

INTRODUCTION

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SPRING ARRIVES in Britain from the southwest, and makes a slanting progress across the country at the pace of between one and two miles an hour. So the phenologists tell us. In sheltered pockets of Devon, and then Wiltshire, primrose shoots push up between the dead leaves that have covered the ground all winter.

Edward Thomas went out in March 1913 to look for Spring. He set out from his parents' house at Balham in the suburbs of South London, and travelled, 'on or with a bicycle', through Surrey and Hampshire, towards the Somerset coast. From their different directions they would converge, he hoped, among the Quantock hills: Spring from the west meeting a man of thirty-five, a literary critic and country writer, a lover of books and places, a husband and father, a man on the road after a long winter's pressure and melancholy. Since boyhood he had watched for the first hedgerow flowers and noted the date when he heard the chiffchaff. Always, even when tied to deadlines and the city, he had a barometric sensitivity to changes in the air and in the light at dusk. He could detect the turn of the year before it became visible to other eyes, when it was only a moment of 'lucidity in the arms of gloom', a fleeting window, 'a pane of light in the western sky'.

Now he had a commission from his publisher to make the struggle between seasons his narrative. It would not be a simple movement into warmth; he could not write 'sumer is icumen in' with the confidence of the old reverdies, or re-greening songs. He would listen in on the conversation of winds, as the balance of power shifted, 'very meekly' or in quarrelling

flights, from north-easterlies to southerlies. *In Pursuit of Spring* would be about long, uncertain transitions, returning storms, and human moods which fluctuate as much as the weather.

Thomas chose to perform his spring ritual at Easter time. He started out in lowering storm clouds and a black mood on Good Friday, and his journey was a form of uneasy ascent from this low point. It was his agnostic alternative to the Christian ceremonies taking place in the village churches past which he cycled. Out on the road, while others gathered together as families and congregations, he knowingly weighed up his search for natural renewal with the Christian story of death and resurrection. Easter was very early that year: Good Friday was March 21. It was ambitious to expect Spring so soon. But Thomas caught the song of the chiffchaff as he crossed into Hampshire, and primroses grew thicker on the banks as he proceeded, glimmering in the shadows of roadside trees.

Thomas' precisely evocative prose carries us from London through the Home Counties, into open country, and across Salisbury Plain. Town by town we go, then village by village. Morden, Epsom, Guildford. West Lavington, Steeple Ashton, Catteridge (where cows stand quietly in what used to be the manor house chapel, 'an excellent congregation, free from all the disadvantages of believing, or wanting to believe, in the immortality of the soul'). If I were any kind of cyclist I would follow him, but I abandoned my bicycle years ago after a few uncertain outings, and now follow in imagination through places I know a little but not well. Reading Thomas, I can feel the cushioned ground of the North Downs, where shallow pine roots trip up walkers on sandy commons, where rhododendrons grow dark and glossy at the ends of private gardens, and paths lead up through gorse and bracken onto heaths. I have never been through Bishop's Sutton but when Thomas describes the shrubberies by which 'the village hushes the road', I am vividly aware of laurel hedges and can hear the quality of the quiet.

It matters that Thomas is as good on shrubberies as on open country, and as good on village ponds as ancient houses. This is a kind of place-writing very different from most guidebooks or gazetteers, and indeed as a tour

guide Thomas is audaciously remiss. He has little to say about Winchester, and speeds straight past established beauty spots. When a famous building appeals to him, it is more likely to be as an organic landscape than as a fine example of Early English style. Salisbury Cathedral in the early morning holds him enraptured because it seems ‘struck out of glaucous rock at one divine stroke’, a cliff or mountain habitat for the doves cooing among carved saints.

Most of all, Thomas writes about the road, the verges, the light and the sky; wet-worn flagstones as they ‘answer the returning sun’. He writes about nature tensing and relaxing, as here, on Saturday evening in the Test Valley: ‘The earth was quiet, dark and beautiful. The owl was beginning to hunt over the fields, while the blackbird finished his song.’ Such moments of calm orderliness expand suddenly from between the press of doubts and intermittent rain. Calm and anxiety live together in the same scene and the same sentence. Above the quiet earth, ‘Venus glared like a madman’s eye’.

The American poet Robert Frost, whose friendship would change Thomas’ life in the year after the Easter journey, thought this ‘the loveliest book on Spring in England’, and it convinced him that Thomas should write poetry. ‘I referred him to paragraphs in *In The Pursuit of Spring*,’ Frost recalled, ‘and told him to write it in verse form in exactly the same cadence.’ Thomas took the advice and began to write poems in late 1914. Among the first was ‘March’, and the whole of Spring seems to be there in the concentration of those thirty-two lines which find ‘tenderness, almost warmth, where the hail dripped.’ The following March, 1915, Thomas wrote of ‘All the white things a man mistakes / For earliest violets’, and honoured these things (a chip of flint, a mite of chalk) as genuinely Spring’s, not merely the stuff of illusions and false hopes. They belong to both Spring and Winter, which co-exist.

