
Opening Extract from...

Now All Roads Lead to France

The Last Years of Edward Thomas

Written by Matthew Hollis

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and I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey

EDWARD THOMAS, *Light and Twilight*

Edward Thomas spent the day before he died under particularly heavy bombardment. The shell that fell two yards from where he stood should have killed him, but instead it was a rare dud. Back at billet, the men teased him on his lucky escape; someone remarked that a fellow with Thomas's luck should be safe wherever he went. The next morning was the first of the Arras offensive. Easter Monday dawned cold and wintry. The infantry in the trenches fixed their bayonets and tightened their grip around their rifles; behind them, the artillery made their final preparations to the loading and the fusing of the shells. Thomas had started late to the Observation Post; he had not rung through his arrival when the bombardment began. The Allied assault was so immense that some Germans were captured half-dressed; others did not have time to put on their boots and fled barefoot through the mud and snow. British troops sang and danced in what only a few hours before had been no-man's-land. Edward Thomas left the dugout behind his post and leaned into the opening to take a moment to fill his pipe. A shell passed so close to him that the blast of air stopped his heart. He fell without a mark on his body.

I

STEEP

1913

Winter

> There has been opened at 35, Devonshire-street, Theobalds-road, a 'Poetry Bookshop', where you can see any and every volume of modern poetry. It will be an impressive and, perhaps, an instructive sight.
>
> EDWARD THOMAS, *Daily Chronicle*, 14 January 1913

At the cramped premises off Theobald's Road in Bloomsbury, Harold Monro was preparing for the opening of his new bookshop. Before the turn of the year, Monro had announced that on 1 January 1913 he would open a poetry bookshop 'in the heart of London, five minutes' walk from the British Museum'. It would be devoted to the sale of verse in all its forms – books, pamphlets, rhyme sheets and magazines – and would be both a venue for poetry readings and the base for an intrepid publishing programme. 'Let us hope that we shall succeed in reviving, at least, the best traits and qualities of so estimable an institution as the pleasant and intimate bookshop of the past.' To Monro that revival meant something particular: wooden settles, a coal fire, unvarnished oak bookcases, a selection of literary reviews lain out on the shop table and, completing the scene, Monro's cat Pinknose curled up beside the hearth.[1]

The premises stood on a poorly lit, narrow street between the faded charm of the eighteenth-century Queen Square and the din of the tramways thundering up Theobald's Road. The shop occupied a small ground-floor room, twelve feet across and lit from the street by a fine five-panelled window; in the back was an office from where Monro ran his publishing empire. Upstairs was a dignified drawing room where the twice-weekly poetry

readings were initially held, and two floors of bedrooms lay above, available to guests at a price of 'a sonnet and a shilling' – or three and sixpence a week in hard cash. Much of the surrounding area had been slum-cleared at the turn of the century when Kingsway was carved through from Bloomsbury Square to the Strand, but not Devonshire Street, which survived in squalor, cluttered by dustbins and vaulting cats. Public houses pinned the street at either end, while along its modest 150 yards traded two undertakers and, by report, a brothel. Many of the buildings were served by a single outside tap, and it was not unknown for passers-by to be hit with fish bones and other scraps cast out from an upstairs window, or chased down the street by boys with catapults. This was the setting for the Poetry Bookshop, in the heart of what one visitor called a 'murderous slum'.[2]

On 8 January 1913, a week later than planned, the Bookshop officially opened its doors. Poets, journalists, critics, readers, patrons: they came in their dozens, until barely a foot of standing room was left unclaimed. That afternoon and the one that followed, three hundred people crammed into the little shop, filling the staircase and the first-floor drawing room; for the capital's poets it was an occasion not to be missed. Wilfrid Gibson, the most popular young poet of the decade, was already resident in the attic rooms and had only to walk downstairs, while the wooden-legged, self-declared 'super-tramp', W. H. Davies, had hobbled in all the way from Kent. Lascelles ('he said it like tassels') Abercrombie had been invited to open the proceedings, but speculated that to ask a man of his years might seem tactless to the elders (he was about to turn thirty-two); W. B. Yeats diplomatically suggested that perhaps the honour should not befall a poet of any description. But Monro was adamant, and turned to the fifty-year-old Henry Newbolt, then Chair of Poetry at the Royal Society of Literature, to perform the ceremony. At Newbolt's side was Edward Marsh, Secretary to the First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill and editor of an anthology launched that day

