'A Mirror of England'? [Book review]

MUNDYE, Charles <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8321-8704>

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Andrew Webb, *Edward Thomas and World Literary Studies: Wales, Anglocentrism and English Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).

In his 1920 ‘Foreword’ to Edward Thomas’s *Collected Poems* Walter de la Mare famously wrote of Thomas that ‘if one word could tell of his all, that word would be England.’ In doing so he began an association in popular understanding between Thomas and a rather nostalgic version of pastoral Englishness that persists in many places of collective cultural memory. Andrew Webb’s *Edward Thomas and World Literary Studies* puts forward an alternative Thomas, one whose sense of Welsh identity was of deep personal significance. That Welsh identity is also, argues Webb, essential to a proper understanding of Thomas as a writer. But this is not just a simple account of one writer’s life and work, thinking as it does about Thomas as part of a much larger project to ‘re-centre a literary tradition in a formerly peripheral space’.

If, as Webb points out, the editor of a special issue of *Poetry Wales* in 1978 declared Thomas to be ‘a largely English person of Welsh parentage’, then in what sense is it really viable to think about the major significance of Thomas for the tradition of Welsh writing in English? Webb is not the first to explore such questions, and indeed his book contains a useful section which summarises previous discussions of Thomas’s Welsh and English identifications. Inevitably and importantly Webb revisits Thomas’s family history and biography with particular focus on the question of Welsh identity and affiliation. The correspondence between Thomas and his influential Welsh Oxford history tutor O.M. Edwards is of particular interest in this respect, with Thomas writing in a letter of 1901 on the subject of Edwards’s book *Wales*: ‘but I am sure that because I am Welsh you would be glad to know how much I love the book.’

In further support of his argument Webb observes Thomas’s acquaintance with the Welsh language poets Watcyn Wyn and Gwili. The latter wrote ‘Edward Eastaway’, an elegy in English for Thomas, published in 1920, a poem which recalls their friendship and walks through the geographical and mythical landscapes of Carmarthenshire. But it is in relation to Thomas’s writing, and in particular much of his under-discussed prose, that the real substance of Webb’s argument comes to life. We are provided with a very full sense of Thomas’s detailed knowledge of Welsh history, literature and mythology, and Webb finds its expression not only in the more obvious locations: *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans*, a novel about a London Welsh family, *Beautiful Wales*, and *Celtic Stories*, which draws on materials from the *Mabinogion*, but also through an analysis of some of Thomas’s poems, which approximate in form to certain Welsh language poetic traditions, such as *cynghanedd* and *englyn*. In tracing a kind of continuity of tradition to counter the Anglocentric version of Thomas, Webb also outlines Thomas’s importance to many key Welsh poets writing in English, including Alun Lewis, Tony Conran, Leslie Norris and R.S. Thomas. Once we are presented with Thomas’s notebook entry for 1899 we need to go a long way around if we are to avoid the significance of Webb’s argument: ‘Day by day grows my passion for Wales. It is like a homesickness but stronger than any homesickness I ever felt [...] Wales indeed is my soul’s native land.’

But Webb is also interested in ways in which his newly de-centred Thomas relates to the rest of the world, and in particular he draws our attention to Thomas’s sustained prose interests in Irish

literature, Belgian literature, and more broadly in European symbolism and aspects of modernism. Further, Thomas is supportive of gay writers, including Wilde, at a time when many of his contemporaries were maintaining a relative silence. In all of this we are shown a writer defiant of mainstream tastes, an 'outsider-insider' whose interests and range defied simple or canonical norms or narrow limitations, and whose own sense of existential displacement and deracination draws him to find sympathy with a range of different experiences, expressions and modes of being.

Perhaps the most involving of all chapters comes in the final examination of 'England's Failed Locales', which examines complications underlying the Englishness of some of Thomas's most readily identifiable English poems. From English landscapes understood through their significance to Welsh drovers to the uncanny ghosts of Roman and Welsh historical presences which belie the easy mythology of aboriginal Englishness, Webb opens up new perspectives on familiar poems, with a particularly memorable reading of 'The Combe' in terms of the origins and politics of the etymology of its title word.

This is an ambitious book: a sympathetic revisionist study of a deeply important poet on the one hand, and a significant milestone in re-centring an understanding of the literatures of the British Isles on the other. If at times it rather browbeats us with its theoretical models, it can be forgiven, because it is taking on some big questions for which new kinds of frameworks of understanding are indeed necessary. The issues at both an individual and cross-national level that are raised here are important, and an excitingly re-invigorated portrait of Thomas emerges – of a writer more plural, subversive, and restless than ever before.

Charles Mundye, 19 November 2013