangement for an excellent lunch in the village hall.

All in all, it was a most memorable day.

Bedales and Churcher's Edward Thomas Day: Sunday 16 November 2014

Commemorating the 100th anniversary of Edward Thomas' poetic life

The genesis of Edward Thomas' first poem 'Up in the Wind' springs from a particular place and time: the White Horse Inn, Froxfield on 16 November 1914. On this date, Thomas wrote a prose sketch about a conversation he overheard:

> "I should like to wring the old girl's neck for coming away here." So said the woman who fetched my beer when I found myself at the inn first. She was a 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 get away before long. she said, she would go mad with the loneliness.

This led to Thomas' first poem 'Up in the Wind', which he completed on 3 December 1914.

> 'I could wring the old thing's neck what put it here!
> A public-house! It may be public for birds,
> Squirrels, and suchlike, ghosts of charcoal-burners
> And highwaymen.'

So began Edward Thomas' extraordinary poetic life, finishing with his death near Arras on 9 April 1917. In order to mark the 100th anniversary of Thomas' poetic flowering, Bedales and Churcher's schools are holding a day of talks, readings, walks and commemoration in Steep and Froxfield. As well as remembering and celebrating Thomas' poetry, the day will engage visitors with the way that Thomas's poetry was so closely connected with the landscape. The day is designed for sixth form students who may be studying Thomas and others who love his work.

We will gather at Bedales at 10am. Speakers will include Dr Guy Cuthbertson and the heads of English from Bedales and Churcher's. There will be tours of Thomas sites in Steep before the walk up the Hangers and lunch at the White Horse (the White Horse is commissioning an "Edward Thomas sausage" especially for the event).

A short ceremony and a reading, led by the Poet Laureate, will commemorate the 100th anniversary of Edward Thomas's poetic life, and will mark the conclusion to the formal part of the day.

Costs (including lunch and soft drink): Students - £15 Adults - £25
Please contact The Box Office, Bedales School, Church Road, Steep, Petersfield, Hampshire, GU32 2DG
Or email: tickets@bedales.org.uk

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Edward Thomas at the Winchester Poetry Festival

On Sunday 14 September, the distinguished scholar and critic Edna Longley will be sharing her enthusiasm for this most influential of authors, who was much admired by Philip Larkin, RS Thomas, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes. Edna's illustrated lecture *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* will span Hampshire, the First World War and Thomas's poetic legacy. For more details and to book, see the festival website. Supported by Jon Monkcom of Wessex Group.

Winchester Poetry Festival

The first Winchester Poetry Festival – to be held from 12-14 September - will have three interlocking strands: it will be rooted in the centenary commemoration of the First World War and its poetry, it will be a celebration of Hampshire's contribution to our national literary heritage and it will bring over twenty poets and writers to England's former capital city.

Among the poets who have agreed to take part in the weekend are Jackie Kay, Christopher Reid, Patience Agbabi, Julia Copus and Ros Barber. The Festival will be showcasing writers from Hampshire – including Maggie Sawkins, recent winner of the prestigious Ted Hughes award - offering workshops for emerging writers on getting published and on performance skills, organising events for schools, a literary walk and much else.

In the highly atmospheric War Memorial Cloister at Winchester College, T.S. Eliot prizewinner Michael Longley, and distinguished poet and translator David Constantine, will be the principal contributors to an event which the Festival is organising in partnership with the Wilfred Owen Association to commemorate the start of the First World War.

The well-known Liverpool poet Brian Patten is also coming back to Winchester. In the 1960s, after the publication of *The Mersey Sound* by Penguin Books, and with the Beatles at the height of their fame, Brian Patten wanted to escape the media circus in Liverpool. So he moved to Winchester because it was 'misty and ancient and quiet'; it was a productive period for his writing.

It is going to be a rich and packed weekend. Full information can be found at www.winchesterpoetryfestival.org. The Festival is being supported by Hampshire County Council, Winchester City Council, the Arts Council of England and numerous local businesses and residents.

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Stanley Snaith's Book of Edward Thomas's Collected Poems

In newsletter number 70 of August 2013, I reported the 'discovery' of the collection of books that had belonged to Helen Thomas, many of which were inscribed by Edward and are now in the Edward Thomas Collection in Cardiff University. Among them was Stanley Snaith's *North* inscribed by Snaith to Helen and dated 3rd January 1934. By coincidence in Tim Wilton-Steer's collection, also reported in the newsletter (number 71) is a copy of the 1920 Collected Poems with the de la Mare introduction, published by Selwyn and Blount. What makes this copy exceptional and unique is what Snaith has added to it by way of annotations, cuttings, letters and photos.

Stanley Snaith was born in Kendal in 1903 and died in 1976, became a close friend of Gordon Bottomley and was himelf a writer of consequence. For work he moved south and became Librarian at Bethnal Green and ultimately Chief Librarian of Islington. His poems appear in anthologies such as Poems of Today, Modern Poetry 1922 - 1934 and many others. With Stephen Spender he produced the 'Pylon Poems.' He was also a prose writer, many of his articles appearing in the Library Review. Titles are varied including for instance, 'At Grips with Everest' (1938), 'A Tube Shelter Lending Library', 'One Man's Beginnings' 1951.

It is clear from the book that Snaith held Edward Thomas in high esteem and the following is a necessarily brief summary of what the book contains.

