

Morris, George Borrow and Edward Thomas: a Green Road Opening

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I often go for walks along the Roman road near Cambridge. You can still make out the structure of the Roman *agger*, but now it has become a green road, lined with hedges, with a footpath wandering down the middle. In fact, as you walk along, you see no centurions, but you can imagine you are in the fourteenth century, and waking up like Morris at the beginning of *A Dream of John Ball*: ‘I got up and rubbed my eyes and looked about me, and the landscape seemed unfamiliar to me, though it was, as to the lie of the land, an ordinary English low-country, swelling into rising ground here and there. The road was narrow, and I was convinced that it was a piece of Roman road from its straightness’.¹ During the Middle Ages the road was known as Worsted or Wool Street, and cloth was brought on pack horses from the Suffolk villages to Cambridge and then on into Central England. I also get a sense of those great walkers who passed nearby — George Borrow, who covered the distance from Norwich to London in twenty seven hours, and Edward Thomas, who crossed this road while traversing the Icknield Way.

In discussing Morris’s likes and dislikes in literature, Mackail casually mentions Borrow: ‘he was devoted to George Borrow and read him perpetually’.² These were the days when everybody read aloud to adults as well as to their children, and ‘perpetually’ conveys the sense that Morris would not be denied this pleasure. Just to remind you, then, that George Borrow came from Norwich, a place, he said, where they made the best dumplings and spoke the purest English. He possessed great skills as a linguist and so, during the 1830s, while in the employment of the Bible Society, he traveled round Spain, eventually producing an account of his adventures in *The Bible in Spain*, a book which made him a rival to Dickens. He followed this with two autobiographical accounts of traveling in England, *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*, the titles showing his acquaintance with

Gypsies and the Gypsy language. *Wild Wales* is a description of a journey through that country which he made on foot in 1854. Borrow was a great storyteller and is, I think, an influence on Morris's narrative style, especially in *The Icelandic Journals*, as we might expect.

He is also a primary source for the idea of England and Englishness, which became so strong during the later nineteenth century.

On I went in my journey, traversing England from west to east — ascending and descending hills — crossing rivers by bridge and ferry — and passing over extensive plains. What a beautiful country is England! People run abroad to see beautiful countries, and leave their own behind unknown, unnoticed — their own the most beautiful! And then, again, what a country for adventures! especially to those who travel on foot, or on horseback.³

In case you think this is overdoing it, in the very next paragraph he confronts us with a rat-catcher,

... who communicated to me the secrets of his trade, saying, amongst other things, 'When you see the rats pouring out of their holes, and running up my hands and arms, it's not after me they comes, but after the oils I carries about me they comes.'⁴

It is this combination of unusual opinions together with the extraordinary characters he encountered which led to the popularity of his stories.

In this famous description of England in 'The Lesser Arts' you can see Borrow's simple idea of the unsung virtues of the country being transmuted into a new form:

... but when we can get beyond that smoky world [i.e. London], there, out in the country we may still see the works of our fathers yet alive amidst the very nature they were wrought into, and of which they are so completely a part: for there indeed if anywhere, in the English country, in the days when people cared about such things, was there a full sympathy between the works of man and the land they were made for: — the land is a little land; too much shut up within the narrow seas, as it seems, to have much space for swelling into hugeness: there are no great wastes overwhelming in their dreariness, no great solitudes of forests, no terrible untrodden mountain-walls: all is measured, mingled, varied, gliding easily one thing into another.... it is neither prison nor palace but a decent home.⁵

The argument is continued in the next paragraph in a rather surprising manner, seeming to demolish everything that people believed at that time in their patriotic pride:

... when we think what a small part of the world's history, past, present, and to come, is this land we live in, and how much smaller still in the history of the arts, and yet how our forefathers clung to it, and with what care and pains they adorned it, this unromantic, uneventful-looking land of England, surely by this too our hearts may be touched, and our hope quickened.⁶

It is an anti-imperialistic statement, amazingly so for 1878, and of course, as in Borrow's version of England, note that that the remainder of the British Isles, already open to Romantic tourism, is totally excluded.

During the later nineteenth century George Borrow's influence grew and grew, and in the period from 1900 to 1914 he was still considered a major writer. You would be asked at parties, 'Are you a Borrovian?' I want to add here that the cult of Borrow led to walking tours and the love of the open air. Hilaire Belloc said that he would use no wheeled vehicle when he set out on the path to Rome. In E.M. Forster's *Howards End*, Leonard Bast walks through the night in order to escape London and reach the open country. And consider how all this is sent up in *The Wind in the Willows*, when Mr Toad shows his enthusiasm for the gypsy caravan:

There's real life for you, embodied in that little cart. The open road, the dusty highway, the heath, the common, the hedgerows, the rolling downs!⁷

Finally, it gives us some insight into the career of Edward Thomas, who imitated Borrow in his lonely walks.

