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# A geographical biography of a nature writer

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## Abstract

This article writes a geographical biography of the early 20th century nature writer and poet, Edward Thomas. The reason for doing so is to question the way in which geography has dealt with the symbolic life of landscape. It arranges itself around a single day walking in the footprints of Edward Thomas, across the South Downs – a range of chalk hills in southeast England, extending from Hampshire in the west to Sussex in the east – with the Edward Thomas Fellowship – a literary society, who work to preserve the memory of the nature writer and poet, in the landscape he wrote of.

## Keywords

Biography, landscape, memory, nature, poetry, walking

He [Hilaire Belloc] is such a geographer as I wish many historians were, such a poet as all geographers ought to be, and hardly any other has been.<sup>1</sup>

*Those academics who weren't in their pods on motorways were wandering friars on the footpaths of England. Nature-writers like Edward Thomas and Richard Jefferies were rediscovered and revalued, their downland walks invigilated by keen-eyed young men in khaki shorts. Robert MacFarlane, Cambridge lecturer, tree-climber, champion of wild places, led the way back to the era of ambulatory essays on dew ponds, standing stones, pilgrim tracks.<sup>2</sup>*

## Introduction, literary walking

Whilst out walking one day, in the shade at the age of 36, with the First World War looming, Edward Thomas decided to become a poet. In the few years that followed, believing he belonged nowhere, he tramped across rolling chalk downland, stitching himself to the landscape.<sup>3</sup> Gently slanting from the door of his stone cottage, the South Downs – a range of chalk hills that extend across the south-eastern coastal counties of England from Hampshire in the west to Sussex in the east – became day by day the mainspring of his poetry. As a perennial poet and essayist of the South Downs, he remains an enduring presence a century later in the downland he trampled daily, treading and documenting a series of paths around the village of Steep, East Hampshire, where he lived until enlisting. Since his death, in 1917,

at the Battle of Arras, Edward Thomas has been habitually reappraised and channelled by poets and writers tracing his tracks through the British countryside.<sup>4</sup> This continued presence prompted J.M. Coetzee, writing scenes from a provincial life in 1960s London, to ask, What has happened to the ambitions of poets here in Britain? Have they not digested the news that Edward Thomas and his world are gone forever?<sup>5</sup>

Almost 100 years to the day after Edward Thomas completed his first poem, about a pub near the village of Steep – where a sarsen stone memorial was installed on a wooded escarpment in 1937, dedicating the entire hillside to the poet forever after – this article gives consideration to the question J.M. Coetzee poses, gathering whether Edward Thomas and his world are gone forever. Or if indeed, each poem, its content, its world, is palpably there, in and of the world, sparked into presence like the little heap of magnesium powder lit by the flame of a match, when walking downland.<sup>6</sup> Travelling with a literary society named the Edward Thomas Fellowship – founded over a quarter of a century ago to foster interest in the life and work of Edward Thomas and to preserve the landscape he knew of – the following article is a description of memories materialising and shards of text manifesting themselves at moments when walking for a single day in the South Downs.

The rhythms of the subject in landscape as it lingers, waits, detours and ruminates has of course established itself quite comfortably in the area of cultural geography that attends to the experience of the phenomenological body.<sup>7</sup> Such work, even when it does involve specific representations of the world, has tended to abstract that work from the landscape it was written in and to use representation to reflect back upon landscape, noting the historical importance of representation in creating an image of a region.<sup>8</sup> My concerns in this article are therefore twofold; on the one hand, it seeks to remain within and expand the phenomenological turn in cultural geography and, on the other, to encourage a phenomenological re-reading of the way cultural geography has dealt with representation – or what in cultural geography may be read as a non-representational perception of representation.<sup>9</sup> In this way, I suggest one can both retain the impulse of phenomenological investigation – foregrounding the shock of the poetic – while also addressing that aspect with which recent critics have taken issue, namely, a de-centring of the very individual and emotional experience of travelling in landscape, and the old concern that phenomenological geography jettisoned the substantial power of representational acts.<sup>10</sup>