- Two photographs of Edward Thomas with Gordon Bottomley, one of which was unknown;
- Photocopy of the manuscript of The Trumpet;
- Three reviews of *Letters to Gordon Bottomley*;
- John Lehman's article about Edward Thomas;
- Original holograph letter from Gordon Bottomley to Snaith, including "But my best prose is about Edward Thomas... N.B. It is <u>good</u>. Many people say that it is the best that has been written about him..... At least, if you look carefully between the lines, you will find corrections to all the misrepresentations in the H.T. books." This is followed by a tipped in copy of Bottomley's article *A Note on Edward Thomas*, published in the Welsh Review, September 1945;
- Tipped in a copy of the article *Content with Discontent* by Vernon Scannell;
- Annotations to the poems. Some examples: *Tears*, ' ... an example of Thomas's curiously reticent and elusive way of expressing a rare form of happiness, one which closely neighbours regret... The poem seems to me remarkable in that, saying so little, it conveys so much.' *The Manor Farm,* 'One of his greatest poems.' *What shall I give?* and the other 'household' poems, 'This poem, and the three following, are pleasant enough, but little more. They are not the best side of Thomas. If he had lived to prepare a book of verses, they surely would not have found a place.' *When First*, 'Something good here, but the workmanship is rough and ungainly; it doesn't flow, and the rhyming occasionally shows the prentice hand; so the inner conception doesn't come through as it should.' *Sowing* 'One of his most tender and perfect lyrics.' *The Huxter*, 'What a contrast! (i.e. with the poem on the opposite page) The jolly "Huxter" fills me with distaste - so superficial and ill-written; "It Rains" on the other hand, is sincere, delicately thought out, and exquisitely - though so quietly - <u>achieved</u>.' *A Gentleman* and *The Bridge*, ' "A Gentleman" is a Frost poem, so bad that Frost would surely have disowned it at sight. (Or, if arranged in stanzas, it could be Housman with a hangover!). The fact is, Thomas in the cap and bells is dismally

unfunny. (And for all his friends have to say of him, he appears, from such of his correspondence as has come down to us, to have been signally deficient in a sense of humour.) "The Bridge, however, is the a poet of a rich melancholy contemplation. Technically good too; for example, in the internal rhymes- "behind the kind" and so on'. *Tall Nettles*, 'Finely lyrical, yet keeps the "earthy" quality which is the distinguishing mark of ET's work'. *Haymaking*, 'Although lines 3 - 6 are out of key, this piece, is a fine poem, and the end attains a rare beauty.' *The Sheiling*, 'Difficult to fault. The poem says its say with simplicity and affection for his friend, and with a subdued pathos. Probably only a fellow poet would note the hypnotic use of echoes - "stone, stone", "been, been" etc - a device which was a favourite of the later Yeats. I have not checked the dating but should conjecture that the two poets hit upon it independently.' There are many more;

- an inserted letter from William Cooke about the loan of a picture;
- a cutting from the Stratford-Upon-Avon Herald, dated 31st January 1964 about the closure of Adlestrop station;
- a letter from Clifford Bax, dated 8th March 1924 with a sketch by Bax of Thomas. The letter: 'For some days I have been wondering how I might comply with your request for a few words about the author of these poems: and this afternoon I have come across a little drawing of him that I made twelve years ago. At that period I was living in an old house in Wiltshire, and several times Thomas, in the course of his long wanderings on foot, stayed with me for a month or so. Untitled as it is, I have inserted the sketch in your book because I think that for you it may have more interest than any photographic print, inasmuch as it was done- after lunch on a April day- with Edward Thomas only a few feet from the piece of paper which I now give to you. When he looked at it, he smiled and remarked "I'm sure the left eye is all-too-like the original": and indeed, at that time, his lids had a heavy droop that matched the deep and incurable melancholy of his mind. Nevertheless, he was one of the most humorous companions I have ever had.'
- an envelope of early reviews;
- a pasted in copy of the article, 'Edward Thomas and his Father' by Anthony Davies;
- Manuscript of 'In Memoriam Edward Thomas' by Julian Thomas.

It is the annotations that are of particular interest, being one poet's opinion of the work of another, and as can be seen from the few quoted, they are not always conventional or favourable views. Most of the detailed annotations are in the first half of the book, the second containing many pencilled underlinings but few comments. It appears that Snaith attacked the collection at full burst, reading poem after poem but then ran out of breath.
As readers know from the last newsletter Tim's rich collection is to make the nucleus of the planned Edward Thomas Centre in Petersfield. This item gives a taste of its quality and unusual character.

Richard Emeny
May 2014

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What kind of memory had Edward Thomas?
by John Monks

An interesting aside at the celebration of Edward Thomas's poem "Adlestrop" held in the village hall there on 24 June this year, one hundred years after the express train drew up unwontedly at the now defunct station, was that the poet Anthony Thwaite read aloud Thomas's other well-known poem built around the subject matter of memory, "Old Man". The contrast between the two poems is most striking where they appear to coincide, at the question of what Thomas can and cannot remember. First "Adlestrop":

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

The certainty emphasized by the full stop and the sureness of Thomas's voice throughout that first stanza precede a clearly recalled catalogue of trivial sounds and sights: someone clearing his throat, visible vegetation itemized, a bird breaking into song. The command of remembered detail is such a strong feature of "Adlestrop" that it is singled out for attention in Michael Horovitz's parody "Not Adlestrop" that begins

