

EDWARD THOMAS, WALKING AND THE ICKNIELD WAY

Edward Thomas was born in March 1878 in London of Welsh parentage, the eldest of six brothers. He attended local schools until gaining a scholarship to St Paul's, from where he went to Lincoln College Oxford where he read History. Before he took his Finals he had had a book published, married and had a son, an extraordinary position for that date (1899). Despite arguments with his family, he decided to become a professional writer. However, his position as breadwinner of a growing family meant that he was forced to undertake hack work purely for money. He wrote over thirty commissioned books including travel, biography and criticism. He also managed to write several small books of essays, which represented his only personal writing before 1914. They were not commercially popular. Most of his writing was reviewing, especially for *The Daily Chronicle*, of which he was resident reviewer. In general he despised his commissioned work. On the outbreak of war in 1914 most of this work dried up, and although this caused financial worries, it also enabled him to start writing the poetry for which he has become best known. The majority of modern poets writing in English acknowledge their debt to him. His great interest in the countryside dominates much of his writing, both prose and poetry.

The Icknield Way was written in 1911. First, in February and March he researched the historical records in the British Museum, then from April until July he walked the route, returning to check places and facts, sometimes by bicycle. He wrote the text chiefly in Laugharne finishing it on 19th September 1911. It was published in 1913.

In 1911 one of Thomas's main problems was to establish the route of the IW. In this respect he was something of a pioneer, and he was particularly exercised to find the correct crossing of the Thames, eventually selecting three possible routes. He was also interested to establish the end of the IW in the West, coming to the conclusion that it probably continued from the Wantage-Lockinge area to the south coast ports, Exeter or the Cornish tin mine area. The Way as he knew it in 1911 fizzled out and the book rather mirrors this. Not that he minded for he thought of the 'way' as being more important than the destination: *'There is nothing at the end of any road better than may be found beside it, though there would be no travel did man believe it.'* Some of the book is repetitive and a little weary, which echoes his own tiredness at having to write commissioned work: words meant money and he needed to write plenty of them.

Thomas believed that a book of travel should not be just about the route and the journey- in other words not just scientific facts. He used his journey to discuss the route's history, the things he saw (and often disliked- such as new towns) and especially the journey as a vehicle for self examination and analysis. Although he was not the only writer to extend travel writing from the merely factual, (Norman Douglas was another), he was probably the most influential and predicated the way such writing would progress through the twentieth century. He was attracted by the non-rational reaction to ancient places, roads in particular. He was very aware of the generations of men that had passed that way before him. *'Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt.'* This can be seen in the first two chapters: the first titled 'On Roads and Footpaths', which is a fascinating discussion and the second called 'History, Myth, Tradition, Conjecture and Invention'.

Roads in general fascinated him and he wrote much about them in other works; several of his poems are about roads or tracks and one is simply entitled 'Roads.' On a material level they offered an escape from the routine of hack writing, and quiet away from the family environment, and a way into the countryside that was a sort of food to him. He believed that they started as animal tracks, being subsequently colonised and extended by humans, and he was well aware of

their changing use: trade, cattle and sheep droving, recreation in modern times and their increasing use by motor cars. More than the material however, he felt that ancient roads, and he knew the Avebury and Stonehenge areas well, were almost a sacramental aspect of the landscape. The IW especially affected him by its ancientness, and by the fact that it had not been Romanised. He found that rather overwhelming. Roads lead somewhere, and in Thomas's case he saw the way leading to his death in France on the first day of the Battle of Arras in April 1917. 'Now all roads lead to France', he says in his poem 'Roads', and indeed they did for him as well as for so many others.

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