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Edward Thomas as a Travel Book Writer

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to examine Edward Thomas's literary representations of his walks and bicycle rides from the perspective of the development of the genre of the travel book in Britain. The paper provides a brief outline of the history of the synergy and friction of travel books with the genres of the novel and the autobiography, and the ways in which the developing naturalist and pedestrian discourses influenced travel books and travel accounts. A key argument constructed and developed in the second part of the paper is that the combination of Thomas's dissatisfaction with the loose collage-like nebulousness of his early travel accounts from *Beautiful Wales* (1905) to *The South Country* (1909) and his wide knowledge of 19th-century British travel writers resulted in two 'conventional' travel books *The Icknield Way* (1913) and *In Pursuit of Spring* (1914), in which Thomas relied on such standard generic features as the diary format and the central role of the narrative persona.

Keywords: Edward Thomas, Robert Macfarlane, travel books, travel writing, nature writing, pedestrianism

1. Introduction

Edward Thomas (1878–1917) is considered a major British writer, whose reputation today "rests almost entirely on his poetry" (Wiśniewski 2009: 1). This opinion is generally supported by Thomas's biographers, scholars and fellow poets, one of whom, Ted Hughes (1930–1998), a Poet Laureate, famously said of Thomas as a poet—at the unveiling ceremony of the memorial stone of the Great War poets in Westminster Abbey on 11 November 1985—that "he is the father of us all" (quoted in Wiśniewski 2009: 4). Yet Thomas was writing poetry "only for the last two years of his life, between December 1914 … and December 1916" (Wiśniewski 2009: 1), while in the period between 1897 and 1916 he had written about thirty prose books, some of which are critical studies of literature in general and poetry in particular, but most of them are non-fiction texts generically straddled in various fashions between the two nebulous and hybrid categories of 'travel writing' and 'nature writing'. In this paper, written in honour of Professor Jacek Wiśniewski, the supervisor of my Ph.D. thesis

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(which was about Evelyn Waugh's travel books), I attempt to look at some of these prose books from the perspective of the travel writing scholar I have become, to a large extent thanks to Professor Wiśniewski's guidance and help in the period between 1987 and 1993.

2. Travel writing studies and travel books

Travel writing studies evolved as an academic discipline in the last two decades of the 20th century, and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as well as Paul Fussell's *Abroad: British Literary Traveling in Between the Wars* (1980), though methodologically diverse, may be considered its two foundational texts. Most of the Anglophone scholars, such as Jonathan Raban (1987), Carl Thompson (2011) or Tim Youngs (2013), define travel writing as a hybrid, non-fiction genre and treat 'travel writing' and 'travel book' as synonymous terms. Ian Borm, in his seminal article "Defining Travel: On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology" (2004), suggested that 'travel writing' should be treated not as a genre, but as a supra-generic category, "a collective term for a variety of texts both predominantly fictional and non-fictional whose main theme is travel" (Borm 2004: 13). Then, Borm went on to argue that a 'travel book' should be treated as a genre, and defined it as "any narrative characterized by a non-fiction dominant that relates (almost always) in the first person a journey or journeys that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality while assuming and presupposing that author, narrator and principal character are but one or identical" (Borm 2004: 17). Borm's taxonomy is synchronic; it postulates the wider supra-generic category of 'travel writing', with the "predominantly non-fictional travel book" as part of it, existing as if 'here and now' and not approached diachronically. I found Borm's distinction very useful and decided to apply it historically to describe the development of Anglophone travel writing as a supra-generic category and a travel book as a genre included in this category in: *Travellers, Novelists and Gentlemen: Constructing Male Narrative Personae in British Travel Books, from the Beginnings to the Second World War* (2013) and *A Generic History of Anglophone and Polish Travel Writing* (2020). I am convinced that the analytical tools and generic arguments I have constructed in these two studies are also valid and useful instruments with which to approach Edward Thomas as a travel writer.