> No, I don't remember Adlestrop

the comma not a betrayal of ignorance of the poem but intrinsic to the subversion of Thomas's clear recollections. Yet in one sense, Thomas is not actually remembering anything in "Adlestrop", or at best it is a prompted, secondhand recollection such as a witness might give if asked a leading question. (Here is another reading of the full stop: concurrence not emphasis.) The poem, written in January 1915, contains details that Thomas recorded in his Field Notebook and dated 24 June 1914. He notes glorious weather (it was midsummer's day), the high loose masses of white clouds and gaps of dark, clear blue sky, the train's stop at Adlestrop, the blackbirds' song, the hiss of the engine's steam, the haymaking, and so on. The notebook reveals that Thomas's train made a second unwonted stop farther down the line outside Chipping Campden. He drew on details jotted down of that moment also: long grass, willow- herb, meadowsweet and a man clearing his throat are all in the poem.[1]

Here, laid out before us, is the landscape of an established way of working that has its origins in the problematic and elusive characteristic that Thomas calls his "self-consciousness". A manifestation of self-consciousness in his view is that he mentally composes descriptions at the same moment as experiencing the raw material of memory. On a visit to Wales, he writes to Helen (not then his wife) after the publication of his first book, *The Woodland Life*, that he cannot look at the countryside without being "so miserably conscious of myself that I even think of how I could describe it, actually while I gaze! how mean! how ridiculous! what prose fancy!"[2] (Does Robert Macfarlane do this as well, one wonders?) *The Woodland Life* concludes with pages of rather routine nature notes transcribed from "A Diary in English Fields and Woods", an early example of a field notebook. Thomas's reliance on noting down "all sorts of observations made from day to day"[3] provided him with supplies of "memories". Yes. He remembers Adlestrop because he wrote

it down and used it later, and this despite the concerns he had expressed about this very process. He wrote to Gordon Bottomley in 1909: "I think I agree with … what you say of note books. But I shall not burn them I expect. Only I shall use them less and less as I get more of an eye for subjects. Among my bad habits was that of looking through old note books of scenery &c in order to get a subject or mood suggested to me."[4] "Adlestrop" proved the habit to be tenacious. Thomas's last field notebook was the War Diary he continued at the Front Line.

It has become a commonplace that elements in Thomas's prose contain also seeds of some of his poems, and that Thomas was occasionally "writing as good poetry as anybody alive, but in prose form where it did not declare itself," as Robert Frost asserted.[5] But it is helpful to remind oneself how far back some of the earliest seeds were sown. Consider these echoes:

> There, in the middle days of March, sang the early chiffchaff … the silent avenue was startled by his soft singing cry … This chiffchaff in the lane was solitary, but, farther on, each double hedge and wayside coppice gave shelter to at least one of them. (*The Woodland Life*, 1897)

or this dawn chorus from *Beautiful Wales* (1905):

> out of this darkness peered the early timorous warble of a blackbird, and gradually all the birds in the orchard, hedge and wood made a thick mist or curtain of innumerable and indistinguishable notes through which crept the bolder note of that same nearest blackbird … the continuous mist of song grew thicker […]

and compare them with the final stanza of "Adlestrop" (1915):

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

The famous misty swell of birdsong beginning with the perception of a single bird call is recognizably one of the creative resources Thomas describes in "The First Cuckoo", an essay published the month before his train halted at Adlestrop. He writes: "Countless are the things which may impress us for ever. … But the majority fade away or can be revived only by poetry or strange chance. Very few endure. Those that do, most men are pleased and even proud to recall over and over again."[6] Endurance plays its part in the memories in the last stanza of Adlestrop, the act of recalling involving a harking back to expressions ("farther", "all the birds", "mist"—none of which appears in Thomas's near contemporary field notes) from his earliest books, and which he was evidently "pleased and even proud to recall."

Against "Adlestrop", Anthony Thwaite put forward "Old Man" as a perfect poem. "Old Man" also has a memorable ending:

> Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

The contrasts and similarities between "Old Man" and "Adlestrop" illuminate the characteristics of memory in "Old Man". The passage from *The Woodland Life* quoted in the previous paragraph can be seen as a common antecedent for both poems: "the silent avenue" noted in *The Woodland Life* has something about it of the disturbing avenue down which "Old Man" leads away, intimations of infinity being themselves recurrent in

Thomas's prose and poetry. Memory's centrality in "Old Man" (the word "remember" first occurs at the mid-point of the poem) takes the form of a puzzle, however. There is no "Yes. I remember", only:

> 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.

This poetic act of not-remembering—prelude to the sensation of the ominous avenue—is itself a remembrance, reconstructed from notes, as the encounters at Adlestrop were, in one of Thomas's perpetual aides-mémoires, Field Notebook 79, dated 11 November 1914: "Old Man scent, I smell again and again not really liking it but venerating it because it holds the secret of something very long ago which I feel I may someday recall, but I have no idea what."[7] Five years before that, Thomas associated old man with the vain attempt at recollection in a short story.[8] However, of all the associations that matter to a writer, that between name and thing, words and what they convey, is paramount, and "Old Man", which turns on the failure of a moment of recall, opens with a quiet meditation on the equally slippery nature of the naming of things:

> 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,
> Even to one that knows it well, the names
> Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:
> At least, what that is clings not to the names
> In spite of time. And yet I like the names.

The youthful Thomas was introduced to the importance of names as groundwork or grounding-work for a writer by his mentor and role model, James Ashcroft Noble (Helen's father). Responding to the young man's Jefferies-inspired nature sketches, Noble wrote in 1895: "All that you want—at least such is my feeling—is, as I said before, to throw in a little more topography … Even a place-name would do something to localise the scene, and localisation gives distinction to the picture presented to the imagination. I wonder if I make my meaning plain."[9] Admirably plain, one would think, but Thomas forgets the advice as often as he remembers it in his topographical books. Full realization of the distinction which names give to pictures presented to the imagination is reached finally in the poetry and is of a higher order than the roll-call of country place-names that engages his attention in *The South Country*.[10] The realization is present in the insistence on the name "Adlestrop"; in the speculation in "Old Man"; in the genesis of a name in "Women he liked" and the layered associations of the names in the household poems; and in the eight lines of "A Private" where naming particularizes and simultaneously generalizes the ploughman's whereabouts.