On a literary walk, I follow members of a literary society around a place, which their literary hero portrayed in writing or held dear, until they have had enough or have seen all there is to see. When we reach a spot where an event occurred, a memory is recollected or maybe a poem was written, we stop to undertake a ritual reading, or memorialising, before moving on. This is then repeated until the loop is complete or a pub is reached. A walk practising poetry usually happens two or three times a year. The regular meets when the society of fellows actively travel to and within a literary landscape are a vital part of their voluntary memorialising and the mutual enactment of literature and place – with the literature mediating, altering and enhancing their experience of place and the place doing the same to the literature. Hitching a ride with such literary societies who memorialise, preserve and claim landscape in this way, through a form of ‘right’ or ‘correct’ walking – reasserting poetry as they go – highlighted the individuality of a poetic landscape.<sup>11</sup> I witnessed their

movements, garnered their knowledge of poetry, monitored at poetic sites their detective-work, borrowed their representational findings from their regular reenactments, spoke of memories from previous loops and – legitimised by the undertaking of an outdoor leisure pursuit – mimicked their art of being moral, occasionally mobile, historically and environmentally sensitive healthy citizens.<sup>12</sup>

On these loops of the South Downs, representation – for so long deemed a ‘dead’ sphere of geographic critique – could actually be witnessed, felt, seen, heard, or bumped into and could therefore be researched like any other thing. Literature moored itself, detached itself, interacted with, reassembled and transformed the multiple places we travelled through. Far from being abstract text, literature became a part of the vitality of those places, affecting how we moved through them, manifesting itself as material compositions, as presentations in and of the world – not as representational imaginary, pattern, gaze or construction overarching landscape.<sup>13</sup> In the *mêlée*,<sup>14</sup> the place and literature mutually perform each other – adding, dissolving, maintaining, circulating and deconstructing meaning, symbolism, identity. Here, the two are being held in a porous process of intertwining, becoming and disentangling.

What follows, after an introduction to the nature writer and poet Edward Thomas, is a description of a single day walking a rough-circle of the South Downs, around the village of Steep, East Hampshire, with the Edward Thomas Fellowship. Gesturing lyrically of the landscape, a number of voices are intertwined as the journey unfolds. The work of Edward Thomas emerges from the landscape at moments when it was recalled, italicised in standard poetic verse form.

### **Nature writer and poet, Edward Thomas**

The articulation of the life of Richard Jefferies, written by Edward Thomas in 1909, anticipated his own future.<sup>15</sup> For Thomas, Richard Jefferies was more than a nature writer – he was a guiding spirit of the English landscape, affecting a profound influence upon his own writings. Thomas regarded Jefferies as something of a mentor, once describing the body of work he created as a gospel, an incantation. A similar mystic communion with nature draws them together, alongside a number of sympathetic resonances. A family connection – Thomas holidayed as a child in Swindon, where his grandmother lived, part of his intellectual and spiritual development – their life spans – Thomas lived only 4 months longer – and a creative intensity squeezed into the last few years – a slow gathering, followed by a late spate. Their work is not a naive celebration of flora and fauna, and a dumb blast at modern society, a meditation on purely the trees and the hills. The landscape is specifically peopled and their books are altogether more complicated, precise, witty, technical, nuanced, scholarly and painterly. Jefferies is best known for his writings about nature, agriculture and the countryside. *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *Wildlife in a Southern County*, *The Amateur Poacher*, and *Round About a Great Estate* are his most celebrated pieces.<sup>16</sup> In *Nature Near London* and *After London; Or, Wild England*, he also writes extensively about London and its surrounds, about satellite towns, about the salvo of coming industrialisation and about the perceived loss of a harmonious interaction between nature and people, a rural order.<sup>17</sup> Loss came to define Jefferies as a writer. For Thomas, loss, the loss of a connection with nature, and the inability

of the individual poet to fully represent this loss became his poetic source, down the line. Admixtures of social commentary, environmental action and personal musing, describing the half-ruined buildings and disappearing practices of the time, for leisure and work, their words act like little time capsules, demonstrating the value of representational acts.