The key advantage, in my opinion, of diachronically applying Borm's distinction between the supra-generic 'travel writing' and the genre of a 'travel book' as the former's important component over the traditional approach of Anglophone travel writing scholars which treats these two categories as synonyms is that it allows us to conceptualize more precisely the changes which textual representations of true (but also imaginary) journeys have undergone over the last three centuries. In *Travellers, Novelists and Gentlemen* I argued that the development of 'voyages and travels'[2] in the course of the 18th

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2   In *Travel Writing* Thompson thus defined 'voyages and travels': "From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the most common generic label for what we would now call 'travel writing'" (Thompson 2011: 206).

century could and should not only be seen as a shift in paradigm from 'scientific' to 'sentimental' travel writing, as scholars such as Mary Louise Pratt (1992) and Casey Blanton (1997) postulated,[3] but that, in Britain, the genre of the travel book was established in the middle of this century and started to evolve dynamically. The development of this new genre happened alongside two other prose genres, which were also established and started to flourish in this very period: that of the novel and the autobiography. My conceptualization of the 'rise of the travel book' follows in the wake of the key argument first presented by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957) that historical, economic, institutional and social contexts strongly influence the ways in which literature has been written, and that 'the rise of the novel' in 18th-century Britain should be analysed as a process being the result of the operation of the dynamic development of capitalism in this period, which brought about (among many other things) the development of the middle class and of the "individualist and innovating reorientation" (Watt 2015: 13) of literature, and also the expansion of the book market geared towards the tastes and expectations of this class. The process of 'the rise of the novel' in the 18th century was paralleled by 'the rise of the travel book' and 'the rise of the autobiography'. These three genres, which crystallized and evolved in this period, share some important features: the hybrid nature, the focus on individual experience and the focus on 'realistic' representation, even though the novel eventually ended up on the fictional side of the troubled fiction/non-fiction border, while the travel book and the autobiography are regarded as predominantly non-fictional.

I argued in *Travellers, Novelists and Gentlemen* that the beginnings of the new travel book genre should be traced to the Preface to *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* (1755) by Henry Fielding. In the earlier prefaces to his novels Fielding had written about the advantages of fiction being presented within the convention of realism over works of non-fiction. In the Preface to *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* he reversed this claim, and even though he constructed there a binary opposition between works of fiction and "the work founded like this, on truth" (Fielding 1755: xv), at the same time he gave himself (and travel writers to come) an artistic *licentia poetica* to include "all kind of ornament of stile and diction, or even of circumstance" (Fielding 1755: xiii), that is to embellish his non-fictional prose report from a relatively inauspicious journey with 'ornaments' he had learnt to construct while writing his novels. The decision to name *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* as the first modern travel book parallels Ian Watt's (and Watt's followers) decision to call the long prose narratives of Defoe, Sterne and Richardson the first modern novels. Watt distinguished these first modern novels from earlier 'romances', taking the

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3   Scholars like Parks (1964), Stafford (1984), Cardinal (1996) Carl Thompson (2011) used the dichotomy of Enlightenment versus Romantic to account for this shift, while Barbara Korte (2000) wrote, in a similar fashion, about "object oriented" versus "subject oriented" travel narratives.

perspective of the development of the genre from the second half of the 18th century to the moment in which he was constructing his taxonomy in the mid-1950s. Similarly, Fielding's and Smollett's travel books inaugurated the new genre from the perspective of early 21st-century travel writing studies. However, it should be borne in mind that the traditional 'scientific' travel books of exploration, oriented towards 'objective' descriptions of discoveries and not towards the style, diction and uniqueness of a narrative persona, continued to be written from the second half of the 17th century[4] till the end of the 19th.[5]