The opposing feelings of certainty and memory just beyond the brink of recall as they are felt in "Old Man" and "Adlestrop" are common experiences. Edna Longley draws attention to the frequency of acts of memory or failure to remember in Thomas's poems and notices, as other critics have, the "synaptic spark" between past and present, "between materials that a poet has consciously or unconsciously accumulated and some new factor that switches on a process of selection and transformation."[11] If Frost was right that Thomas

was composing good poetry in his prose that just needed to declare itself, it suggests that poetic "transformation" is essentially one of form. But this will not do.

Thomas inscribes in the texts of his prose his own version of how his poetical voice wins through and it is a long, self-reflexive struggle to use language in a way that lives up to experience. H. Coombes' comment that eventually the poems are "the expression of a correspondingly finer grasp of experience"[12] is as good a summary as can be given of the persistent process of development. Memory and selectivity are partly what holds it together. Thomas was aware of a self-conscious pleasure in recalling the enduring things that impress him and to which he returns in different forms in poetry and prose. He "memorized" these selected experiences through repetition and in aides-mémoires, as the antecedents of "Adlestrop" and "Old Man" exemplify. Perhaps this is one reason why the poems are able to express opposite kinds of memory experience with the same conviction. Thomas does not seek recall with the determination of Proust, nor produce "remembrances" in John Clare's sense. Nor did he survive the First World War to confront the haunting that Ivor Gurney faced, although to the last days of his life his "prose fancy" accumulates descriptive notes in his war diary that he would certainly have relied on for post-war memory and poetry. He approached memory as if it were a storehouse, the contents of which are to be scanned for what most faithfully lives up to experience, even if "the name alone survives."[13]

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[1] Field Notebook 75 in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, quoted in Anne Harvey, *Adlestrop Revisited*, pp 10-11.
[2] *Letters to Helen*, ed. R. George Thomas, p. 1.
[3] Helen Thomas, *As It Was* and *World Without End*, combined edition, p. 33.
[i4] *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley*, ed. R. George Thomas, p. 194.
[5] Quoted in Robert P. Eckert, *Edward Thomas: A Biography and a Bibliography*, p. 150.
[6] *The Last Sheaf*, p. 59.
[7] Quoted in Edna Longley, ed, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 150.
[8] R. George Thomas, ed, *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*, p. 380.
[9] Edward Thomas Archive, Cardiff University. The underlining is Noble's.
[10] *The South Country* (1909), p. 148.
[11] Edna Longley, Introduction to *The Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 24.
[12] H. Coombes, *Edward Thomas: A Critical Study*, p. 22.
[13] "Women he liked", *The Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 127.

This is the record of a journey from London to the Quantock Hills – to Nether Stowey, Kilve, Crowcombe and West Bagborough, to the high point where the Taunton – Bridgewater road tops the hills and shows all Exmoor behind, all the Mendips before, and upon the left the sea, and Wales very far off. It was a journey on or with a bicycle

2012: The car was rolling down the long road to Sidmouth Folk Week, I was taking my friend Robin (then a new acquaintance) to sample the world of folk festivals over the summer; I was an arranger and appropriator of folk songs, I shied away from writing and Robin was a London singer-songwriter whose interest in traditional song was starting to grow. We had met at a neat crossroads in our musical paths and were starting to explore a common interest together. As I steered the car Robin explained an idea that had been forming over the last few years to him...

Pedal Folk: cycling and singing. To make more of an adventure between gigs, to change the pace of our lives and to experience the effect it had on our music.

He had tried to get the project started before but it had never quite come together, before I had really considered the implications it I had said yes and the planning began.

2013: In April we were ready, bikes loaded, maps and routes prepared. We were accompanied on the trip by Katie, a violinist from Galway and Siân, a photographer who runs the blog 'The Girl Outdoors'. The journey started in Bath before heading to Bristol, Swindon and finally Oxford in time for the Folk Weekend. The sky stayed a clear blue, except for a hail shower that sent us scrabbling for our raincoats only to end once we had got them on, and every audience we played to were interested and appreciative of our music and the way we had travelled.

We set out again in August with the intention of travelling a similar route; Frome, Bath, Bristol, Stroud and Swindon. The weather stayed cool and bright, Robin got his first taste of hill cycling (the Cotswalds) and we considered our first two journeys a success.

It was after the first tour a friend asked if I had heard of Edward Thomas and his book 'In Pursuit of Spring' a journey from London to Somerset by bike done in 1913 and published the following year: why not celebrate it by following the same route?

Edward Thomas was a writer who lost his life in the First World War. He is described as one of the fathers of modern English poetry but his name is unfamiliar in comparison to those he associated with; Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Rupert Brookes... He left behind less than 150 poems, emerging in verse after a life as a critic, reviewer and prose writer.

I started to immerse myself in Thomas' work. I was struck by the poetical nature of his prose, his love of the country and the poignant yet timeless choice of subject matter. The repeated themes of nature, the encroachment of town and city on society, culture and landscape were highlighted against the inescapable shadow of the First World War. He was a romantic with the piercing mind of a fatalist, a tracer of the old ways with the foresight of a modernist. After only a few pages of 'In Pursuit of Spring' I wrote the first lines of our first song...