In 1906, Edward Thomas published *The Heart of England*.<sup>18</sup> The book begins with Thomas leaving London on foot, with the reader initially stumbling upon an archetypal suburban street scene of unbroken rows of houses, all the same. Everything is described in vivid detail, as Thomas follows a boy of 9 years old, moving briskly in every direction, and a strange, free, hatless man, ignoring puddles. The mood becomes darker as night falls, and Thomas travels further into a pre-emptive Ballardian suburbia. For Thomas, the place has no meaning, no history, nothing understandable, it is half-built, unnaturally devastated, dejected, sorrowful and despairing. 'The rain formed a mist and a veil over the skeletons round about, but it revealed more than it took away; Nature gained courage in the gloom'.<sup>19</sup> Thomas sets out that night, so as not to endure another night of torment, the noise of his heels and stick staining the immense silence. He feels entrapped on his exit from the city, in a borough of London once nothing but fields. Looking up at the thousands of people in their lighted windows, he proclaims, 'most men are prisons to themselves'.<sup>20</sup> Not the brave cheerful lights in the distance, which we strain our eyes for as we descend from the hills of Kent or Wales: a place of refuge in complete darkness. The first landscape Thomas encounters after leaving London is *The Lowland*. 'How nobly the ploughman and the plough and three horses, two chestnuts and a white leader, glide over the broad swelling field in the early morning'.<sup>21</sup> He continues to express his love of ploughs and what they represent for a further five pages. Evident in these pages is a desire to preserve practices, which are witnessed less and less throughout the 20th century. By writing about traditional rural practice, he is preserving something of the landscape before him. It is this longing to 'make the glimpsed good place permanent',<sup>22</sup> which is evident in Thomas' later – more famous – poetry, 'although somewhere beyond the borders of Thomas' mind, there was a world he could never quite come at'.<sup>23</sup> The book ends with a collection of traditional folk songs.

Another Edward Thomas book that could be rediscovered and reused in geographical investigations of landscape, as David Matless has written previously, is *The Icknield Way* – an account of a walk along a dismembered ancient trackway from Thetford in Norfolk to Wanborough in Wiltshire.<sup>24</sup> Matless notes how 'books move in and out of Thomas' book in surprising ways'.<sup>25</sup> Aspects of landscape ignored by others, such as diverting the text indoors and looking at paintings of landscape on his hotel wall are perhaps a 'deliberate indoor extension of landscape mobility', and an interesting allusion to encountering representation in landscape.<sup>26</sup> In *The South Country*, Thomas wanders through every season, and covers all the counties from Hampshire to Cornwall, and from Surrey to Sussex.<sup>27</sup> As he travels, his mind also wanders, memories materialise and past events are recollected. While in Hampshire, Thomas, struggling to represent nature and unable to consider himself a poet, writes of words: For after the longest inventory of what is here visible and open to analysis, much remains over, imponderable but mighty. Often when the lark is high he seems to be singing in some keyless chamber of the brain; so here the house is built in shadowy replica. If only we could make a graven image of this spirit instead of a muddy untruthful reflection of words!<sup>28</sup>