More than a century and a half elapsed between the publication of *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* and *The Icknield Way* (1913) by Edward Thomas. It took the newly established genres of the travel book, the novel and the autobiography most of the remaining decades of the 18th century to disentangle from one another and to establish relatively steady, even though constantly evolving, generic "horizons of expectations".[6] Texts such as *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) by Lawrence Sterne were for a long time read as travel books, before they were re-conceptualized as novels, when the genre of the novel crystallized and stabilized.[7] The motif of a journey (both real and metaphorical) was to remain important for the genre of the novel in the 19th century, while authors of travel books in this period were to rely more and more confidently on the techniques which are usually associated with works of fiction in general and the novel in particular: "free indirect style, scenic construction, present time narration, prolepsis, iterative symbolism" (Lodge 1997: 8). The genre of the travel book has been a hybrid one since it took off in the middle of the 18th century. One important aspect of its hybridity is that travel book writers, while constructing their texts, have relied (in various ways and to varying degrees), apart from travel writing discourse, on such disparate discourses as: sentimental, scientific, aesthetic, colonial, classical, the discourse of mercantile good sense and, last but not least, on naturalist and pedestrian discourses—the assessment of which is crucial when analysing Edward Thomas's achievement as a travel writer.

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4 Robert Hooke, the first Curator of Experiments of the Royal Society (established in 1662) in 1664 issued a set of instructions to "Seamen and Travellers" which urged them to an attitude which Michael McKeon summarised aptly in this manner: "The fundamental trope of this anti-rhetorical style is the self-reflexive insistence on its own documentary candour, as well as on the historicity of the narrative it transparently mediates" (1988, 105).

5 Carl Thompson located the end of travel writing as "a knowledge genre" at the very end of the 19th century and attributed it to "the expansion of the university system and growing academic specialisation" (Thompson 2019: 123).

6 On "horizons of expectations" and genres, see, e.g., Hans Robert Jauss, *Literary History as A Challenge to Literary Theory*.

7 Percy G. Adams wrote in *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*: "Although Sterne's *The Sentimental Journey* is now a 'novel', in the 18th century it was a travel book and inspired a huge school of sentimental travel accounts" (1983: 198).

3. Travel writing and nature

The manner in which Edward Thomas represented nature in his non-fictional prose narratives and the manner in which these narratives are straddled between nature and travel writing can be best explained, I am convinced, through the conceptualizations constructed and explained in Paul Smethurst's *Travel Writing and the Natural World* (2012). In this ground-breaking study Smethurst, following Raymond Williams, located the emergence of nature-as-construct in the 18th century (Smethurst 2012: 1) and argued that although the developments of Enlightenment science had started to reconfigure the attitudes to nature and the natural world "since the end of the sixteenth century … it was in the latter half of the eighteenth century that the attitudes to the natural world were dramatically altered by the related practices of natural history and global exploration" (Smethurst 2012: 1). In *Travel Writing and the Natural World* Smethurst analysed a whole range of travel narratives which "share a consuming interest in the natural world" (Smethurst 2012: 5) and which were written in the second half of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century. These narratives appeared in many diverse forms of "memoir, scenic tour travel, topographical essay, romantic narrative, exploration journal and guidebook" (Smethurst 2012:5). Smethurst argued that "[e]xploration, natural history, scenic tourism, the picturesque and romanticism all provide diverse windows onto attitudes to nature and direct involvement of the natural world." (Smethurst 2012: 6–7). In what follows in this section the focus will be placed on these "diverse windows", which had a discernible impact on the ways in which Thomas Edward represented nature and his travels.

Exploration narratives and texts on natural history in the 18th century were, on the whole, more 'scientific' and more 'objective' in their description of nature than the texts which started to evolve during a "sublime turn" (2012: 130) which, according to Smethurst, started some two decades before Burke's seminal essay on the sublime and the beautiful (1757): "[f]rom the 1730's these [topographical descriptions] began to turn from factual accounts of physical curiosities in the landscape, to an appreciation of natural beauties and responses to it. Naturalists and tourists began to eulogise over the 'romantic' and 'sublime' scenes …" (Smethurst 2012: 130). The second phase of the "sublime turn", during which nature continued to be produced textually as an object for aesthetic consumption, took place at the end of the 18th century and took the form of the "picturesque". William Gilpin (1724–1804), who coined the terms "picturesque" and "picturesque beauty", was an important early theoretician of these concepts. In his first theoretical work, *Essay on Prints* (1768), Gilpin defined the picturesque as "that kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture" (Gilpin 1768: 2). Gilpin was not only an important theoretician of picturesque beauty, but also a popular and important travel writer, who wrote, illustrated and published (between 1782 and 1809) eight travel books: the title of each of them begins with *Observations on …*, and all these books contain descriptions and aquatints from his "scenic travels" to different regions of England, Wales and Scotland. Gilpin's notions of picturesque