"A road sign today took me a hundred miles
To a town, just a point upon a map"

Thomas used to travel with maps on his journeys specifically to avoid towns as he wandered around the country, preferring to follow the natural courses of contours and rivers to lead him. We, however had the enviable connection between phone maps, google, the National Cycle Network and map my ride to follow and track us.

We played our first concert in London on Easter Monday, fitting given that Thomas was killed on the same day in 1917. The following morning we climbed into the saddle and started the first few miles out of the city across the river and on a to Farnham. We have found that cycling using google maps has led us on many interesting paths, on our route out of London our guide warned us that there would be a ferry involved; we shrugged it off as a glitch until we were led down to a small jetty and toward a young chap sat with his boat! for £5 we climbed aboard and had a minute's trip over the Thames wondering just how much his business had improved since the latest update to the software… Of course not all diversions were that much fun and often we were led to tracks where the straight line that was put before us on the screen seemed a long way off of the twisted and rutted path that lay before us; for three laden cyclists it often was not the most tempting of prospects and there were occasions that we looked for an alternative route.

Organising a Pedal Folk tour. Each leg should be between 30 and 40 miles (in England anyway), once you've got your direction you have a radius to perform within: you have to find the gig, sometimes this leads to a scrabble to see who can get the best gig in an area. You have two sets of clothes, one for cycling and one for performing: make sure your shoes dry quickly. As for food, always make sure you have a loaf of bread, a block on cheese and apples to hand, when we toured in August however we spend as much time foraging and scrumping as we did cycling and performing combined! Our instruments are tightly secured to the pannier racks using a few old inner tubes, the guitar and violin cases sticking out like primordial tails from our bikes (though they may add to the aerodynamic structure, further tests are needed)

"On the far side a neat, white, oldish house was retiring amid blossoming fruit trees under the guardianship of several elms and the shadow of those two tall red chimneys of the electricity works… A mixture of the sordid and the delicate was unmistakable"

From Farnham we headed on to Winchester, to Salisbury, Trowbridge, Wells and finally Crowcombe nestled deep in the Quantock hills. Along the road and paths we passed through towns and villages that were mentioned in the book, some presented out high streets of 80's red brick and pound stretchers, pubs that were familiar to Thomas were boarded up and building sites lay waiting to swallow them up. Others lay quiet, the halls unused and the churches still, perhaps a purposeful move for some to find the peace and quiet that they wanted whereas different communities had built up in other parts, the sound

of children at play in the local primary school and the coming and going of neighbours on first name terms: those were the best places to stop for lunch.
All these points on the map took shape and form, the connection between them, the landscape and history of this country was at once comforting and unsettling as it is directly and irreversibly linked with the politics that have formed our culture, society and way of living.

And each turn of the pedal took us further and closer to our goal, the aches and pains of the first couple of stretches gently faded and blended with the rhythm of the day; sitting in the saddle, legs pushing and pulling in quiet orbits, our voices rising and falling in conversation, laughter and song. We started eating up the miles, the regular contact with the ground that every traveller desires was filtered through the rolling wheels to become a 1:1 graph of the landscape as we passed over it feeling each gradient, plain and pot hole. The surfaces changing from smooth tarmac to rough track and soft, winding lanes that seemed to suck the tyres in and lift us from the saddle, our calves glowing red with exertion. On our final day the grey shadow of the Quantock range, at first a feat of imagination, became a grim and grey reality rising, a frozen tidal wave out of the levels waiting for us. Waiting.

Along our road we had been asking audiences whether we should go around or over, the vote for over was marginally and so upwards, upwards and upwards we climbed, reaching 1047' and cycling into the rain before it fell.

"My road had the close company of the railway, which had just crossed the river. The three ran side by side on a strip no more that a quarter of a mile wide... the railway on my left was more silent than the river on my right, among its willow and alder and tall, tufted grass."

The route we took differed slightly to the book as the roads that Thomas used have now turned into main A routes across the land filled with fast flowing streams of cars, vans and lorries chasing each other to their destinations. Instead we followed large portions of the NCN sometimes on lesser B roads or along the old railway and canal paths that used to be such a source of industry in England.

That the cycleways now join such a significant part of the country along the lines of the former local branch lines reflects a clear changing in attitude towards the way we perceive our connecting points and the actions that lie between them. At each gig we had people come to watch us and tell of their connection to Edward Thomas, why he meant something special to their lives; some had been in contact with his family, others were only recently coming across his work and wanted to learn more, a couple even brought us a first edition of In Pursuit of Spring to see! All those stories are starting to join up with our lives and travels, we are looking forward to the next tour, tracing more points along Thomas' trails and travels as well as bringing our music to anyone who stops to listen. We look ahead to our own changes and growth, following our roads with the power of wheels and legs to turn them.

Tim Graham
www.pedalfolk.co.uk

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Richard Jefferies Society Birthday Lecture
Saturday 25 October 2014 - 2.30-4.40pm

Subject: **The Presence of the Past: Richard Jefferies, the Middle Ridgeway and landscape change**
Speaker: Prof. Patrick Dillon
Venue: Liddington Village Hall, Church Road, Liddington, Near Swindon SN4 0HB
Admittance: Free

Richard Jefferies' lifetime spans a period of intensification in agriculture, culminating in 'High Farming', followed by one of depression. The ups and downs of farming and the associated impacts on wildlife and the countryside are recurring themes in his writing. Viewed from the perspective of environmental history, Jefferies' works can be seen as a commentary on an ever changing relationship between economy and ecology, land-use and wildlife. In this lecture Patrick will offer an insight into the downland landscapes of Jefferies' country and the changes that have taken place subsequently. The agriculturally-dominating influence of the London market, the relationship between ploughland and grassland, land holding, and countryside sports, emerge from the historical record as the chief forces that have created the landscape we see today and the wildlife that inhabits it. In exploring these themes, he will draw on a book, 'Middle Ridgeway', written jointly with Eric Jones, and illustrated with landscape paintings by his daughter Anna Dillon. Publication of the book is anticipated in 2015.

