

Poems by Edward Thomas (“Edward Eastaway”) Facsimile of the 1917 edition.

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In early 1918, Robert Graves wrote to Edward Marsh, the guiding force behind the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies:

... I have a new poet for you, just discovered, one Wilfred Owen: this is a real find, not a sudden lo here! or lo there! which unearths an Edward Eastaway or a Vernede, but the real thing... (quoted in *Edward Marsh*, Christopher Hassall, London: Longmans, 437)

“Edward Eastaway” was the pseudonym—soon to be dropped—of Edward Thomas. Thomas’ first major appearance as a poet under the Eastaway nom-de-plume was in Gordon Bottomley’s *An Annual of New Poetry* which appeared four or five weeks before his death in the Battle of Arras on 9 April 1917. He had chosen to disguise his identity due to his fame as a critic and the reticence of his retiring personality.

It was this reticence, manifested in his brooding moodiness, which

generated a conflict between him and the stylish, ebullient Marsh. The *Georgian Poetry* series was published from 1912-1922. Graves appears in the last three of the five volumes; Thomas appears in none. Graves' remark to Marsh implies some sort of a coterie that was excluding Thomas. Wilfrid Gibson and Lascelles Abercrombie tried to persuade Marsh to include Thomas, but he always refused, latterly giving the reason that he did not publish dead poets. That Graves did not see the merits in Thomas' work is surprising, and may point, as Martin Seymour-Smith has suggested, to having read him with insufficient care (*Robert Graves: His Life and Works*, 373-4). It may also have been that Graves judged Thomas by his champions, such as Gibson and Abercrombie, and finding them wanting in rigour, placed "Edward Eastaway" with them. It is a shame: both men, born in London (Thomas in 1878, Graves in 1895), had Celtic blood in them and both men stood in their own way as individuals. It would seem that they might have had much to talk about.

The *Poems* by Edward Thomas ("Edward Eastaway") published by Selwyn and Blount, appeared posthumously in October 1917, but the arranging of the material was the work of Thomas himself. The facsimile edition contains—in addition to the poems—an introduction by Thomas' surviving daughter, Myfanwy, and a copy of a letter to an Oxford friend, A.D. Williams, possibly written in March 1917.

To the reader familiar with Edward Thomas' poetry there will be no major discoveries here. All the poems were collected later, and there are many famous and much anthologised items, including the most famous of all, "Adlestrop". What makes this volume interesting is the knowledge that as we turn its pages we are reading the poems in the order that Thomas intended them, its closeness to the intention of the man—and—given hindsight of his important in twentieth century letters—its pure historical interest. Any original editions of this book are rare and prized museum-pieces—too fragile and precious to be actively used. The arrival of this volume—small enough to slip into a pocket—gives the reader back the freedom to read.

The dedication—"To Robert Frost"—in itself is interesting. Frost had been instrumental in releasing the flow of poetry in Thomas. He had come to Britain with his family in September 1912, living first in Beaconsfield and then at Leddington near the Gloucestershire village of Dymock until February 1915. He had been drawn to Dymock by the presence of a group of Georgian poets then living or visiting there, among them Gibson, Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke and John

Drinkwater. It was a crucial time for Frost, seeing as it did the publication of his first two collections of poetry, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*. Thomas the eminent critic had written a seminal review of the latter book, the two men became friends and during the summer of 1914 had cemented their relationship on long walks in the Gloucestershire countryside. It was this review—and this friendship—which was for Graves the external circumstance in his opinion of Edward Thomas. He long felt that those first two volumes contained much of Frost's best work, and the fact that Thomas saw that—and that Frost liked Thomas—meant that there must be SOME good in the man!

At the time of those walks, Thomas had just published his prose work, *In Pursuit of Spring*. Frost read it, and told him that within the prose was poetry. "Declare the form", Frost said, "and they'll call you a poet" (BBC Radio Interview, 1957). Frost talked about his "sound of sense" theory—that everyday speech has a music which conveys its meaning by sound alone. In this time of reaction against the turgid Edwardian verse that had preceded the Georgians, the idea caught fire in Thomas' mind. By the end of 1914 the first poems—the poems in this collection—were emerging. Among these were "Adlestrop", written on a train journey to visit Frost at Dymock (Frost, too, created famous work as a result of those walks: "The Road not Taken" was inspired by Thomas the countryman, who would so often vacillate about which path to take his friend down).

On page 47 of the *Poems* is Thomas' testament to those walks during the last hot months before war, "The Sun Used to Shine":

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

Each night...

The book also contains poems from Thomas to his wife Helen and to his Children. "Lights Out" is here, and the beautiful "Words", which significantly he places last:

Out of us all
That make rhymes,
Will you choose
Sometimes—
As the winds use
A crack in a wall
Or a drain,
Their joy or their pain
To whistle through—
Choose me,
You English words? ...

Thomas began composing that poem on May Hill, the Gloucestershire hill so much loved by Frost himself. The *Poems* focuses us very much on those months of friendship, the friendship to which we owe Edward Thomas' release as a poet. Today the fields around Dymock contain a network of footpaths, walked by—among others—members of the Edward Thomas Fellowship (its former Hon. Secretary, Alan A. Martin, provides a preface to this new edition), and the Friends of the Dymock Poets, a group set up to study the work from the Georgians living here at this time. And within this book there is an almost eerie sense that Thomas predicted their presence, as he passed in conversation along those same paths in 1914, musing on a presentiment of how, one day, others would pass that same way:

... other men though other flowers
In those fields under the same moon
Go talking and have easy hours.