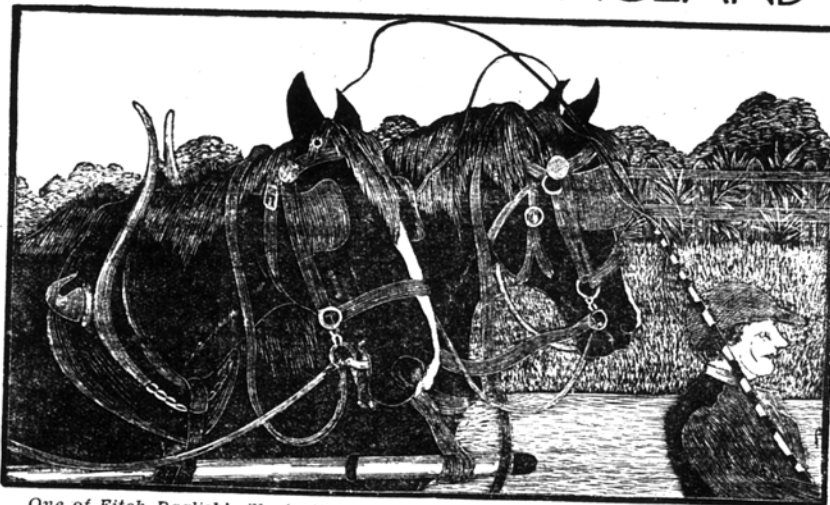


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THE HEART OF ENGLAND

By H. E. Bates



One of Fitch Daghlish's illustrations to "The South Country" by Edward Thomas

THE HEART OF ENGLAND, first published in 1906, has not, until this year, been reprinted; and the publishers speak of *The South Country* as having been out of print for many years. It would seem, then, that the work of Edward Thomas, never popular in his life time, has also never been read except by a mere handful of people since his tragic death in France at the age of thirty-seven.

Mrs. Thomas's two semi-fictional works, of which Thomas was the hero, brought his name briefly before a forgetful public again, but even *As It Was* and *World Without End* had such quality of their own that one wonders sometimes if they are not, unhappily and ironically, better known than Thomas's own books—books which were, as Mr. Fitch Daghlish points out in his preface to *The Heart of England*, a mere "fragment of what should have been his life's work."

Nevertheless, the appearance of these two books together seems to indicate that there is still an interest in Thomas's prose works, and even a fresh demand for them. "Despite his reputation as a poet, his prose works are still known only to a discerning few, for the best of them have been allowed to fall out of print or to remain undiscovered on booksellers' shelves."

There was never a better moment than this for a revival of interest in Thomas's prose, for he wrote with a profound insight and knowledge and beauty of all those things in which, as it sees them slipping rapidly away from it, a new generation has become interested—the beauty of the English countryside, the land, the birds, the flowers, the joy of walking and the pleasure of meeting "fellow-travellers on the roads and in the inns."

Thomas's work is full and overflowing with his love of these things; it is touched with melancholy because of their rarity or their passing away; but it is very rarely angry, like Hudson's, or sneering, like Lawrence's, because of that rottenness which is eating into the very heart of England, that rural England by which Thomas's "soul was revived when it was faint with despair, and comforted as some are by religion or music."

I quote this last sentence from Mrs. Thomas's introduction to *The South Country*. It is a sound, penetrative piece of writing, full of understanding and information, unclouded by sentimentality, perfectly free from all hero-worship. It would serve better than any

BOOKS BY EDWARD THOMAS

THE SOUTH COUNTRY (A new Edition: with engravings by E. Fitch Daghlish and a preface by Helen Thomas. Dent, 10/6.)
THE HEART OF ENGLAND. (Open Air Library. Dent, 3/6.)

article I could write to reveal Thomas to those who know his name only casually and those who do not know him at all. She gives a most sympathetic, memorable portrait of Thomas:—

"Edward Thomas's nature was meditative, austere, and reserved. He hated ostentation, snobbery, hypocrisy, affectation, and sentimentality. The things and people who were honest and direct appealed to him. . . . Nor was he, as he walked, only the nature-lover intent on observing birds and flowers and clouds and the life of the hedges and copses. Nor was he the aesthete satisfying his eye with the beauty of the contours of the hills, the symmetry of the trees, and the grouping of the villages. Nor was he only the artist transmuting all this into words. He was all these, and much more."