Patrick Dillon is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Exeter. He joined the Richard Jefferies Society in 1982 and was formerly a member of its Council. He gave a presentation on 'The Ecology of Jefferies Landscapes' at the Literary Festival in 1998 celebrating the 150th anniversary of Richard Jefferies' birth.

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Letter to the Editor

A letter to the editor from Professor Fran Brearton of Queen's University, Belfast:

Sir,
I recently read with interest Andrew Webb's bracing study of *Edward Thomas and World Literary Studies*, in which he sets out to reclaim Thomas's Welshness from the Anglocentricity, as he sees it, of current Thomas studies. I write to correct some errors for readers who may be less familiar with the contemporary Irish poetry scene than with Thomas, and which have the effect of significantly misrepresenting the work of Michael Longley, a poet whose 50-year writing career shows a deep love of Thomas and whose poetry contains an imaginative dialogue with Thomas characterised by its subtlety and profundity.

In his brief discussion of Michael Longley, and with a critical sleight-of-hand, Webb mentions Longley's several poems about Thomas (none of which is discussed), and his many poems about his own father, a veteran of the Great War, claiming, erroneously, that Thomas is 'often associated' with Longley's father in these poems (once isn't 'often'). Webb then offers a reading of Michael Longley's 'Wounds' as a poem whose 'images of war', images which he claims are 'associated with both men', link 'the front to more local political tensions' 'The poem', he concludes, 'retells a foundation myth of British Ulster – its people's sacrifice for the British state in the First World War – and the association of Thomas with Longley's father draws the Welsh poet into this project'. He quotes in evidence four lines from the poem: 'the Ulster Division at the Somme / Going over the top with "Fuck the Pope!", / "No Surrender!": a boy about to die, /Screaming "Give 'em one for the Shankhill" [*sic*].

Ironically, for Webb to describe the Northern Ireland Troubles as 'local political tensions' is itself rather open to the charge of Anglocentricity, particularly given the death toll in the year – 1972 – in which this poem was written. Webb's basic error here, in what he seems to think is some kind of unionist 'project', is his assumption that Longley's father is an Ulsterman. Major Richard Longley was an Englishman, who moved, with his (English) wife to Belfast in the late 1920s. The poem is also misread to a degree that is shocking to anyone familiar with Longley's work, and with its political import. It is not a poem about, or linked with Thomas; nor does it allude to Thomas, or indeed any of the other war-poets – Isaac Rosenberg, Charles Sorley, and Edmund Blunden among them – with whom Longley has engaged in his work. Had Webb done more than simply extract from it a reference to the Ulster Division, he would be aware that Longley's father sees this insane act of bravery with 'admiration' *and*, crucially, 'bewilderment', and that it is one of 'two pictures' from his 'father's head', the other that of the London-Scottish padre in Richard Longley's own regiment 'Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick…Over a landscape of dead buttocks'. Moreover, the poem does not 'retell a foundation myth'; it subjects the ideological certainties underpinning (or at least attributed to) the actions of the Ulster Division – as also underpinning the more immediate slaughter on Longley's own doorstep – to profound ethical scrutiny. It exposes that 'foundation myth' as one of the 'Wounds' of its title, and reveals its devastating implications for Longley's own time – as old wounds and unresolved tensions from the period 1912-22 resurfaced in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. Beside his father, Longley imaginatively buries:

> Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of
> Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.
> A packet of Woodbines I throw in,

A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus
Paralysed as heavy guns put out
The night-light in a nursery for ever;
Also a bus-conductor's uniform –
He collapsed beside his carpet-slippers
Without a murmur, shot through the head
By a shivering boy who wandered in
Before they could turn the television down
Or tidy away the supper dishes.
To the children, to a bewildered wife,
I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said.

'Wounds' is, as Brendan Kennelly describes it, a poem which 'knows no frontiers, and its pity is unconfined'. Longley's 'project' in this poem may well be political in the broadest sense of the word, in as much as its humanity is a corrective to forms of political and religious fanaticism; it is also a brave poem in the context of its production, in its inclusivity, its willingness to confront difficult aspects of history, and in its refusal to take sides. In this, one might well argue it is a poem subtly indebted to Longley's love of Thomas – the Thomas in 'This is No Petty Case of Right or Wrong' who writes 'I hate not Germans, nor grow hot / With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers' for instance; but it conscripts Thomas for no petty 'project' and the disservice done here by Webb both to Longley's work, and, as importantly, to Thomas's legacy in that work, is considerable.

Fran Brearton

Andrew Webb's Edward Thomas and World Literary Studies: Wales, Anglocentrism and English Literature *(University of Wales Press, 2013) was reviewed by John Monks in the last newsletter*

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A photograph of the new headstone for 2nd Lt. P. E. Thomas, with the recently added personal inscription 'POET'. From the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

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Reviews

Last Words for Edward Thomas
by Giles Watson

Published 19th January 2014
Available from:
http://www.lulu.com/shop/giles-watson...
£9:50

The concept behind this book which is intended as a tribute to Edward Thomas is a very simple one. Take Edward Thomas's war diary, and with skill and art extract a few lines (which are set in Italic) and then compose a poem around those lines. Every poem makes use of the words in the diary and is set in chronological order. Add to the poems a related image as well as extracts from the diary itself and we are left with a book that is most appealing. On reading the book I found myself going back to Thomas's diary to read further than the extract used in the poem. However, the greatest success in these poems is that you could almost believe that Giles Watson was reading Edward's thoughts.