In 1913, Thomas set off on a bicycle from London when spring was about to begin. The plan was to pursue spring and witness the metamorphosis of the landscape, the further he got along a preordained route westerly. It was not until more than a month after a false spring had visited London though that he finally did get going, in the second week of March. The journey along roads and lanes from London to the Quantock Hills – to Nether Stowey and Coleridge Cottage, Kilve, Crowcombe, and West Bagborough, via Guildford, Dunbridge, Salisbury Plain, Bradford-on-Avon, Trowbridge, the Avon, the Biss, the Frome, Shepton Mallet, and Bridgwater – *In Pursuit of Spring*, was published in 1914.<sup>29</sup> His good friend, the poet Robert Frost, concluded that the book was poetic and that ‘Thomas was a poet behind the disguise of his prose’, encouraging him to begin writing poetry.<sup>30</sup> This is unclearly discussed in a number of biographies, where Thomas appears Frost’s ‘debtor, in verse and in inspiration’.<sup>31</sup> Thomas though was in pursuit of the poetic long before meeting Frost. Riding out of the capital westward, to the sacred site of Coleridge Cottage in Nether Stowey, Somerset, following the return of spring, was not his first poetic excursion. In *The Heart of England*, *The South Country*, *The Icknield Way*, and *In Pursuit of Spring*, ‘we can see Thomas clearing the ground [in his prose] in preparation for a thorough understanding of the self that, he feared had gone astray’.<sup>32</sup> On returning from the pursuit springwards, Thomas wrote 85 poems in 7 months from November 1914 to the day he enlisted. ‘Frost produced the enharmonic change, which made him not a different man, but the same man in another key’.<sup>33</sup>

Of the 144 poems written – ‘sometimes at the rate of one a day’<sup>34</sup> – in the final 2 years of his life, *The Manor Farm* (1914), *The Combe* (1914), *Adlestrop* (1915), *The Chalk Pit* (1915), *A Tale* (1915), *The Path* (1915), *Lob* (1915), *Aspens* (1915), *The Mill Water* (1915), *Wind and Mist* (1915) and many others still resonate, despite their speedy execution.<sup>35</sup> The startlingly arresting views of English landscape, the eulogies for ancient beasts of the British countryside and the descriptions of disturbing, strange and beautiful folkloric archetypes have defined him as a person, after extended periods spent withdrawn and morose doing hack work. The prolonged state of introspection Thomas suffered before eventually deciding to become a poet is played out in his poems in what Edna Longley terms ‘poetic psychodrama’.<sup>36</sup> The poems habitually feature a split self or a ‘switch between patient and analyst’, reflecting the mild schizophrenia he was diagnosed with after undergoing psychoanalysis in 1912.<sup>37</sup> A doppelganger, performing the role of his analyst, haunts the landscapes Edward Thomas wanders, acting as a knowledgeable precursor, taunting his attempts at nature writing and poetry. Alongside a landscape imbued with a human agency, the doppelganger is played off against the voice of the poet, redirecting his feelings, as if in a process of transference. His poetry is as a result conversational and plain in form, achieving on the page a ‘disarmingly low-keyed tone of voice’.<sup>38</sup> The sound of sense. Moments of thought and memory perforate, and expound all that is ‘ungraspable in the very nature of words, and memory, and consciousness’.<sup>39</sup>

On the cusp of old and new, ‘between antiquated traditionalism and elitist modernism’, Thomas is an isolated figure, not included in Michael Robert’s epoch-defining *Faber Book of Modern Verse*.<sup>40</sup> Rejecting the fuss of modernism and the pomp of traditionalism, Thomas continues the distinctly English plain style of Chaucer, early Wordsworth, John Clare, Richard Jefferies and Thomas Hardy. He captures the fleeting, fractured moments, of

intimate disintegrating places, set in the wider context of a disappearing, encroached upon English countryside, preserved for eternity in dark, eerie, haunted, uncanny verse, beset with loss, due to his 'residual mystical inclinations'.<sup>41</sup> The melancholic version of Romantic Ecology, or eco-historical writing, Thomas espouses in verse is naturalistic but very much committed to the workers who cultivate the landscape.<sup>42</sup> While this article does not share the same green agenda as Romantic Ecology, it recaptures something of a return to a pre-modern reading of poetry, relearning the poetic method of looking at the world.<sup>43</sup>