that would become one of the best-selling poetry series of the century. Among its contributors was the twenty-five-year-old Rupert Brooke, who was in Cornwall that afternoon recovering from the strain of his fraught personal life but who would give a reading at the Bookshop before the month was out. F. S. Flint, a dynamic young civil servant and poet who spoke nine languages, took a place on the busy staircase and told the stranger beside him that he could tell by his shoes that he was an American. The shoes belonged to Robert Frost, newly arrived in London, who confessed that he should not have been there at all:

> One dark morning, early in the New Year, or maybe it was late in December, I found myself passing before the window of a shop where a clerk was arranging volumes of current poetry. A notice announced the opening, that night, of Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop. I went in and asked if I might return for the evening. The assistant told me the guests were 'Invited'. But I might try.[3]

Frost, aged thirty-eight, was a literary unknown without a book to his name and he had come to England to see that changed. Through the Poetry Bookshop he would make an introduction with another American who had achieved the very thing that Frost desired. Ezra Pound was a precocious young poet and editor who, at twenty-seven, had published four collections of his own; he would become closely involved in Frost's drive to publication and would make many appearances in the Bookshop himself. In the time ahead, almost every poet worth their salt would become part of the story of the Poetry Bookshop. T. S. Eliot would be a caller, Wilfred Owen a tenant in the attic rooms. Robert Graves, Charlotte Mew, Frances Cornford, Richard Aldington and Eleanor Farjeon would have books published under the shop's imprint. Others saw print through the shop's journal, *Poetry and Drama*: Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, Robert Bridges, Rabindranath Tagore, Amy Lowell, F. T. Marinetti and Walter de la Mare among them. Others again gave public readings: Yeats

recited to a sell-out audience, Wilfrid Gibson performed in a droning monotone; W. H. Davies suffered nerves (cured when he was encouraged to think of the whisky afterwards), Sturge Moore forgot his lines; Ford Madox Hueffer read hurriedly, Rupert Brooke inaudibly, and Ralph Hodgson, who could not tolerate so much as a mention of his own work, simply refused to read at all, while simply no one could silence the actorly John Drinkwater.

The Poetry Bookshop would withstand all weathers: poor sales, infighting, alcoholism, a world war, competition, relocation, expansion and contraction, even romance between the poets and employees. 'All the poets have joined together to hire a big house near the British Museum,' reported the visiting sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska, 'where they live and work, and have underneath it a shop where they sell poetry by the pound.' For the next two decades, the Bookshop would be exactly what Rupert Brooke pronounced it to be when it opened that January in 1913: the centre of the New Poetry.[4]

In 1913, a new direction in poetry was desperately needed. The heyday of Victorian poetry was long over. Matthew Arnold had died in 1888, Robert Browning a year later, and the Laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson had followed three years after that; the brother and sister Rossettis either side of this eminent trio. Swinburne and Meredith lived on but their best work was behind them, while the curtain had fallen on the risqué *fin-de-siècle* and their leading lights: Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde and Ernest Dowson had all died as the century turned. The Edwardian decade that followed had left behind a strandline of conservative imperialist verse: Henry Newbolt likening the Englishman at war to a public school-boy at cricket ('Play up! Play up! And play the game!'), while Rudyard Kipling wrote of the Empire's inheritance as 'the white man's burden'. It was 'tub-thumping stuff', Siegfried Sassoon told Rupert Brooke, offensive to some, plain silly to others. But the poet who most typified the inadequacy of the age

was the laureate Alfred Austin, a poet considered so terrible that he was better loved for the parodies of his verse rather than anything he wrote. In a hasty ode to the botched 1896 Jameson Raid in the Transvaal (a raid so shambolic that instead of cutting the telegraph wires to mask their position Jameson's company cut a wire fence by mistake), Austin attempted to honour his subject with a dignity reminiscent of Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', but instead he managed only this:

> So we forded and galloped forward
> As hard as our beasts could pelt,
> First eastward, then trending nor'ward,
> Right over the rolling veldt,

Bad as they were, these verses might have been quietly forgotten had it not been for an unkind satirist who parodied them yet more succinctly – 'They went across the veldt, | As hard as they could pelt' – a couplet that stuck in the public's craw, forever attributed to Austin, though he never actually wrote it. The mockery of the laureate might have been vindictive (it would worsen), but it was not without purpose; as Ezra Pound put it, 'Parody is, I suppose, the best criticism – it sifts the durable from the apparent.' The treatment doled out to Austin characterised a wider discrediting of Edwardian literature, and when Henry James said of H. G. Wells that he had 'so much talent with so little art' he said as much about Edwardian fiction in general as he did about Wells himself. Expectations were high for a promising new generation of novelists. Katherine Mansfield had recently published her debut *In a German Pension*, while Virginia Woolf was finishing hers (*The Voyage Out*) and James Joyce was preparing *Dubliners*. D. H. Lawrence, whose *Sons and Lovers* would publish that year, said much about the moment when he likened it to an awakening from a night of oppressive dreams:

> And now our lungs are full of new air, and our eyes see it is morning, but we have not forgotten the terror of the night. We dreamed we were

falling through space into nothingness, and the anguish of it leaves us rather eager. But we are awake again, our lungs are full of new air, our eyes of morning.[5]

These were unsettling times in England. The cost of living was soaring, and trade union membership had rocketed in recent years; the political left anticipated strikes, even riots as the Liberal government and the conservative courts undermined the legal standing and protection of the unions. Suffragettes were taking up direct action, breaking shop windows, starting letterbox fires, defacing public artworks, chaining themselves to railings; some went on hunger strike in prison and were subjected to brutal force-feeding. Women did not have the vote, nor did men who were without property. Irish Home Rule dominated debate at Westminster: the predominantly Catholic South urgently wanted to see it implemented, while the mainly Protestant North just as vehemently wished to block any measure of independence. Civil war loomed across the water, the British army feared mutiny, while the unofficial and rival armies of the Irish Volunteers and the Ulster Volunteer Force were now drilling and gun running. The agricultural labour force was demoralised and impoverished, and England's 'green and pleasant lands' were rarely seen by the industrial classes locked into long and dangerous hours in the factories; the venerated 'all red line' of telegraph cables that linked Britain's Empire across the globe seemed a profitable market only for the rich. So did the telephone, the aeroplane, the radio, the motor car, the electric light bulb, the high-speed train, the cinema and other recent developments. The United States and the newly unified Germany had overtaken Britain as industrial powers. These were difficult days for Britain, uncertain hours for a fading empire, watching nervously the growing danger of Germany's own imperial aims.

At the end of the Edwardian era, literary attitudes were also in revolt. According to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 'public taste

decreed that you should attend Fabian summer schools with vegetarians and suffragettes, and sit at the feet of Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Mr Bernard Shaw'. True enough, many of the poets who emerged from university at the turn of the century did so with leanings that were Fabian, Socialist or Liberal; but more importantly, they were writing in new ways, downplaying Victorian rhetoric and laying claim to anything, however 'unpoetic', that might lend their work realism. By 1911 that search for realism had introduced a coarseness which resonated with public taste but not with the gatekeepers of English literature. When Rupert Brooke published *Poems* that year (the only collection that appeared in his lifetime), its graphic treatment of a seasick, lovesick 'Channel Passage' included the lines, 'Retchings twist and tie me, | Old meat, good meals, brown gobbets, up I throw', which were generally considered vulgar, below decency or, at best, what the *Times Literary Supplement* described as 'swagger and brutality'. But it was John Masefield's poem *The Everlasting Mercy*, published first in the *English Review* in 1911, that had the greatest effect of all. The 1,700-line poem recounted the exploits of a bawdy, boozy village poacher; a braggart who boasts, 'I drunk, I fought, I poached, I whored, | I did despite unto the Lord', and who is confronted setting a trap:

> Now when he sees me set my snare,
> He tells me 'Get to hell from there.
> This field is mine,' he says, 'by right;
> If you poach here, there'll be a fight.
> Out now,' he says, 'and leave your wire;
> It's mine.'
> 'It ain't.'
> 'You put.'
> 'You liar.'
>
> 'You closhy put.'
> 'You bloody liar.'[6]

Modest as it might seem by today's standards, this was far from polite Edwardian fare and the poem thrilled the new audiences; as Edmund Blunden later reflected, it 'energised poetry and the reading of it, no matter what extremes of feeling it then aroused or now fails to arouse'. Gutsy, galloping, vernacular, here was verse story-telling that readers hungered for – as Harold Monro put it, 'that the general public could appreciate without straining its intelligence'.[7]

If Masefield and Brooke were the figureheads of this poetic revival, they were not yet the poets' poets. That distinction fell to two men: Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats. But they were an older generation and of secure reputation with a dozen volumes of verse between them, whose passions were seen by some to lie elsewhere. Hardy was by then in his seventies, and it was his novels that the public seemed likely to remember. Irishman William Butler Yeats was still in his forties, but his work with the Abbey Theatre was considered by many in the poetry world as a waste of his considerable talents, while his aloof manner by common agreement made him unapproachable. Neither man seemed likely to direct a revolution in verse; that challenge would fall to a younger division of writers, 'the two newest and most forward movements in English poetry', said Harold Monro: the Georgians and the Imagists.[8]

In the summer of 1911, with George V newly enthroned, Harold Monro addressed his friend Arthur Sabin over lunch with uncharacteristic excitement. 'We are living in a new Georgian era – and, by Jove, Arthur, we are the new Georgian poets'. Within eighteen months, he would publish a book from his Devonshire Street headquarters that captured the new mood exactly; but the idea for it would not come from him.[9]

Rupert Brooke was a frequent guest at Edward Marsh's apartments in Gray's Inn, London, and one night in September 1912 he and Marsh sat up late, discussing how best to shake the pub-

lic of their ignorance of contemporary poetry. There and then, they counted a dozen poets worth publishing, and put the idea of an anthology to Monro. Five hundred copies were printed: half received on 16 December 1912, the remainder on Christmas Eve; all were sold by Christmas Day. A reprint was hurried through, then another and another. By the end of its first year, the book was in its ninth printing and was on its way to 15,000 sales. The name of this remarkable anthology was *Georgian Poetry*.

At its simplest, the Georgian Poets were those who appeared in the five volumes that Edward Marsh would edit over the next decade; but these writers were brethren by more than publication alone. The Georgians looked to the local, the commonplace and the day-to-day, mistrusting grandiosity, philosophical enquiry or spiritual cant. Many held an attachment to the traditions of English Romantic verse; they looked to Wordsworth in their connection to the land rather than to John Donne and the Metaphysical pursuit of the soul. The style was innocent, intimate and direct; lyric in form, rhythmic in drive, it dovetailed short sketches of the natural world with longer meditations on the condition of the human heart. It was not a poetry of public politics and represented no particular ideology or constituency, but attempted instead to convey rapture in the modest miracles of life: in a daffodil, a bird's song or the breeze that stroked the branches of an oak tree. It employed whimsy in place of calculation, charm rather than conviction, and attempted the lightness of a pianist playing with one hand; its subject matter would be as everyday as a country lane or a village fence post.

To its critics, this was an approach that could only equate to 'minor' verse and 'littleness', and some thought them in love with littleness; Richard Aldington: 'They took a little trip for a weekend to a little cottage where they wrote a little poem on a little scheme'; Robert Graves: 'Georgianism became principally concerned with Nature and love and leisure and old age and childhood and animals and sleep and other uncontroversial subjects.'