Colin G. Thornton

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And You, Helen

by Deryn Rees-Jones with images by Charlotte Hodes

Helen Thomas became a widow when her husband the writer and poet Edward Thomas was killed at the beginning of the first battle of Arras in 1917; she was left alone to bring up their three young children.

Deryn Rees-Jones has combined with Charlotte Hodes to create a sympathetic view of not only Helen as a widow but also the many thousands of other women and children who found themselves in a similar situation as a result of the war.

Very little has been written about Helen outside the Thomas family and Rees-Jones has taken as her starting point Edward's poem 'and you Helen'. From this, Rees-Jones envisages by way of a sensitive ten part poem what Helen could have felt immediately after Edward's death.

Rees-Jones' poem is supplemented by thirteen prints and collages by the artist Charlotte Hodes.

The second part of the book is entitled 'Imagining Helen Thomas' a unique contemplative assembly of events predominantly from Helen and the children's lives. It examines the difficulties of Helen and Edward's relationship, and the deep feelings that Helen felt for Edward and their family, all set against the background of war and the after effects of war.

Many of the extracts will be familiar however; it is in the way that they have been collated that makes for a remarkably perceptive view of Helen and her life after the death of

her husband.

To anyone who knows not Edward and Helen this beautifully presented book will undoubtedly leave them wanting to know more about both Helen and Edward. To those of us who have had Edward and Helen as part of our lives, reading this book leaves us with a warm and pleasurable glow throughout.

And You, Helen is published by Seren ISBN 978-1-78172-172-8 at £14.99

Colin G. Thornton

And You, Helen was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 at 4.30pm on Sunday 6th July and repeated at 23.30, Saturday 12th July.

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Edward Thomas - Paintings and Drawings
by Valerie McLean

Edward Thomas - Paintings and Drawings by Valerie McLean, is one of the many books that arrives in time for the centenary anniversary of the outbreak of World War One. A series of illustrations accompany a selection of Edward Thomas's poems and prose extracts from In Pursuit of Spring and The South Country that are reproduced from the sketchbook of this Herefordshire artist. By the author's own admission "*The selection of poems and prose was a personal choice and the images are not necessarily always directly illustrating the poems but I have attempted to link my artwork to the text.*" In this context I think that Mrs McLean has failed, as this reviewer failed to see any connection between the words and the images. In some cases the hand written and type set words fade away and in no way enhance the visual page before the reader, this is a disappointment because the word images are most interesting. Nowhere could this reviewer see from what source the poems were taken from, and this leads to a rather curious use of a word in the poem 'Parting'. The final line uses the word 'strain'. In the first edition of Edward's verse the preferred option is 'stain' as in the Annotated Collected Poems by Edna Longley. The book itself has a pleasant feel about it; however the use of Gill Sans typeface gives the overall impression of a school text book, which is a pity as the headings for the poems are in a more sympathetic typeface. As for the art itself, well, art is always subjective but my overall impression was that it is varied and interesting and shows Mrs McLean's love for the Herefordshire countryside where she lives. An index of the artwork is included.

Edward Thomas Paintings and Drawings by Valerie McLean. Published by Fineleaf. ISBN: 9781907741340. Price £19.95 Hardback. The book is also available from the website www.valeriemclean.com

Colin G. Thornton

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Poetry in Folk Music

Those of you who have an interest in poems which are set to music as folk songs may be interested in some recent releases described below.

If you attended the event in April 2007 to mark the 90th anniversary of Edward Thomas' death you may recall that one of the highlights of the week-end was a concert performed by singer songwriter Johnny Coppin. Those familiar with Johnny's work will know him as composer of folk songs, a poetry anthologist (including some of Edward's poems) as well as a singer and songwriter. His many albums include "Forest and Vale and High Blue Hill" (Songs of Gloucestershire), "Edge of Day" - a collaboration with writer Laurie Lee and "Songs on Lonely Roads" (The Story of Ivor Gurney). Johnny is based in Gloucestershire and has set poems by poets from around that area to music, including Leonard Clark, John Drinkwater, F W Harvey, Frank Mansell and Edward Shanks as well as those previously mentioned. He has also performed at the Dymock Poets events as well as composing music for, and is Musical Director for the touring company the Festival Players. Johnny was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the University of Gloucestershire in recognition of "his outstanding contribution to the cultural life of the County".

In April 2014 Johnny released his latest album called "Borderland". It is a very fine, beautifully presented and produced collection of songs and of particular interest are three poems of the First World War set to music. One song, "Gloucestershire from Abroad" is a poem written by F W Harvey in 1918 whilst in a prison camp. The other two are more contemporary, "John Condon" is very poignant about a young boy who lied about his age to serve in the War. "Dream of England" is a very evocative song that captures the homesickness felt in the trenches. A fourth song of the war era "Moonlit Apples" is a poem by John Drinkwater published in 1917. Other more modern folk songs complete a most enjoyable album.

Another recent album of interest is "Cyprus Well" by Devon singer/songwriter Jim Causley. The story behind the album is that as a child Jim was made aware by his schoolteacher that he shared his surname with the Cornish poet Charles Causley (1917–2003). Jim's family were unaware of any relationship to the Poet. Only recently he researched his family history to find that in fact they were related via great grandfathers. This led Jim to put a collection of the poems to music. The stand-out song for me, among many fine ones, is "My Young Man's a Cornishman".