Edward Thomas died in the battle of Arras, Easter Monday, 9 April 1917, at 7:36 a.m. hit by a stray shell at the Beaurains observation post.<sup>44</sup> There was not a scratch on him. The sound of the blast stopped his heart. A sombre war diary is published at the back of the new edition of the collected poems, where he writes how a shell landed beside him a day earlier but did not explode. There was a letter found in his pocket when he died, with the diary and a photograph of his wife. The poems Thomas wrote are available in their original form and in endless newer volumes, along with letters written to friends and family, a fragment of autobiography, many biographies – including a new one, *Now All Roads Lead to France: the Last Years of Edward Thomas* – guides to his poetry and the places in which the poetry was written, all his topographical and critical work and even new poems, which were found only recently.<sup>45</sup> Thomas has a hillside dedicated to him, marked with a sarsen stone, two stained glass church windows, his name etched onto the war poet's memorial in Westminster Abbey and his homes marked with plaques stating that the poet once lived there. And over a quarter of a century ago, in 1980, a fellowship, a band of brothers, was established formally, to further perpetuate his life and work and to conserve the countryside known to Edward Thomas and recorded in his writings, by repeatedly walking it, the Edward Thomas Fellowship.

### **Steep, East Hampshire**

After 10 minutes or so, two gentlemen arrived sporting suitable attire, carrying a book of poems and an explorer map. Dressed in gear, which was less shiny than I had imagined. Woollen socks, corduroy trousers, leather boots, tweed cap. The cagoule was bagged; an aluminium stick was on show, jutting from a hand, indicating that I had not driven through time, but the Downs of Southern England. The men stopped by the awkward automatic door of the old stone station. It opened and quickly closed unsurely. A bearded man was Colin – the honorary secretary of the fellowship – and wearing a flat cap and carrying the aluminium stick was Larry – the honorary treasurer and membership secretary. They were staunch Edward Thomas enthusiasts, frustrated that he was not a household name. This corner of Hampshire provides the ground base to the majority of his poems. It is known as Little Switzerland locally. On the map we pored over it said Steep.

The disciplined walk was so focused around Edward Thomas that at times, the landscape felt unnecessary, a distraction from the poetry. The landscape became more noticeable at designated stopping points, where the scene unfurled itself, and we strained to get a better view. Or when the poetry told us to see and we tried to glimpse the past. We often stopped and pondered the poem in the place it was written almost a century earlier, before reading it

aloud. The landscape is still apparently as it was, time has slowed down, but I was unable to substantiate this, merely picture. The poetry has, according to Colin and Larry, preserved the landscape and given it blue-plaque status, national importance, a narrative which was largely unreadable to me. When we were not talking about poetry, I was versed in the history of the Edward Thomas Fellowship, Edward Thomas, his life and his death in the First World War. Colin spoke of how on the morning of Easter day 1917, a stray shell blast stopped his heart and left not a scratch upon him. The sombre landscape of the Arras offensive in north eastern France is still haunting this quiet corner of East Hampshire.

At Steep Church, there is a memorial to the dead of the Great War. Inscribed on the wall of the church were the names of the men who perished in the trenches. Edward Thomas is one of the names in a list of around a hundred people from this small village. Of course, explained Colin, Edward did not need to go to war. Reading the words, FOR KING AND COUNTRY, prompted Colin to question the devotion of Edward to monarchy. Not so much King but certainly country, he went on to say. What followed, from Colin, is the most repeated story about Edward Thomas. And along with his writing is part of the reason why he is held in such high regard by the people who wander this landscape regularly. It is the story of why he went to war. A friend, Eleanor Farjeon, asked why he was going to fight. Edward bent down, picked up a handful of earth, crumbled it between his fingers and replied, literally for this. I think he was defending a way of life too, said Colin. It is not a story of nationalism but of preservation. Edward essentially believed he had cherished England thoughtlessly, visually, slavishly. Fighting was necessary in order to look again, uniformly, at the English landscape. He wrote poems still once enlisted, all but one written while training in England. Other poets of the period produced verse verging on nationalist manifesto. Edward continued writing what he knew, the English landscape, a landscape now more disturbing than ever. Colin told me it had been suggested by some that Edward knew he would be killed at war, and that he welcomed death. Death was a final solution to the melancholy suffered as a man and a writer. It enabled the fusion of self and world strived for by the poet.