What more he was one may discover in Mr. Fitch Daghlish's introduction to *The Heart of England*:

"Never has the common and ordinary been rendered more thrillingly beautiful than by the pen of Edward Thomas. His prose, at once delicate and vigorous, with its sturdy directness and grave sincerity, is an inspiration to all whose eyes are not sealed to the wonders of the daily detail of the countryside, and he brings back to the contemplative reader something of childhood's contentment and joy in the seemingly small and trivial."

Still more one may discover from Thomas himself. Though he was not, like Hudson, what one would call an expert naturalist, there was scarcely an aspect of country life in which he did not revel and of which he did not give us some beautiful and inspiring picture. There are passages in *The South Country* where the beauty of words and emotions are so vivid and intense that one feels drunk with it, where one feels one cannot listen to it any longer. Nevertheless one must, and one does, listen, even against oneself, and I can think of no higher tribute to any writer.

I remember once comparing a writer's art to the flight of a bird, a comparison which a dull critic found "tame." But I can think of no higher praise for a man: to have his conscious artistry likened in its beauty and perfection to the unconsciously perfect grace of a bird.

Thus I have no hesitation in saying that Edward Thomas's prose sometimes seems to me as exquisite and pure and fresh as the singing of a skylark.

Thomas, like the lark, sings in a passion of ecstasy and joy, thrilling us by his flow of words as the bird does by its cadence of notes and, like the bird, he is for ever soaring heavenwards, to the sun, to the white clouds, to a new sublimity, yet he is never far from earth, from the common things, the fields, the hedgerows, the grass, the trees, the soil itself, and is always returning to it, soaring up and returning again. I can think of no better way of praising the mixture of spiritual and earthly qualities that his best work possesses.

Thomas wrote—often against his will—very many books, and most are unobtainable. It would be a great service to letters if the publishers of these two volumes could re-issue his works uniformly, or even in the delightful *Open Air Library*: a series that might have been named specially to accommodate Thomas. Both *The South Country* and *The Heart of England* have been charmingly done, and though one feels that Thomas, whose art of painting pictorial prose was so great, often does not need an illustrator, one feels also that he would not have quarrelled with Mr. Fitch Daghlish.

These, indeed, are two fine books, beautifully printed; and the illustrations do not merely adorn the text: they interpret it.

MacDONALD'S MEAN ATTACK

(Continued from page 507)

George turned from the vagaries of Samuel and Simon to the unemployed, he was turning from the ridiculous to the sublime, and his appeal lost nothing in its earnestness and force, from the comic interlude which had preceded it: Shakespeare often uses comedy to heighten tragedy. Lloyd George spoke of the tragic position of the unemployed, and obviously made a deep impression on the House as he urged the Government to adopt some schemes for the amelioration of their condition.

Arthur Greenwood wound up the debate for the Labour Party. He said that the Prime Minister's speech was the worst he had ever made. "He tore his passion to tatters. The Prime Minister has descended to the lowest level of Tory polemics in the arguments that he used."

In a speech of overwhelming force, Greenwood attacked the Prime Minister as the "darling, now, of the Tory Party, living upon the adulation of people who for 20 years on this side of the House he consistently fought, and now has the insolence to charge my Right Honourable Friend (Lansbury) with having changed his views."

When Greenwood resumed his seat, it seemed that there was no more to be said. It was a pity that the Prime Minister was not there to hear it. If the debate served a purpose for the Labour Party it also served one for the Prime Minister. For his speech was a speech of reassurance. It was a message to Mayfair that their revelries need not be curtailed, nor a single cocktail sacrificed, even if the children of Shoreditch go short or the women of Whitechapel go hungry.