In the short period between receiving encouragement from Frost and his death at the Battle of Arras in March 1917 – at Easter, exactly four years after his Spring pilgrimage – Thomas wrote an extraordinary body of lyric poetry. It endures while much of the prose lies unread. For many readers,

then, *In Pursuit of Spring* will be fascinating as a work in progress, the material from which poetry emerged. Thomas the poet is already present in it, like the face in stone that is revealed by a sculptor's chipping away of what surrounds it. But I wouldn't want to chip away anything too soon. What seems to me so beguilingly strange in the book is its mixture of poetry and prosiness. It moves between passages so condensed one has to read them four times, and others which loiter in redundancy. Leaving Shepton Mallet Thomas pays 'the usual bill' for his accommodation, and then, he writes, 'I tried to get into the churchyard again; but it was locked.'

The expansiveness of his book is part of its point. It is his habit, at almost every village, to read the inscriptions on the graves. He is a collector of epitaphs, and he finds room in his text for an improbable number of them. The long-forgotten rhyme on a stranger's tomb can prompt wry inventions of unknown lives, or the recollection and recital of some story remembered by chance, inserted in the book as if for safekeeping. Wandering between grand tombs and meagre crosses, he conjures the sounds of a village through its families. At Holybourne there are 'Lillywhites, Warners, Mays, Fidlers, Knights, Inwoods and Burningshams', which makes this a different world from Stapleford, where the names are 'Goodfellow, Pavie, Barnett, Brown, Rowden, Gamlen, Leversuch'. These family names make up the language of the book as much as the place names which announce each stop along the way. We are with the writer who would remember Adlestrop, 'only the name / And willows, willow-herb, and grass'.

There is nothing morbid in his graveyard visiting. There's even a touch of the farcical: at Berwick St James there are 'ivy-covered box tombs lying around . . . like unclaimed luggage on a railway platform'. The luggage may be unclaimed, but Thomas remembers without fail that it once belonged to real people with loves, hopes, scores to settle. He smiles sadly at the epitaphs of those 'awaiting the resurrection of the just', fairly sure that they are waiting in vain. He cannot feel in these churchyards what Stanley Spencer would feel when he showed in *Resurrection at Cookham* generations of people waking and stretching into eternal life. All the more important, then, that Thomas should say over their names. It is a way of

honouring all that continuity of past life in the places he passes. And it is also a way of putting into longer perspective his own solitary struggles.

The Mays, Fidlers, Knights and Inwoods of the old villages might well have been surprised to find a solitary Spring pilgrim standing alone in quiet churchyards. It seems out of step with the chatty, boisterous mood established by so much Spring writing through the centuries. It is nearly April after all, the time when Chaucer's travellers crowd together, shouting and laughing at each other. Spring is a social time after winter isolation, and Spring is a time for lovers. 'Lenten is come with love to towne' sang the poets in fourteenth-century March and every March since then. Thomas' Lent passes into Easter with no word of love, except for love of the earth and the road.

In the agricultural year, March is a time of intense busyness. Medieval and renaissance almanacs list the daunting tasks of preparation for the new growing season: ploughing and sowing, hedging, ditching and pruning. All that industry still shaped country life in the 1820s. John Clare's poem for March in his *Shepherd's Calendar* is all action, both for the elements and for living things – from the 'headlong hurry' of late-Winter floods to the sower whose ankles sink in 'pudgy sloughs and clay'; it's a poem of stooping, splashing, chopping, leaping, striding, slinging, strewing, in which hands and feet are constantly moving through the 'many weathers' of the season. Early primroses are crushed under the boot of the hurrying woodsman – unless he catches sight of the cheering flowers in time.

Thomas' book is meditative by contrast; its action is the psychological movement of the spirit in response to the sky. Thomas is all receptive eye and nerves. If Clare's workers are an integral part of the Spring, defining the season as much as the nesting rooks and ragged clouds, Thomas is a visitor riding through it, feeling his way into its secret life and at the mercy of its moods. Those who are not farmers, and that's most of us now, admire the Georgic songs of practical labour, but cannot write them for ourselves and must acknowledge different kinds of Spring experience. As he rides through countryside which is not his home, Thomas gives little attention

to what needs to be banked or pruned, but looks for the unspoken life of plants, birds and winds which know nothing of him and require no intervention.