beauty and the ways in which he applied them in his travel books had a lasting impact on the ways in which nature was to be represented in travel and nature narratives in general and in travel books in particular throughout the whole of the 19th century, right up to the moment when in 1897 *The Woodland Life*, the first collection of Edward Thomas's 'nature studies', was published. Gilpin's theories and Gilpin's travel books started and set in motion many, often contradictory, social, aesthetic and literary processes.

The popularity of Gilpin's picturesque mode of tourism coincided with more and more positive assessments of home tourism as patriotic, a phenomenon which, according to Zoë Kinsley (2008: 1–2), had originated with the travel accounts of Celia Fiennes written at the end of the 17th century. Almost a century later, the Napoleonic Wars blocked the traditional Grand Tour routes in France and Italy and caused even more Home Tour travelogues to be written (Turner 2001: 206).

4. The rise of pedestrianism, peripatetic theory and practice

In the 19th century Home Tours and their textual representations continued to be popular thanks, to a large extent, to the itineraries and mind-sets of the Romantic poets, particularly those of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who helped to popularize the new 'pedestrian' (also called 'peripatetic') fashion. Robin Jarvis, following Morris Marples's pioneering 1959 study of literary pedestrians entitled *Shank's Pony: A Study of Walking*, noted that the rapid growth of recreational walking in that period could be attributed to "the changes in the attitudes to the natural world and the growth of aesthetic tourism" (Jarvis 1997: 5). After Wordsworth, pedestrian literature, praising nature but also the timelessness of the very act of walking, developed mostly in essays such as William Hazlitt's "On Going on a Journey" (1821), Leigh Hunt's "A Walk from Dulwich to Brockham" (1828), or Leslie Stephen's "In Praise of Walking" (1902), but also in travel books like George Borrow's *Wild Wales* (1862) or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879).

5. Edward Thomas and the travel book tradition

Chapter Two of Jacek Wiśniewski's biography of Edward Thomas, entitled "Edward Thomas's Nature Books – *In Pursuit of Spring*", introduces and briefly analyses Thomas's non-fiction "nature books" from *The Woodland Life* (1897) to *The Icknield Way* (1913) and *In Pursuit of Spring* (1914). Wiśniewski explains in this chapter that:

> [t]he genre, represented by all these prose books, is called by some critics 'rural literature' or 'topographical writing' and by others 'country books'. It is a uniquely English sub-category of non-fiction writing, a demanding form of literature with a long history behind it, going back to the 17th century and the English Restoration ...(Wiśniewski 2009: 90)

Earlier on, in Wiśniewski's introduction to Thomas's biography we read: "Some of his [Thomas's] best travel books, like *The Icknield Way,* 1913, and *In Pursuit of Spring,* 1914, take the reader west along the old highways of the South Country from London to the Welsh border" (2009: 1). In what follows I would like to agree with Wiśniewski's high assessment of these two books as 'travel books' and argue at the same time that *The Icknield Way* and *In Pursuit of Spring* are simultaneously 'nature books' and 'travel books', and that other books, such as *The Heart of England* (1906) could be added to this pair. In all his books where nature is central, all the way from *The Woodland Life* to *In Pursuit of Spring,* Thomas achieved "the concreteness of vision" thanks to a shorthand note-taking technique he had learnt from Richard Jeffries (Wiśniewski 2009: 87).

