

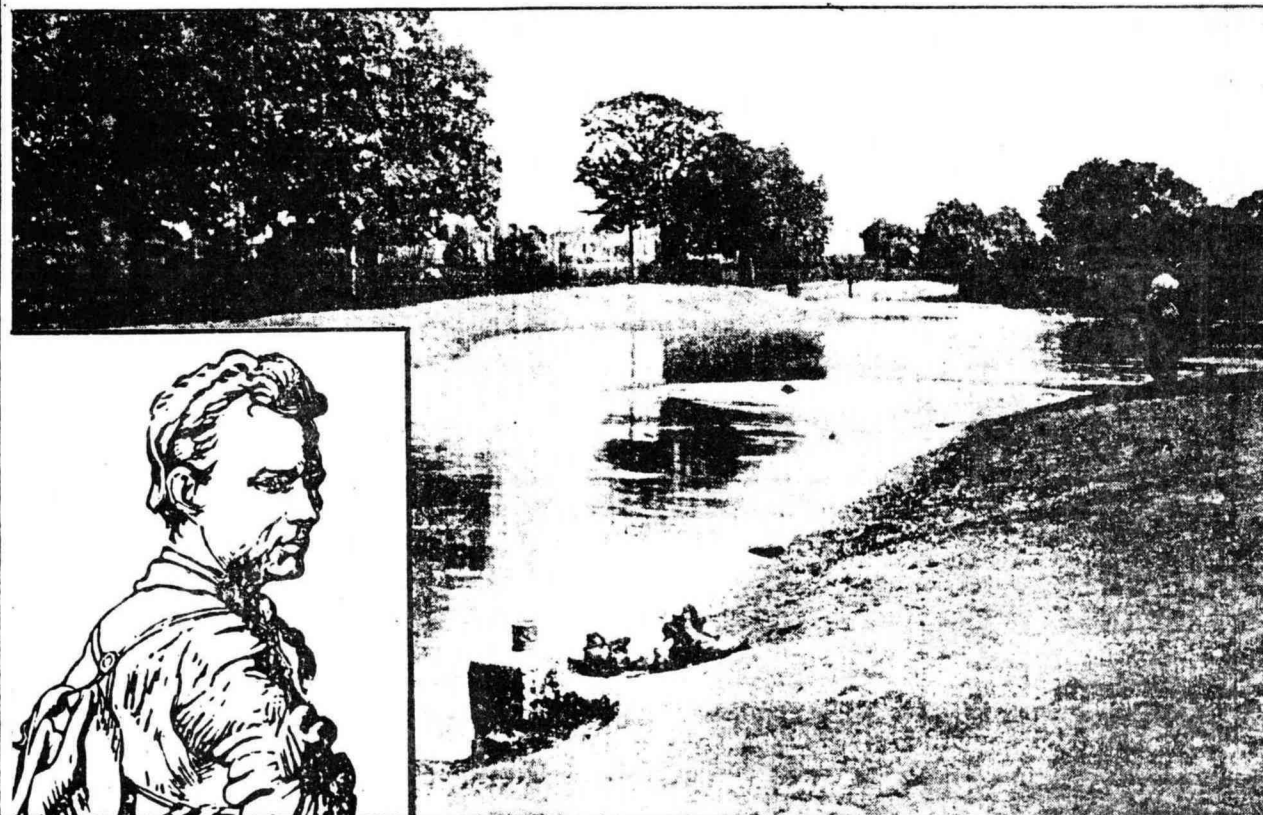
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Edward Thomas 1878-1917

EDWARD THOMAS & BATTERSEA:

SOME CONNEXIONS

by

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It seems regrettable that the centenary of the birth of the poet Edward Thomas, is drawing to a close with no word of remembrance or any celebration in the borough with which he was associated for much of his early life.

Born in Stockwell on 3rd March 1878, Edward Thomas was brought to live in Battersea when he was two years old. He was the first child of a family of six sons and his father, Philip Henry Thomas, a Civil Servant, was to stand at one time as Liberal candidate for the constituency.

The family lived successively at 49 Wakehurst Road, 61 Shelgate Road and 13 Rusham Road. In Thomas's autobiographical work and that of his wife Helen, there are references to the district which bring alive, with great vividness, conditions at the turn of the century.

In a future edition of the Historian I hope to review some works published to celebrate this centenary year. The most popular and well-known book to date has been, not the work of Edward Thomas himself, but the story of their life together, written by his wife Helen, "As It Was:; World Without End", now obtainable in a paperback edition.

Helen Thomas was the daughter of James Ashcroft Noble, a well-known critic and publisher, who had also brought his family to the area, first in Nicosia Road, Wandsworth and then at 6 Patten Road. Here Edward Thomas brought some of his earliest work for Noble to consider. He received encouragement and help, and, introduced to Helen, formed a friendship based on their shared interest in books and the countryside. Their later marriage, many vicissitudes, and great courage are movingly portrayed in her book.

The poetry of Edward Thomas is in print, but his prose works are now difficult to find. Extracts from them show how the youthful and serious mind of a great writer was nurtured in this unpretentious, still somewhat rural, suburb of London. This article, it is hoped, will provide a taste of what is there for the historian as well as giving some details of Thomas's life story.