Those in the twenty-first century who watch for the first March flowers often feel differently again. The average date for the first oak leaves is earlier and earlier; bluebells now are common in March where in 1913 they were rare; in some years chiffchaffs have overwintered in the new warmth of Hampshire. (These 'Indications of Spring' are registered and made available in a survey called Nature's Calendar, which observes the unfolding of the season very much as Robert Marsham observed it for more than sixty years in the eighteenth century, and as naturalists have done ever since.) There have been some very backward Springs, Aprils deep in snow, but these too seem to indicate a shifting climate, more liable to extremes. The age-old joy in first flowerings and first bird-calls is now mixed up with anxiety; the old signs of repetition and return are now also registered as signs of change. There will be new forms of Spring writing to come.

Thomas carried a camera in his pannier, probably the one he had been given in 1911 when he told his friend Edward Garnett that it would save him from the need to make memory-jogging sketches on his travels. And so, more than a century later, we can peer into sepia images and make out the first leaves forming on the winter branches of 1913.

There are photographs of dishevelled-looking orchards, and nests in the high trees above Wells Cathedral; photographs of hedges, and field boundaries, and fenced avenues and wide bare views over Salisbury Plain. There are a few landmark buildings like the ruins at Glastonbury, and a few curiosities – like Turner's Tower near Radstock, which is odd-looking, attenuated, a cross between a church belfry and a castle turret tacked on to a row of workers' houses. It had been built to rival a neighbour's tower, but had lost its top in a lightning strike by the time Thomas saw it – and has now been demolished altogether.

The most beautiful and unusual photographs are those of the road: that 'majestic road' called the Hog's Back running high on the ridge of the

North Downs, the road as it bends into Rudge near Frome, the smartly tree-lined road near Shapwick. Thomas kept noticing the fall of light on different road surfaces: the patchy damp of paving after rain, or the glint in the puddles between muddy tyre tracks. He loved to see the sheen of a wet road curving ahead of him. It flickers in the distance between bare trees at Nettlebridge. In the photograph he took near Crocombe, the road looks so fluid and smoothly reflective that it might be a narrow river. In his happiest moments, Thomas felt more as if he were floating or sailing rather than cycling on solid ground.

A cyclist on a dark afternoon today will see taillights and headlights negotiating between cars double-parked along tight village streets. The tarmac is painted with give-ways and speed-hump warnings. These roads in the 1910s were plain and open, appearing fluid to the eye. The photographs are so empty of cars and people that this England looks deserted. But Thomas' text suggests all the lively sounds the camera could not record. There are rooks cawing all along the route from rookeries now lost, often in elm trees. There are the chiffchaffs, marsh-tits, and blackbirds. There is the sound, too, of the telegraph wires, humming and whining, Aeolian harps in the wind above the road.

Only one of the pictures (of Turner's Tower) reveals that Thomas was not alone on his travels. His younger brother Julian had accompanied him on preparatory research trips through Wiltshire, and his friend Jesse Berridge was at his side into Somerset. Had we passed some village pond that March, we might have glimpsed them smiling and talking. Long after Thomas' death, when Berridge remembered him, it was as a life-giving companion who made the sights and sounds of an English journey seem luminous. He even dreamed of Thomas: 'in my dream he was coming down a road, in loose dark clothes, to meet me, with his long purposeful stride and his face alight with pleasure and gaiety.' Berridge treasured up memories from their joint pursuit of Spring. There was the moment, for example, when they were both lying on the beach at Kilve. Thomas spotted a meadow pipit swooping over the sands, 'and the moment became unforgettable'.

The mysterious 'Other Man' who appears in the book is quite different

from the friendly and appreciative Berridge. He is both a complete stranger and a part of Thomas himself. We meet him first when Thomas takes shelter outside a bird shop. Another man goes in, buys a chaffinch, cycles a little way with it in a paper bag, and then releases it. Thomas follows, for it appears that they are set on the same route. Again and again these two cyclists converge, noticing different features of the places they pass, swapping notes. There can be no final summing up of the relationship between them. Did Thomas release a bird from a paper bag in Wimbledon? Perhaps he did and partly mocked himself, or perhaps he didn't and partly wished he had. The bird flies off into the open, but Thomas cannot get free of the other man who persists in travelling the same way.

If he is haunted by this second self, it is not a very elegiac kind of haunting. It is more an oppression or an irritation. The Other Man appears when it would be more peaceful to be alone on the road, and at night in the inns he is frankly a bore, talking on and on about subjects that obsessed Edward Thomas. He has a taste for pub signs and weathervanes, of which he makes drawings in his notebook. He is a perfectionist, like Thomas, in the matter of clay pipes. He is an inner voice externalised, and will not easily let up. When Thomas wrote his poem 'The Other' in December 1914 he was still caught in this long, exhausting negotiation, and had lost hope of ever freeing himself: 'He goes: I follow: no release / Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease.'