Why "Cyprus Well"? Jim recorded the album in Charles Causley's cottage of that name in Launceston, Cornwall.

For further information visit: www.johnnycoppin.co.uk and www.jimcausley.co.uk

Stephen Turner


Johnny Coppin • Borderland

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Dymock Poets Collection at the University of Gloucestershire

In 1995 the Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education established the Dymock Poets Archive and Study Centre. The College collaborated with both the Edward Thomas Fellowship and Friends of the Dymock Poets, along with descendants of the poets themselves, to found and populate the collection. The College is now the University of Gloucestershire and our Dymock collection continues as a major research collection to promote interest in the work of the Dymock Poets and to provide an important resource for those engaged in cultural, historic and literary research.

The collection is housed in the Special Collections and Archives service at Francis Close Hall campus in Cheltenham and contains an extensive collection of the works of Edward Thomas, as well as archive material from Myfanwy Thomas, deposited by Richard Emeny. Other deposits include a rare collection of Robert Frost poems from Edward Eastaway Thomas in November 1995. These pamphlets were privately printed in limited numbers and were given away by Frost as Christmas greetings. The Edward Thomas Fellowship itself has also deposited administrative material including newsletters, correspondence, minutes, journal articles, newspaper clippings, programmes, leaflets, photographs and other ephemera.

We also hold: Working papers and first editions of the writings of Lascelles Abercrombie; Works, photographs, and personal ephemera donated by the family of Wilfrid Wilson Gibson; Manuscripts and first editions by Eleanor Farjeon; Extensive collection of poetry by, and critical works of, Robert Frost; A major collection of the works of John Drinkwater; Works relating to other Gloucestershire and Herefordshire poets and fellow figures of the Georgian movement; Scholarly papers, journals and biographies.

Readers are encouraged to visit and make use of the collection. Although we currently have no online catalogue for searching archive material, our secondary-source holdings are available to search on the main University of Gloucestershire library catalogue (https://aleph.glos.ac.uk/F?RN=502522093 – click on "Locations and Collections" then tick "GPWA" in the lower pane before entering your search criteria).

To make an appointment to visit the collection in person, please telephone 01242 714851 or email archives@glos.ac.uk. The service is open Monday to Friday, 10am-4pm. Our postal address is: Special Collections and Archives, Library and Information Services, University of Gloucestershire, Francis Close Hall (QU024), Swindon Road, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, GL50 4AZ.

Save the Date: The School of Humanities at the University will be hosting a conference in celebration of the Dymock Poets on **5th – 7th June 2015** at Francis Close Hall, Cheltenham. As well as an academic retrospective of the Dymock Poets, this occasion will be a celebration and reinvigoration of the link between the University, its students and the Friends of Dymock Poets, Edward Thomas Fellowship and our shared Dymock special collection.

The conference aims to do this by offering a stimulating combination of a variety of papers, presentations and creative responses to the work of the Dymock Poets and also the nature of archives and special collections. The whole aim of the conference is to stimulate further activity that will retain and continue to celebrate our shared inheritance of this remarkably stimulating time and landscape. The event will involve University students, academic staff and members of the wider public. It will generate new work and start building new approaches to curating the Dymock Poets' collection.

The conference programme and booking information will be advertised in the next Edward Thomas Fellowship newsletter. Please contact the Special Collections and Archives at the University of Gloucestershire if you would like more information.

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Other News

The Letters of Robert Frost volume 1 1886-1920 (848 pp) has been published by the Belknap Press. In the long review in the *TLS*, David Bromwich commented that 'Frost's letters to Thomas are rather casual and implicit; he counts on his friend to know what must be on his mind as he talks of nothing much'. There was also a long review in *The New York Times*, where William Logan observed that in England Frost befriended 'the duller if not the dullest versifiers' and 'had a gift for the attentions of amiable second-raters' but Edward Thomas was 'a poet of greater subtlety and depth than all the other English poets Frost came to know'.

The Dymock Poets by Sean Street, originally published in 1994, will be published in a new edition this autumn with new illustrations.

At the site of Trowbridge Royal Artillery Barracks, a plaque has been erected recording Edward Thomas's stay there.

On BBC Radio 4 Extra, *No One Left and No One Came*, a programme about Adlestrop, was repeated on 23 and 24 June.

The Sunday Telegraph contained an article on Adlestrop by William Langley on 11 May.

John Greening's *To the War Poets* has been published by Carcanet. In a sequence of verse letters he addresses the poets of the First World War directly, making connections yet always aware of distance.

Torbay Poetry Festival will include 'The Golden Summer' on 23 October (in Torquay). An evening of story, narrative and poetry from the poets who gathered in Dymock, Gloucestershire, that Golden Summer of 1914.

The Artists' Rifles exhibition at the Willis Museum, Market Place, Basingstoke, runs until 27 September.

The Independent newspaper, as part of its series 'A History of the First World War in 100 Moments', published Helen Thomas's account of her final farewell to Edward ("I stood at the gate watching him go . . ."). The Fellowship provided the photographs that illustrated this article.

In Glasgow Cathedral on 4 August amongst the readings at the service there was an extract from Helen Thomas's *World Without End*, wherein she describes the last time they were together at Christmas.

War Poet by Jon Stallworthy is published by Carcanet, as is *Fall In, Ghosts: War Prose* by Edmund Blunden, edited by Robyn Marsack.

Back cover: Pedal Folk


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