I am convinced that for all the nebulousness of the generic labels such as the ones listed by Wiśniewski ('rural literature', 'topographical writing', 'country books') but also some others, like 'nature writing', there would not be many scholars who would contest Wiśniewski's usage of the term 'nature books' to any of the books, from *The Woodland Life* to *In Pursuit of Spring.* However, the situation becomes more complex when, in order to decide which of these nature books can also be regarded as travel books (and to what extent), we put them through the test of Jan Borm's definition of a travel book, which requires that a representative of this genre should exhibit the following three features: firstly, the non-fiction dominant; secondly, relating "a journey or journey that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality"; and thirdly, "identity of the author, main character and (almost always) first person narrator" (Borm 2004: 17). I believe that Thomas's 'nature books' approached from the travel book perspective could and should be seen as moving chronologically from 'pure' nature writing with no elements of travel books, through the intermediate phase of the balance between naturalist and travel discourses, towards travel books *sensu stricto.*

6. From nature books to travel books

Thomas's first book, *The Woodland Life,* published in 1897 when he was just nineteen years old, is a collection of eleven essays and a naturalist's diary covering one whole year. These essays describe "the woodland life" during all seasons of an area in England Thomas later called "the south country". There is not even a hint of a first-person narration in any of the essays, no hint of a narrator who would embark on any form of journey. It is pure 'nature writing'.

In the first decade of the 20th century—during which he was working frantically hard to support his growing family with his writing, mostly as a literary critic and later also as a biographer—Edward Thomas received three commissions to write texts for books which had originally been conceived as a series of colour reprints of paintings by renowned British painters. *Oxford* (1903) and *Beautiful Wales* (1905) were both published by A. & C. Black. The first of them contained sixty coloured reprints of cityscapes of Oxford

painted by John Folleylove (1845–1908), and the second seventy-four coloured reprints of Welsh landscapes painted by Robert Fowler (1850–1926). The title pages of these two books have the same design and follow the same pattern *Oxford: Painted by Robert Fowler, R I, Described by Edward Thomas …* and *Beautiful Wales: Painted by John Fulleylove, R I, Described by Edward Thomas … .* "R I" after the names of the painters signifies that they were members of the prestigious Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours, while the fact that the names of the (well established) painters come before the name of a young writer (with no letters to follow) shows the publisher's priorities. The third of these books (containing forty-eight illustrations) was published in 1906 by J. M. Dent. The author/illustrator hierarchy, at least on the title page, is more orthodox: "*The Heart of England* by Edward Thomas, with coloured illustrations by H. L. Richardson".

None of these three books is a travel book *sensu stricto,* i.e., a first-person narrative structured chronologically around a 'real' journey or journeys, but they all include longer or shorter fragments of first-person descriptions of journeys typical of travel books. *Oxford* is the least 'travel writing oriented' of the three as it consists mostly of guidebook-like historical descriptions and musings. However, the book's first chapter, entitled "Entering Oxford", opens as a travel book, not a guidebook:

> Passing rapidly through London, with its roar of causes that have been won, and the suburbs, where they have no causes, and skirting the willowy Thames, — glassy or silver, or with engrailed grey waves — and brown ploughlands, elm-guarded, solitary, I approached Oxford. (Thomas 1903: 3)

But the cadence of the evocative, impersonal prose soon takes over, like in this fragment: "In Oxford nothing is the creation of one man or of one year. Every college and church and garden is the work of centuries of men and time …" (Thomas 1903: 12). The recollections of the narrator's own walks in and around Oxford are few and short, and it is only in the two final pages of the penultimate chapter that Thomas indulges in what appears to be a poetic recollection of a walk along one of the footpaths "[t]he Oxford country is rich in" (Thomas 1903: 252), taken in the company of unspecified undergraduate friends: a walk which started from "one of the many fair little Oxford bridges" (Thomas 1903: 253), and took them away into the country along "the great hawthorn hedge" (Thomas 1903: 253) and then back along the slow flowing river when "twilight began to drive her dusky flocks across the west, " (Thomas 1903: 254) until "troubled tenderly by autumnal maladies of souls, we came to our place of rest—a grey, immemorial house with innumerable windows" (Thomas 1903: 254). Thus, Thomas's own 'praise of Oxford', a poetic reconstruction of an autumnal walk with his student-friends back to their college rooms, strategically ends the penultimate chapter of the book and it immediately precedes the final chapter, entitled "In Praise of Oxford", which consists of fragments of poetry and