On occasion, he was moved by what he saw in the village of Steep and would be able to write about it, which is why he chose to stay. One such example of this is in front of 2 Yew Tree Cottage. A large feathery shrub called old man, or lad's-love, which we rubbed on our hands, gave off a pungent scent. Myfanwy, the youngest daughter of the poet, would pick at the bush every time she walked in and out of the house. Her father, Edward, was guilty of doing exactly the same. On one occasion when he mislaid his key, being transported at the smell of the herb to

Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

Before we left the garden, a ritual reading of the poem Old Man took place and we rubbed our hands on the leaves once more. The smell wafted up from my hands into my nostrils, transporting me elsewhere. For

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray

And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;

Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait

For what I should, yet never can, remember;



No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush

*Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,*

Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;

Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

Not far from 2 Yew Tree Cottage is the Cricketers Pub. Only one noise could be heard above the distant hum of the a3. Aspens. Blowing about in the wind, as in days gone by, they talk together

Of rain, until their last leaves fall from the top.

Beyond the talking trees, we turned back on ourselves, to visit another memorial. A marble column with a wreath of poppies placed carefully at the base. Once again we looked for the name of Edward Thomas. It was about half way up. We stood for a few moments to pay our respects before turning left towards a cast iron bench, looking out across fields skywards. The ghosts are up there to be summoned. Visions of Edward running down the shoulder with Myfanwy on his shoulders abounded. This was a common sight. There was a repeated excited noise from my fellow walkers who were perceiving fading markers. A water-mill

Where once men had a workplace and a home.

Traces of what it once was remain. While the waterfall still flows, the mill and wheel are no longer there. Ruins were a common sight even in the days of Edward, as people began to move out of the area to London and Southampton. Edward felt a duty to write poetry about their fleeting existence. Mass industry was coming. In the silence of the Downs, the waterfall roared away. It is useless now, powering nothing,

Only the idle foam

Of water falling

Changelessly calling

To the men who worked there in the past. The site has returned to nature, who adds flowers here and there. We read *The Mill Water* in homage to what was left.

Colin was looking over at a solitary pine in a corn field shouting

With only gratitude

Instead of love –

A pine in solitude

Cradling a dove.

Knowing the significance of this pine, even if no one else did, Colin read the lines

That I could not return

All that you gave

And could not ever burn

With the love you have.

Climbing upwards through Lutcombe Bottom, beyond a lake system was a chalk track about 10 feet in width. It led us up steeply into some trees. Water ran down the chalk eroding away

the surface, revealing the past in tiny rivulet. The story of a lady who dropped a box of blue plates on the path we walked was retold. Smashed fragments still sparkle against the white rock, just, and tell the tale. The wood cutters cottage had gone bar footings, leaving the path redundant, going nowhere but to a clasp of trees. Nettles grow making visible what once was. I picked up a blue shard but later lost it, swallowed by landscape, trampled back down, to be found again next year, or the year after. The event is immortalised in verse by the poem, A Tale. A tale through which to see this coombe. The shards continue to be found a century after the event. It must have been a large box. When they eventually are all gone, Colin pondered dropping some more.

The deep coombe, dark and wet, was now below us. Fern and wild garlic almost covered the bracken completely. We had walked up a narrow path along the eastern edge of what now appeared to us as a large valley. The path narrowed further the higher we climbed Stoner Hill. Little steps had been cut into the chalk and mud to allow the ascent to be done upright. I was unsure whether they had been ground down by the feet of people over centuries or had been dug away by a single person. We stopped and leafed through the book of poems to the poem, The Path. I presumed that this must be the path Edward wrote about. The one we had just used to climb the hillside. It runs along a bank and there is a precipitous wood below. It was not though. For many years, people had walked to this site and read the poem without realising it was the wrong path. There was another which has gone to the winding prickles of bramble branches, unused for so long by humans. It went nowhere but to the top of the deep coombe. Stopping suddenly at the edge where the trees end. It overhung us by 30 feet or so. A vista before the trees topped it. An old lady remembered the path though, the one that looks

As if it led on to some legendary

Or fancied place.

