**Andrew Webb**

**Edward Thomas and World Literary Studies: Wales, Anglocentrism and English Literature** University of Wales Press

I am writing about and back to Edward Thomas. I teach Edward Thomas. Here are four items from our further reading for students: *Edward Thomas: Mirror of England* by Jacek Wiśneiwski, ‘The Imaginary England of Edward Thomas’ in Roger Ebbatson’s *An Imaginary England,* ‘Edward Thomas: an England of ‘holes and corners’’ in David Gervais’s *Literary Englands: Versions of ‘Englishness’ in Modern Writing*; in *The Art of Edward Thomas,* we have one essay by Sally Roberts Jones on Thomas and Wales. In my own poetry ‘back’ to Thomas, I have him entrenched in England and Englishness. It is time to redress this.

Webb has produced a readable, and easily consulted account of Thomas as Welsh in important aspects of his life, his poetics and his consciousness. He provides an exhaustive examination of critical receptions of Thomas in both Wales and England; this is followed by a scholarly and comprehensive history of Welsh publishing and literary endeavour with careful attention to its economic and colonial contexts. Webb is careful too, to set out his critical framework which is within the field of world literary studies. The final three chapters examine Thomas in relation to: the Welsh Cultural Tradition, English as a ‘foreign tongue’, and what Webb terms England’s ‘failed locales’. The thoroughness of each chapter leaves one astonished not so much at the extent of Thomas’s feeling for Wales and his understanding of himself as Welsh, but how these have been so overlooked. And happily, Webb’s special project being to recover Thomas for Wales, he is as attentive to the man’s prose in its own right rather than as a key to his poetic development. But if, as is commonly argued, Thomas’s prose was the cradle for his poetry, then it is significant that his essays, reviews, biographies, short stories and travel narratives, are often about or refer to Wales.

Webb shows that Thomas was deeply read in Welsh folklore and myth, familiar with its history, but also its landscapes as they function in those traditions and cultural expressions. Part of the attraction for Thomas is that myth and folklore are the literature and music of the people, the common man/woman. More importantly, Webb discerns more than simply knowledge of such material: Thomas asserts ownership of it, in direct contrast to George Borrow, subject of a critical study by Thomas in 1911: where Borrow uses official names of bards, Thomas calls them by their ‘folk name’; Thomas also castigates Borrow for his ignorance of Welsh culture, noting his knowledge is ‘picked up anyhow and anywhere … without system and with very little friendly discussion or comparison. Wales therefore was as wonderful as Spain, and equally uncharted.’ (118-9) As Webb notes elsewhere, Thomas pre-empts a postcolonial commonplace here, as Borrow carelessly exoticises the ‘other’ while failing to notice the particular qualities unique to that ‘other’. Yet, Thomas’s own knowledge of Welsh cultural traditions is impressive in itself since such material only properly comes into the public arena in 1910 (119). His commitment to it affirms its importance to him. Even his ostensibly ‘English’ work gravitates towards Wales: *Heart Of England* (1906) concludes there; *The South Country* (1909) reflects on ‘a woman who had lived in England for fifty years but “nonetheless hums a Welsh tune”’ (Webb, 119); *The Icknield Way* (1916) takes a different tack, and uncovers the Welshness of England – a witty subversion of the colonial dynamic.

When Webb turns to the poetry, his thesis takes flight. What Matthew Hollis has recently identified as ‘musical phrasings’ and that which separates Thomas’s poetry from Frost’s, Webb reads in terms of Thomas’s adaptations of Welsh-language poetic rhythms, metre and forms: for example, *cynghanedd* – a form ‘based on repetition of consonant sounds and internal rhyme’ is found in some of its variations in poems such as ‘The Bridge’ and ‘The Green Roads’ (124). Webb finds further evidence that Thomas’s prosody is also indebted to ‘the classic Welsh-language tradition of *barddas*’ and the *triban*. This form follows an AABA scheme, but the end of line 3 rhymes with a word *within* line 4. Webb cites ‘The Ash Grove’ in which echoes of this scheme poems are apparent, and successful. In essence, Thomas is responsible for significant yet subtle formal innovations and appropriations that are not out of place in the first two decades of the twentieth century along with other modernist experiments. Webb cites Edna Longley’s comparison of Thomas’s work to some Imagist poems, and yes, T E Hulme’s ‘Autumn’ does come to mind on reading Thomas’s ‘In Memorium (Easter 1916)’, except that Thomas crafts his poem within a careful, tight rhyme scheme. For Webb, however, the short single stanza form that ‘In Memorium’ follows, also recalls the Welsh *englyn*. Webb, in other words, expands any reading of Thomas to acknowledge not only his profound understanding of English literary history, but his equally rich Welsh literary heritage.

The study also argues for Thomas’s promotion of Irish and/or homosexual writers at a time when, post-Wilde, neither categories were safe with which to be associated; similarly, it uncovers sympathies with Symbolist poets and Modernist writing. The importance of this, for Webb, concerns other critics (crudely) aligning Thomas’s allegedly quintessential Englishness to his supposed anti-modernism. Instead, Webb argues for Thomas’s pro-modernity as evident from his interest in what is perceived as ‘not-English’; he links Thomas’s openness to qualities and attributes which would contradict notions of ‘Englishness’ as they are understood at that time, and where they would involve especially, definitions of masculinity that the colonised and/or homosexual male subject would not meet. The study makes intelligent use of letters to Frost for further debate of Thomas as one who sought a space in some sense free of the constraints of gender and nation.

There is a danger in Webb’s project, in that it is inevitably haunted by a refrain of, ‘look, I’ve found another Welsh thing about Thomas’. At times, the scholarship is more apparent perhaps than style, an unfortunate effect of such an endeavour. And there is too little examination of *why* Thomas was so drawn to his Welsh heritage as a Romantic desire for difference and origin. Still, the book is often compelling in its arguments, and re-situates both Wales and Thomas in literary history. It also rights a wrong: – the oversight of much criticism to-date of Thomas’s Welsh heritage, and its living presence in his work. It is an essential addition to scholarship on Thomas.

Kym Martindale