In "The Childhood of Edward Thomas", he wrote of Battersea, in particular of Wakehurst Road, as he recalled it. The houses were then (1880's) new, and each had "something distinguishing them and preventing monotony. The people in them made them different. In addition, some were beginning to be draped in creepers, some gates stood open, some were shut. One had bushes in the garden, another had flowers, another nothing but dark trodden gravel. The house above ours in the next pair, was presumably meant for a doctor, and possessed a coach house which looked almost as if it belonged to us. That was our outward distinction..... Through the open window..... one

Mayday, Jack-in-the Green bounded in to beg a penny, showing white teeth, white eyes, black face, but the rest of him covered and rippling with green leaves. The passage was a playground when it was wet or too dark to be out of doors. Here, when I had at any rate one brother..... who could run, we two raced up and down the passage to be pounced upon by the servant out of a doorway and swallowed up in her arms with laughter."

At night, when the fog was thick, there was another kind of excitement. "People went about with lanterns and you could get lost, or if not you could pretend to, and stay out late. It was good also to belong to a search party, and, perhaps, in spite of a lantern, turn out to be lost yourself or back at your starting place. Clapham Common on those foggy nights was in many ways like desert undiscovered country, yet perfectly harmless."

Of Wandsworth Common he wrote that it, "offered many temptations to more irregular games and aimless roving. For it was an uneven piece of never cultivated gravelly land. Several ponds of irregular shape and size, varying with the rainfall, had been hollowed out, perhaps by old gravel diggings. It was marshy in other places. Hawthorn and gorse clustered tall and dense in great and little thickets. Tall elms and poplars stood about irregularly..... We picked sorrel leaves and ate them among the gorse bushes.... A railway ran across the Common in a deep bushy cutting, and this I supposed to be a natural valley and had somehow peopled it with unseen foxes."

When he was older and able to wander a little further, he discovered the neglected grounds of Battersea Rise House, described by his biographer thus, "..... near by, at the edge of Clapham common was The Wilderness." (so Thomas called it), "a triangular three-acre field, with a pond covered with waterlilies, abounding in carp Beyond The Wilderness were broad pastures and wild thickets, where Thomas once found a lane of larches, a long waterside copse, which he sought again and again, looking for the eggs of the moorhen. It seemed a deserted, forgotten land the broad meadows became an almost mythical land ; the sun there seemed brighter, the grass greener."

Thomas himself, a solitary boy, there with an imaginary companion, remembered, "I have never seen thrushes' eggs of a blue equalling those we found there.... No wonder Our Country was supernaturally beautiful. It had London for a foil and background; what is more, on that first day it wore an uncommon autumnal splendour, so that I cannot hope to meet again such heavily gilded elms smouldering in warm, windless sunshine, nor such bright meadows as they stood in, nor such blue sky and such white billowy cloud as rose up behind the oaks on its horizon."

Soon, "Our Country", shared sometimes with a real companion, expanded to include Richmond, Wimbledon, and Merton and, later, Surrey, Kent, Wiltshire and the West.

From the time he was fifteen, and during his four years at Battersea Grammar School and his few months at St. Pauls, he was contributing to several notable publications. Even in his early work that meticulous observation which could have made him a naturalist lies behind his writings.

During the year 1895-1896 he kept a delightful Diary chronicling his observations over a wide area of "Our Country". For example at home in Battersea he noted, "April 13th 1895 Swallows, house-martins and sand-martins came to Wandsworth Common in fine blue weather." "August 6th Five pairs of martins have built under the eaves of two houses in a crowded thoroughfare of shops: their hawking is done over mud-pools or chimney-tops, and literally under the horses' feet or the wheels that go by without end." "August 31st At this time a cuckoo flew up and down a London street, bewildered, sheltering in its limes." "October 20th Hawthorn blossoming, in scattered sprays, on Wandsworth Common; while the leaves are gone, or going, with purple about them."

In 1897 this Diary and some of his articles were published together as his first book, "The Woodland Life". By then he was preparing for Oxford and had met Helen.

With Edward still to spend his final year at Oxford they were married in 1899. Helen stayed with his parents in Shelgate Road and there their son was born in January, 1900. Tenacity was one of Edward's great gifts; marriage, fatherhood and work for his history finals were one side of his life. But writing was his vocation and, in 1902, his second book, "Horae Solitariae", appeared. Meantime, the young family had found a flat at 115 Atheldene Road and then another in Nightingale Parade, both of which were unsatisfactory; the next move was away from London and into the country for good.

However, Edward Thomas continued to know Battersea well all his life, returning frequently to stay with his parents at 13 Rusham Road, to which they moved on a date between October, 1901 and October, 1902. (Indeed, this house must have continued to be the centre for this interesting family up to 1936, when Edward's gentle, sensitive mother died. Eleanor Farjeon tells of her visits there and records her appreciation of Mrs Thomas).

From various country homes, over a decade and a half, Thomas was to write articles and books for scant payment. His output was large; it was also great in talent and graceful in scholarship.

In a strange happy interlude between this incessant, badly rewarded toil and the outbreak of war, Edward Thomas and Robert Frost and their families became friends. Some of the prose that Thomas had written, Frost held to be already poetry. An acceptance of this seems to have been a turning point and an emancipation to Edward Thomas.

When war came and he joined the army he was freed from the threat of penury. And the poetry came, the culmination of over twenty years apprenticeship to prose - and ended with his death at Arras on 9th April 1917.

Thomas is a writer's writer, as Turgenev is said to be the novelist's novelist and yet, in both cases, their work can be followed with satisfaction, pleasure and insight at a less critical level. Battersea can claim few writers; to have nurtured him, as he quietly gains a more and more central and important place in the country's literature is, perhaps, some compensation.