For the first time on the walk, I could see for miles in every direction across segments of field. Downs clear before and behind. We somehow walked from the secret path to a pub with no name. On the wooden benches outside the pub, the fellowship would write a birthday card for Edward. Colin has kept the cards and looks back through them occasionally, remembering the names of the past. This was an isolated local. A public-house that is public for birds, squirrels and such-like. An outpost up in the wind, as Edward noted in his very first poem. A stick and boots belonging to him were by the fire inside. This was his favourite haunt. We walked over to the stick and boots and stared. The stick was a perfect fit for the hand of Edward, carved from one thick branch of holly. Some sort of mystical connection with Edward was being awakened. Colin reached for the stick and tried it for size.

We aimed for The Manor Farm with the sound of Larry's stick staining the immense silence. A bright light at the end of the dark tunnel opened out and gave onto a scene, which seemed uncannily like I had been there before. The power of representation perhaps, or the quintessential village green, or maybe I had been here before. It felt homely, comforting. A large grand farm-house, a small church, a great yew tree, crossroads, signpost and post-box remained in the misty haze of a late summer day. Everything was incredibly silent and still. Wandering away from the others, I opened the wooden gate of the little church and walked

beneath the great yew tree, opposites in size and age then and now. I could still hear nothing, wandering among the old crumbling grave stones. No voices, no birds, no wind, indeed no life but my crunching soles. Turning to leave the church yard with its overgrown grass, brambles, ivy and that great yew, I looked over the hedge and at the manor farm and knew

This England, old already, was called merry.

A tunnel of green, deep trenches a couple of metres apart, where wheels had passed over for centuries. Deepened since Edward wrote the poem, The Lane, looking down more often to concentrate, slowing and studying my gait, I noticed a dead mole on the ground, face up with arms outstretched. There was not a scratch on it. Its heart stopped from a fright, a loud noise, perhaps a blast from a gun. Colin bent down, reached for the mole and stroked the fur on its belly, before picking it up. It was not larger than his palm. Touching it, I was surprised at its warmth and its softness. Not long since it had gone. The end of the long, narrow, straight, arduous lane felt like the gateway to another world.

Down Cockshott Lane, inscribed on the side of a house were the words: EDWARD THOMAS POET AND HIS WIFE HELEN LIVED HERE 1909–1913. The fellowship had organised the hanging of this plaque and took great pride in it. Colin explained that Edward hated living in the house. A story of him leaving the house late at night during a storm was retold. Helen saw Edward leave with a gun. A shot rang out moments later. Helen feared the worst. An hour after hearing the shot, Edward returned with the gun in his hand. I heard distorted by the wind:

Nights of storm, days of mist, without end;

Sad days when the sun

Shone in vain: old griefs and griefs

Not yet begun.

About 30 feet in front of us, almost human like in its qualities, the stone stood, surveying the landscape. With trepidation due to the steep slope and the incoming gusts, I walked slowly and carefully towards it. Written on the octagonal plaque set into the hard sarsen stone was: AND THEN I ROSE UP, AND KNEW THAT I WAS TIRED, AND CONTINUED MY JOURNEY. Colin explained that this is taken from an essay written by Edward. How true it felt to my aching body at that moment. Colin placed a hand upon the stone and lent for a while in thought. After a minute or so, he began describing the difficult task of erecting it. A team of people had to remove it from Avebury, where it once stood in a sacred sarsen stone circle. The spot henceforth was a place of pilgrimage. Each year, the fellowship come to pay their respects. A poem has been written about the stone.

