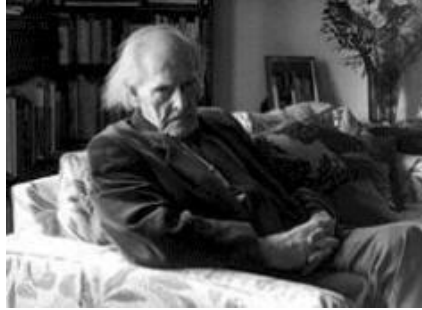


Poems that shaped me

This is the final part of a yearlong series written by Neil Richardson on 12 of the poems or poets which shaped his own thinking, writing and life. This month, he considers the work of **R.S. Thomas** (1913-2000) and two poems, **The Way of It** and **A Marriage**.



The Way of It

With her fingers she turns paint
into flowers, with her body
flowers into a remembrance
of herself. She is at work
always, mending the garment
of our marriage, foraging
like a bird for something
for us to eat. If there are thorns
in my life, it is she who
will press her breast to them and sing.

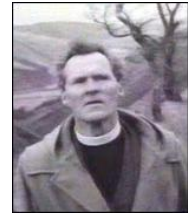
Her words, when she would scold,
are too sharp. She is busy
after for hours rubbing smiles
into the wounds. I saw her,
when young, and spread the panoply
of my feathers instinctively
to engage her. She was not deceived,
but accepted me as a girl
will under a thin moon
in love's absence as someone
she could build a home with
for her imagined child.

Ronald Stuart Thomas slowly rose from being a little known Welsh country parson living in ever-more obscure parts of wild Wales into one of the most admired and celebrated poets writing in English in the 20th century. In 1955, John Betjeman, in his introduction to the first collection of Thomas's poetry to be produced by a major publisher, *Song at the Year's Turning*, predicted that Thomas would be remembered long after Betjeman himself was forgotten. How right he was proved to be! Wikipedia describes his life thus – "R. S. Thomas was born in Cardiff. He was awarded a bursary in 1932 to study at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, where he read Classics. In 1936, having completed his theological training at St. Michael's College, Llandaff, he was ordained as a priest in the Church in Wales. From 1936 to 1940 he was the curate of Chirk, Denbighshire, where he met his future wife, Mildred (Elsi) Eldridge, an English artist. He learnt the Welsh language at the age of 30, too late in life, he said, to be able to write poetry in it."

A Marriage

We met
under a shower
of bird-notes.
Fifty years passed,
love's moment
in a world in
servitude to time.
She was young;
I kissed with my eyes
closed and opened
them on her wrinkles.
'Come,' said death,
choosing her as his
partner for
the last dance, And she,
who in life
had done everything
with a bird's grace,
opened her bill now
for the shedding
of one sigh no
heavier than a feather.

For some time I have been in awe of R. S. Thomas. His work is just perfect and I believe he will one day be put in the top category of poets in English, right up there with Mr Shakespeare! Three years ago, I read a biography by Byron Rogers called **The Man Who Went Into The West, The Life of R. S. Thomas**. (London: Aurum Press, 2006).



Reading the biography brought me face-to-face with the fact that Thomas was not really a likable person and in some ways, he was something of a snob, carefully cultivating the rich English people around him whilst blasting away about the “English” in his political ranting. His working day consisted of writing and studying in the morning, hill walking and bird watching in the afternoon, and eating and socialising in the evening. It is also odd that nobody remembers his sermons as being particularly interesting or written in beautiful language. After learning Welsh, the day came for him to preach his first sermon in the new language. At the end, the congregation reflected that although they could understand his Welsh, they still couldn’t understand the sermon! He was abrasive and unforgiving. In a poem called **Unposted**, he writes to a person who has sent him some poems to read, perhaps for approval? His response is

“I see why you wrote them,
but why send them? Why not
bury them, as a cat its faeces?”

However, it is not necessary to be nice to be great! Thomas’s poetry is dominated by Wales, its people and landscapes, its birds and wild life, and of course, God and the spirituality of his own journey. I have not chosen poems to reflect these themes, but two poems about his wife. These poems are very revealing. In the poem **The Way of It**, Thomas reveals that his wife didn’t really love him, but married him as a second best option. Very sad, to live with that feeling all one’s married life! His sharp descriptions of Mildred in the first stanza are typically R. S. Thomas, precise, pared down to the last syllable and totally convincing in so few words. He is aware that he is a pain to her, but comforted that

If there are thorns
in my life, it is she who
will press her breast to them and sing.

He scolds her for her sharp tongue, but is thankful that she wants to heal any wounds she caused. The bird image is just right

I saw her,
when young, and spread the panoply
of my feathers instinctively
to engage her.

The absence of love of which he speaks now becomes a matter of practicality. She looked to him to provide for her and her as yet imagined child. Thomas seems to deal with the humiliation of this situation and despite having to put up with what really is second best, he surely loved her, as I think is very clear. It is the way of it.

A Marriage is a poem which shocks and thrills. The genius of his language drives the reader on and breathlessly, we see the whole of their married life in 22 short lines. How moving are the words,

She was young;
I kissed with my eyes
closed and opened
them on her wrinkles.

As a man who has written over 50 poems about his wife, I feel sad about what these poems reveal for both Ronald and Mildred Thomas, the rather empty marriage landscape which is implicit. But selfishly, I feel more saddened because I know that I could never write anything so beautiful and powerful, so delicate and yet so tough as these two short poems. I know a master at work when I see one. I hope you enjoyed the 2009 series.