Edward Thomas wrote a study of George Borrow, and the books in which he described his own walking tours are based on Borrow's model. They are similarly interspersed with accounts of the people he met. Thomas can reach the sublime, and he adapted passages from his prose works into the drafts of his poems. For a well-known example consider how 'Rain' is indebted to the description of the 'rain' in *The Ickniel Way*.⁸

When I first began to read poetry for myself, as opposed to school tasks, I read Edward Thomas; I was immersed in the First World War poets, and thought his style was very anti-romantic compared to the others. At about the same time I began to read Morris and started with the prologue to *The Earthly Paradise*, i.e. 'The Wanderers' in the G.D.H. Cole selection. I remember comparing this with Edward Thomas, and thinking, since I knew about Tennyson's ornate descriptions, that Morris was writing in a very straightforward way, and constantly using speech rhythms, which were appropriate as the characters in the story were speaking to each other:

... could I see once more
The grey-roofed sea-port sloping towards the shore

Or note the brown boats standing in from sea,
Or the great dromond swinging from the quay...⁹

How far Morris himself can be described as a ‘modernist’ is doubtful, but we live in a time when historical periods are being redrawn. Will it do to continue to think of him as a ‘Victorian medievalist’? He was opposed to ‘Victorian’ values, and ‘medievalist’ strikes the wrong note; for all his love of history, his work seems to be directed at the future. It is no wonder that writers of the Modern period (*ca* 1914–1930) were highly conscious of his work. And so we come back to Edward Thomas.

The facts about Thomas’s acquaintance with Morris are well known, but I wish to make a brief recapitulation here. In his autobiography Edward Thomas explains how his father tried to improve his rather dozy son, and introduced him to William Morris.

My father used to talk to me of books and take me to lectures. At Kelmscott House I heard Grant Allen recommending state endowment of literary genius: I saw William Morris, and was pleased and awed.¹⁰

It is worth pursuing this connection as far as possible, hoping that in the end it may help us with Thomas’s ideas. When Thomas, still in his twenties, became one of the senior literary critics, he reviewed successive volumes of Morris’s *Collected Works* in *The Bookman*. These reviews show us that ‘bookmen’ had no need to be informed about the actual works by Morris, with which they are assumed to be familiar. Instead Thomas told them about the extra materials which May Morris had introduced; mainly letters but also lectures which were previously unpublished. He knew Morris’s poetry in great detail and told his friend Gordon Bottomley what to read; he explained that he had grown out of some of Morris’s poems. But while discussing W.H. Hudson he said:

Except William Morris there is no other man whom I would sometimes like to have been, no other writing man. William Morris’s *Message of the March Wind* ... reminds me of Hudson, and isn’t it a noble piece of humanity?¹¹

On the other hand he was quite prepared to challenge the authority of Morris. In discussing his own book on Oxford he says:

Morris must have had a very eclectic eyesight if he saw a medieval city almost entire, when he came up. For Worcester, Pembroke, Jesus, Christ Church, the Radcliffe Camera, All Saints Church, & many other places were 16th, 17th or 18th century buildings almost unmixd.¹²

This is also the case in the reviews where, for example, he slates *Sigurd the Vol-sung* for driving any reader to sleep by the end of the first paragraph. Though he

included Morris's work in his anthologies, he made some unexpected remarks about *News from Nowhere* in *A Literary Pilgrim in England*, saying that the book 'is saved, if at all, by what comes straight from Morris's experience of the Thames and Thames side houses at Kelmscott and Hammersmith'.¹³ In *The South Country* he compares a number of major English poets, concluding:

Under those oaks in May I could wish to see these men walking together, to see their gestures and brave ways. It is the poet there who all but creates them for me. But only one can I fairly see because I have seen him alive and speaking ... he and Chaucer and Jonson and Byron have obviously much plain humanity in their composition. They have a brawn and friendliness not necessarily connected with poetry. We have no ceremony – as we do with some other poets – with Morris...¹⁴

He goes on to quote from 'The Message of the March Wind' and 'Thunder in the Garden', and contrasts Morris with ethereal poets such as Shelley.

I suppose this will not do as an example of criticism, but only as a way of placing Morris. The real problem in comparing Morris and Thomas as poets is the question of style. Consider how 'The Message of the March Wind', which describes a walk in the countryside, begins:

Fair now is the springtide, now earth lies beholding
With the eyes of a lover the face of the sun;
Long lasteth the daylight, and hope is unfolding
The green-growing acres with increase begun.¹⁵

You can see how the first two lines are plainly written, but the second two have got themselves twisted round in order to match the rhyme and rhythm; you could say that 'increase begun' is unnecessary. And what to do about 'lasteth'?

