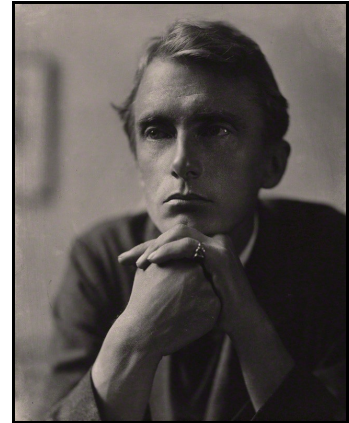


EDWARD THOMAS

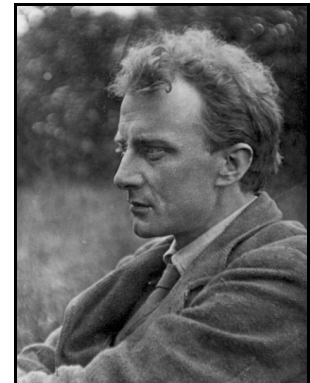
(3 March 1878–9 April 1917)

Edward Thomas, an Anglo-Welsh poet, essayist, and novelist, is commonly considered a war poet, although few of his poems deal directly with his war experiences, and his career in poetry only came after he had already been a successful writer and literary critic. He enlisted in the British Army in 1915 to fight in the First World War and was killed in action during the Battle of Arras in 1917, soon after having arrived in France. Thomas's poems are noted for a certain colloquial style, their attention to the richness and beauty of the English countryside, and their recognition of the violence done by distant conflict to the natural order of things. Former British Poet Laureate Ted Hughes once described Thomas as "the father of us all."



Edward Thomas, NPG Photo

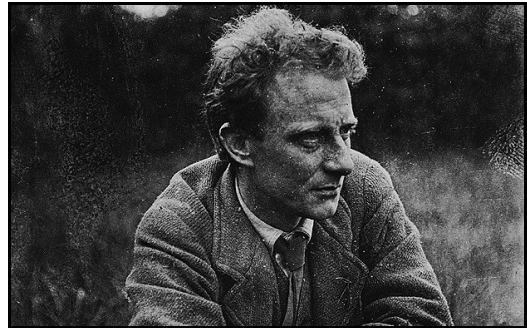
Edward Thomas was born in Lambeth, London, to a family of mostly Welsh ancestry. He was educated at Battersea Grammar School, St Paul's School in London, and Lincoln College, Oxford. In June 1899 he married Helen Berenice Noble (1878-1967), in Fulham, while still an undergraduate and determined to live his life as a writer, at first working as a book reviewer, feverishly reviewing up to 15 books every week. He had inherited a predisposition for melancholy from his mother, and even though his melancholy deepened with the hated drudgery of hack work, his writings are known for their care and a certain freshness and charm. From 1905, Thomas lived with his wife and their family at Elses Farm near Sevenoaks, Kent. He rented a tiny cottage nearby to a Welsh tramp poet W. H. Davies, whose career he almost single-handedly nurtured as best he could, even arranging for the manufacture of a makeshift wooden leg for Davies.



E. Thomas at Elses Farm

Thomas was already a seasoned writer by the outbreak of World War I, having written a novel *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans* (1913), published widely as a literary critic (for the *Daily Chronicle*) and biographer, as well writing about the countryside. Even though he considered poetry the highest literary form and regularly reviewed it, he only became a poet himself at the end of 1914, initially publishing his poetry under the name Edward Eastaway. During this time Thomas often visited the village of Dymock in Gloucestershire, which by August 1914 had become the residence of a number of literary figures, including American poet Robert Frost. Thomas immortalized the (now-abandoned) nearby railway station at Adlestrop in a poem of that name after his train made a stop at the Cotswolds station on 24 June 1914, shortly before the outbreak of the War.

Influenced unintentionally by friend Frost, who after returning to the U.S. had sent him an advance copy of "The Road Not Taken," a gentle mocking of indecision, Thomas enlisted in the Artists Rifles in July 1915, despite being a mature married man who could have avoided enlisting. Part of his decision may have been also prompted by the attraction of a steady salary to support his family. In November 1916, having been previously promoted to corporal, he was commissioned into the Royal Garrison Artillery as a second lieutenant. He was killed in action soon after he arrived in France at Arras on Easter Monday, 9 April 1917. His widow Helen



Edward Thomas c.1910

was told he was killed "bloodless[ly]" by the concussive blast wave of one of the last shells fired as he stood to light his pipe and that there was no mark on his body; however, a 1936 letter from his commanding officer Franklin Lushington (only discovered years later in an American archive) states that in reality the cause of Thomas's death was being "shot clean through the chest." W. H. Davies's commemorative poem "Killed In Action (Edward Thomas)" was included in Davies's 1918 collection *Raptures*. Thomas is buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Agny in France (Row C, Grave 43). He is commemorated (among 16 WWI poets) by a slate stone in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, London, and individually by memorial windows in the churches at Steep and at Eastbury in Berkshire.

After the war, Thomas's widow, Helen, wrote about her courtship and early married life with him in the autobiographies *As it Was* (1926) and *World Without End* (1931); her short memoir *My Memory of W. H. Davies* was published in 1973, after her own death. In 1988 Helen's writings were gathered into a book published under the title *Under Storm's Wing*, which included both autobiographies and a selection of other short works by Helen and her



Lt. Edward Thomas 1916

daughter Myfanwy, as well as six letters sent by Robert Frost to her husband. At least nineteen of Thomas's poems were set to music by the Gloucester composer Ivor Gurney, and he is the subject of the biographical play *The Dark Earth and the Light Sky* by Nick Dear, which premiered at the Almeida Theatre, London in November 2012.