Still gazing across the Downs, Larry began to tell the story of an accident an elderly member of the fellowship had on a previous walk. Not being able to quite remember a name, I was told and shown with actions how he rolled head over heels down the hill regaining his footing occasionally and only stopping once at the wooden fence about 20 feet below. The gentleman was fine but did not attempt the entire walk again. Colin was laughing loudly by this point and was also joining in with the actions where appropriate. Subsequently, he told a similar

story involving his grandson and himself and of course Edward and Myfanwy who used to hurtle down this very hill.

Before we descended the vertiginous escarpment following in the footsteps of Edward and Myfanwy, we passed a bench looking out over 60 miles of downland. The bench had written on it: IN MEMORY OF ROWLAND AND CHERRY WATSON WHOSE ENTHUSIASM LED TO THE DEDICATION OF THE MEMORIAL TO EDWARD THOMAS IN 1937. I stopped there for a moment letting the others wander on and sat with the dead on Edward's Hill, looking out through the gloom. What an elaborate suicide note these poems have seemingly turned out to be. And then I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey.

### **Remembering, dis-remembering or forgetting**

In the geographical biography of Edward Thomas written here, the words that the early 20th century nature writer and poet produced of Steep, East Hampshire, over his shortened lifetime are confronted in the landscape they represent. The reason for doing so was firstly to harness the power of representational acts, re-enlivening the work of Edward Thomas, which is both beautifully evocative of landscape and historically and geographically situated; secondly, to demonstrate the relationship between the poetic method of representing landscape and the re-emergence in cultural geography of narrating a form of the self travelling through landscape; thirdly, to foreground as part of the rhythms of the subject in landscape as it lingers, waits, detours and ruminates, representations of the world that affect how that journey occurs and is experienced; and fourthly, to expand upon and further complicate the area of cultural geography that attends to the experience of the phenomenological body. Recent work in cultural geography on landscape, perception, embodiment, memory, material culture and the spectral has pointed towards the sort of affective mapping of more-than-human entanglements that a geographical biography represents.<sup>46</sup> The rough-circle walked in the footprints of Edward Thomas attends to the minutiae of the poetic in landscape, thinking in terms of loss and haunting, 'outside the unfolding locales of chronology', and confronts the endless fading away and 'emptying-out' of meaning and memory in landscape.<sup>47</sup> The moment of poetic shock that occurs when the world Edward Thomas wrote of leaps into the present is written as ultimately fleeting and elusive, exposing a certain irrecoverableness of a glimpsed past landscape.

The loop of Steep, East Hampshire, undertaken is an examination of representation in landscape, representing in landscape, which takes as its starting point a question from J. M. Coetzee, and an idea that representation is itself in and of the world, a tangible presentation. An abstract Romantic regional imaginary, or an everyday material lived Edward Thomas Country, is understood via a creative response to travelling landscape performed by using 'an oblique and attenuated form of practice'.<sup>48</sup> Writing a conversation played out in landscape between myself, the fellowship and Edward Thomas on remembering, dis-remembering or forgetting the article writes the individual, personal and slippery geography of representation and the collective memories this landscape holds. The projection onto landscape of feelings, with the landscape acting as a doppelganger, or memory sponge, is the very stuff of the

psychoanalytic experience, which Edward Thomas partook in on a daily basis and the fellowship undertake annually, revealing a historical affective relationship between self and landscape. When following the paths Edward Thomas wove through the South Downs, a transference of memories, thoughts and feelings transpires, and the old fashioned geographically poetic or poetically geographic subject Carl Sauer would have noticed walking in landscape is enlivened, exposing conflicts, struggles and anxieties at the breakdown of language; much remains over, imponderable but mighty.<sup>49</sup>

Yes, I remember Adlestrop –

The name, because one afternoon

Of heat the express-train drew up there

Unwontedly. It was late June.<sup>50</sup>

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