Thomas did away with nineteenth century rhetoric. T.S. Eliot once described the qualities of modern verse as follows:

... the colloquial style, the sound of the conversational voice, the range of mood and emotion which requires a more homely diction for its expression...¹⁶

In all these qualities Thomas was a pioneer, and this may be considered as a good description of the surface texture of his poems. What is going on beneath the surface is another matter. As Thomas himself said in an article on 'War Poetry':

I need hardly say that by becoming ripe for poetry the poet's thoughts may recede far from their original resemblance to all the world's, and may seem to have little to do with daily events.¹⁷

This strange utterance calls for comment. At this time Thomas was compiling an anthology to be called *This England: An Anthology from her Writers*, in which he

wished to use the main English poets (including Morris), ‘as a riposte to propagandist anthologies’.¹⁸ It helps to explain why many people found Thomas’s own poetry, written during the Great War, seemingly devoid of any reference to it. Indeed, I was myself amazed to read just recently that ‘Adlestrop’ is now being taught as a poem of the First World War. Yet why not?

In fact there is a great deal of mystery about the poems of Edward Thomas, so often promoted as models of straight talking and simplicity. He was originally presented as a Georgian poet, and appeared under that banner in anthologies aimed at school children. I remember, when I was quite small, reading these lines, dedicated, if that is the right expression, to one of his children:

If I should ever by chance grow rich
I’ll buy Codham, Cockriden and Childerditch,
Roses, Pyrgo, and Lapwater,
And let them all to my elder daughter.¹⁹

I suppose I thought it was a whimsical, even comical little poem, which fascinated me because I lived in South Essex and knew, not perhaps these names, but plenty like them. During the late 1990s, by a strange trick of fate (I was waiting by a bus-stop, and was asked to get on a coach to help on a tour of the battlefields of the Great War), I found myself at Edward Thomas’s grave. This is situated in a ‘sacred grove’ beside the allotments in Agny, a village outside Arras. What do you do in such places? You read poems while the birds swoop and sing. One of the group, a serious Thomas scholar, read this text as her choice, and I realised how it has now deepened into a last will and testament, written by a soldier in 1916, the First World War hidden behind and yet looming over this poem as perhaps it does over all his verse.

The second part of the poem contains a riddling request, suitable for a child used to fairytales:

The rent I shall ask of her will be only
Each year’s first violets, white and lonely,
The first primroses and orchises –
She must find them before I do, that is.
But if she finds a blossom on furze
Without rent they shall all for ever be hers ...²⁰

It leads us, like the key to the back door, out into the natural world: this will always stay true to us and deliver a genuine bequest of the earliest spring flowers. The furze is a trick because it is always in flower. The rural place-names also contain a legacy of Englishness.

This mysterious side of Thomas is linked into walking the roads, and treasuring their familiar surroundings. In ‘I never saw that land before’ the poet describes

how he remembers a landscape; though seen only once it gave him an experience which is, he tells us, impossible to understand. What began as a simple poem ends with these stanzas:

I neither expected anything
 Nor yet remembered: but some goal
 I touched then; and if I could sing
 What would not even whisper my soul
 As I went on my journeying,

I should use, as the trees and birds did,
 A language not to be betrayed;
 And what was hid should still be hid
 Excepting from those like me made
 Who answer when such whispers bid.²¹

What exactly is to be hid? One interpretation is that this refers to the deeper world of the imagination, which is 'not to be betrayed'. But I like to think that it is the roads themselves: consider how he had to trace the 'old roads' when planning his journey along the course of the Icknield Way:

Even when deserted, these old roads are kept in memory by many signs. The grass refuses to grow over the still stream of turf in the same way as at either side of it. A line of thorn trees follows their course, or the hedge or fence or wall dividing two fields. They survive commonly and conspicuously as boundaries between fields, between estates, parishes, hundreds, and counties. It is one of the adventurous pleasures of a good map thus to trace the possible course of a known old road or to discover one that was lost.²²

The irony is that when he joined the Army Thomas was employed as an instructor in map reading. The Essex villages named by him in the poem to his elder daughter were in the area of his camp at Hare Hall, Romford. But for Thomas time moved inexorably forward, and the roads changed their aspect:

Now all roads lead to France
 And heavy is the tread
 Of the living; but the dead
 Returning lightly dance...²³

In France he would need the same map-reading skills in his new post as an artillery officer, but he was killed in the Battle of Arras in April 1917. It is not clear what future he saw for the rural England he tried to immortalise, while London continued to grow; as Edna Longley says: 'the war only intensified the elegiac tilt of Thomas's eco-history'.²⁴ What is amazing now is the present revival of interest

in his work.²⁵

Of course Morris saw beyond this, and, in a semi-jocular tone, suggested that in his visionary future even London would be penetrated by green roads.