Thomas preferred, and depended upon, the company of writers who had lived in England before him. He had a head full of other people's words and rhythms, and they were associated in his mind with distinctive landscapes. Wherever he travelled, he was on a literary pilgrimage, and indeed much of what he saw at Easter 1913 went into the book he finished the following summer, *A Literary Pilgrim in England*. He was the most topographically alert of readers, and the most readerly of topographers, so that in cycling through different landscapes he was aware of crossing from one writer's imaginative territory into another's. He never found for himself a satisfactory home in which he could feel permanent, but these

wide literary allegiances gave him a sense of company and belonging in the places he passed.

We are dealing here with a pilgrim who needs no recourse to reference books to know what John Skelton wrote in Leatherhead and who can quote John Helston as he looks into the River Mole. George Meredith is the poet most in Thomas' mind as he cycles through Surrey: 'Meredith of Box Hill', both earthly and swift-winged, whose poems were 'saturated with English sun and wind'. On Salisbury Plain he feels for lines of connection back to Philip Sidney, whose Arcadia was both Wiltshire and nowhere. And he comes at times so close to W.H. Hudson it is as if the elder and the younger naturalist are travelling together. Hudson often set out on his long (sometimes months-long) walks at Eastertime, listening for the first of the migrant birds. At Easter 1903 he had waited in Salisbury for late arrivals in a cold spring, and what cheered him most in the city were the thrushes calling across the cathedral green, and stock-doves on the West Front, as on 'the ledges of some ocean-fronting cliff'. When Thomas hears those doves' descendants a decade on, he is in Hudson's company.

Thomas' goal is the author of 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan'. His route is towards the Quantocks, which is Coleridge's country. He suggested in *A Literary Pilgrim in England* that the Mariner comes home to somewhere near East Quantoxhead, and he felt that in describing the landscape between Stowey and the Quantocks he was also evoking the imaginative topography of Coleridge's poems: 'the rocks, the firs and slender oaks and birches, the whortle-berries, the waterfall, the spring'. The spring? It is a freshwater spring he means: 'that beautiful fountain at Upper Stowey', one of the secret springs, overhung with vegetation, welling up between cleft rocks in this country of woods and coombes and caverns measureless to man. Coleridge soon went with Wordsworth north to Cumbria, but Thomas does not read him as a Lake Poet. In the mountains he was 'a man in exile, and had been once he decided to follow Wordsworth out of the West'. For Thomas he is always among the mossy outcrops of the Somerset coast, with their fusion of the mild and the wild, their nooks of domesticity and their places of austere exposure.

So Thomas goes west to Coleridge and to Spring, an odd doubling since Coleridge's Springs are darkly uncertain times. Thomas has the ghostly ballad 'Christabel' in mind, a poem set in April, but an April so ominous it cannot be named and is not yet Spring. 'Tis a month before the month of May / And the Spring comes slowly up this way.' In the dark windless night of 'Christabel', the revenants of winter hang on in the woods. What moves is not alive: 'The one red leaf, the last of its clan / That dances as often as dance it can.' It must be the most vivid dead leaf in literature, twirling on its thread, suspended between seasons.

Coleridge's ode 'Dejection' is also a Spring poem, written in April 1802, but its subjects are storm and numbness, night and pain. Thomas, too, feels something uncanny in the suspension between seasons, and responds with all his body and mind to the quarrelling winds and the earth's tense negotiation between death and life. 'I had a wish of a mildly imperative nature', he explains at the outset, 'that Spring should be arriving among the Quantocks at the same time as myself.' The whole journey is undertaken in this 'mildly imperative' way, at a pace not too hurried (there are all those epitaphs to read), but with a certain urgency – like the steady, addictive pace of Coleridge's ballads themselves.

Will it spoil the reader's pursuit if I say that Thomas gets his wish? I don't think so. We have to travel with him in order to enjoy what he finds in Somerset, in the deep lanes where 'the exuberant young herbage, the pure flowers such as stitchwort and the pink and silver white cuckoo flowers, but above all the abounding honeysuckle, produced an effect of wildness and richness, purity and softness, so vivid that the association of Nether Stowey was hardly needed to summon up Coleridge.' Once we are embarked on the journey, and caught in the insistent Good Friday rain, the movement towards those cuckoo flowers may well start to feel mildly imperative. With a little urgency in the pace, we follow him west.

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