Quoth Dick: ‘... This part we are just coming to is called Kensington Gardens; though why “gardens” I don’t know’.

I rather longed to say, ‘Well, *I* know’; but there were so many things about me which I did *not* know, in spite of his assumptions, that I thought it better to hold my tongue.

The road plunged at once into a beautiful wood spreading out on either side, but obviously much further on the north side, where even the oaks and sweet chestnuts were of a good growth; while the quicker-growing trees (amongst which I thought the planes and sycamores too numerous) were very big and fine grown.

It was exceedingly pleasant in the dappled shadow, for the day was growing as hot as need be, and the coolness and shade soothed my excited mind into a condition of dreamy pleasure, so that I felt I should like to go on for ever through that balmy freshness. My companion seemed to share in my feelings, and let the horse go slower and slower as he sat inhaling the green forest scents, chief amongst which was the smell of the trodden bracken near the way-side.²⁶

To sum up, though the links are often tenuous, we can see the positive view of the green roads that these writers shared, and as Edward Thomas said in ‘Roads’, the very act of walking them brings that vision to life:

The hill road wet with rain
In the sun would not gleam
Like a winding stream
If we trod it not again.²⁷

The real green roads of England lead from the past, where they had a clear function, as Patrick O’Sullivan has recently suggested:

the old, hidden roads — drove roads which run direct across the hills between villages which no-one uses now, and in the lowlands direct pathways and roads which people once used to get to church, but which fell into disuse.²⁸

Unlike modern motorways they were incapable of eating up and destroying the landscape. Indeed, the green roads seem always to have been part of it, like deer tracks or sheep walks. They lead forward to a future where, in a rejuvenated world, the older forms of transport may have to be revived, and, dare I say, be a pleasure to be enjoyed. In this spirit I shall continue my walk along the Roman road.

NOTES

1. G.D.H Cole, ed, *William Morris*, Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1934, p. 199. (Afterwards Cole)
2. J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, London: Oxford University Press, World's Classics edition, 1950 (1899), p. 226.
3. George Borrow, *The Romany Rye*, London: The Cresset Press, 1948 (1857), p.192.
4. *Idem*, p.193.
5. Cole, p. 507.
6. Cole, p. 507.
7. Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, London; Methuen, 1927 (1908), p. 31.
8. Edward Thomas, *The Ickniel Way*, London: Wildwood House, 1980 (1916), pp. 282–283. (Afterwards *The Ickniel Way*)
9. Cole, p. 287.
10. Edward Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas: a Fragment of Autobiography*, with a Preface by Julian Thomas, London: Faber & Faber, 1938, p.137.
11. R. George Thomas, ed, *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, p.158. Letter to Bottomley, 26 February 1908.
12. *Idem*, p. 48. Letter of 10 March 1903.
13. Edward Thomas, *A Literary Pilgrim in England*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1917, p. 82.
14. Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, Wimborne Minster, Dorset: The Dovecote Press, 2009 (1909), p.107.
15. Cole, p. 355.
16. T.S. Eliot, *The Classics and the Man of Letters*, London: Oxford University Press, 1942, p. 11.
17. *Poetry and Drama* (2, 8 [December 1914]), cited in Edna Longley, ed, *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2008, p. 214. (Hereafter Longley)
18. Longley, p. 214.
19. Longley, p. 115. 'If I should ever by chance grow rich', lines 1–4.
20. *Idem* lines 5–10.
21. Longley, p. 120. 'I never saw that land before', lines 16–25.
22. *The Ickniel Way*, p. 27.
23. Longley, pp. 106–8. 'Roads', lines 53–6.
24. Longley, p. 23.
25. There are many reprinted volumes of his work; see, in particular, the new Oxford editions, e.g. Guy Cuthbertson, ed, *Edward Thomas: Prose Writings*:

a Selected Edition, Volume 1: Autobiographies, London: Oxford University Press, 2011, 400 pp. Also Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas*, London: Faber & Faber, 2011, 389 pp.

26. Cole, pp. 25–6. (i.e. *News from Nowhere*, Chapter V).

27. Longley, pp. 106–8. ‘Roads’, lines 13–16.

28. Part of an e-mail from Patrick O’Sullivan to the writer, 1 May 2012.

Anybody interested in walking the Roman road I refer to should consult the illustrated booklet: *Fleam Dyke & Roman Road Walk: A circular walk linking two of Cambridgeshire’s ancient sites*, published by the Friends of the Roman Road and Fleam Dyke in association with the Ramblers’ Association and Cambridgeshire County Council, Cambridge, 2009. ISBN 978-1-904452-32-4; recommended retail price £2.50. The full walk is twenty five miles long but you only need to do part of it. The booklet contains good route maps, and copious illustrations of flora and fauna. There are lists of places to eat and accommodation.

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