prose of the 'classics' like John Lyly, William Wordsworth or John Dryden selected by Thomas.

In *Beautiful Wales,* the next book after *Oxford,* which Thomas was commissioned to write to accompany the coloured series of illustrations of a renowned painter, the ratio between impersonal guidebook discourse and first-person travel narration is reversed, in favour of the latter. Jean Wilson perceptibly noted that in *Beautiful Wales* Thomas rose:

> ... well above the level of the guidebook and commentary A. & C. Black commissioned. By ignoring what was expected in such a series—that is, a text subservient to Robert Fowler's illustrations, a practical guide to the whole country and an introduction to its most famous sites—he makes room for his own vision of Wales, anticipating innovations in the travel book over the century. (Wilson 2015: 137)

Wilson described how much historical research on Wales Thomas had done in the British Museum Library and how much more research he planned when, confronted by the imminent commission deadline, he "decided to omit all history" (quoted in Wilson 2015: 137) and wrote the whole second part of *Beautiful Wales* as a 'calendar', which gave him an excuse to indulge in the passages which, as it turned out, he enjoyed most, even though he self-depreciatingly was to write that they were "25000 words of landscape" (quoted in Wilson 2015: 139) and "marvellously irrelevant as a rule" (quoted in Wilson 2015: 138). Wilson called these passages "a series of prose poems" (Wilson 2015: 138) and she showed that they not only allowed Thomas to "give voice to the many dreams, visions and memories with which he lives" (Wilson 2015: 138), but also to use not only "the copious notes he made in his three-day tramp" (Wilson 2015: 138) in Wales, but also essays he had written earlier for himself elsewhere "on London suburbs for instance." (Wilson 2015: 138)

Beautiful Wales is, of course, not composed solely of what Thomas self-ironically referred to as 'landscape'—short impressionistic recollections of walks, written usually in the first-person narration and piled one after another in an unchronological and topographically disjointed fashion. There are long 'objective' guidebook-like passages introducing educated British readers to Wales in the first two chapters, and descriptions of a few characteristic Welsh characters in Chapter Four, but Chapter Three, "A Farmhouse under a Mountain" and Chapter Five, "Wales Month by Month" (which covers more than one hundred pages and more than half of the book) are almost exclusively 'landscape': reminiscences of walks somewhere in the country taken in some unspecified time and order. In Chapter Five, 'landscape' reigns and begins in the first, January, paragraph.

> The road ran for ten miles between mountains on which the woods of oak and fir moaned, though there was little wind. A raven croaked with a fat voice. I could hear a score of

streams. But the valley would not speak with me. The sole joy in it was that of walking fast and of seeing the summits of the hills continually writing a wild legend on the cloudy sky. (Thomas 1905: 99)

'Landscape' collages remained Thomas's main construction method in his two next 'topographical books': *The Heart of England,* published in 1906, just a year after *Beautiful Wales,* the third and last in the series of Thomas's books written to accompany collections of coloured illustrations, and *The South Country,* published in 1909. *The Heart of England* consists of forty-six short landscape-chapters grouped in five parts with topographically non-committal locations ("Leaving Town", "The Lowland", "The Upland", "The Mountains", "The Sea"); some of these, like the first chapter, "Leaving Town", are first person foot travel narratives, while others, like the second chapter "Faunus", are more like prose-poems praising English landscapes without resorting either to a first-person travel narrator or disclosing the location. Jean Wilson argued that: "by keeping his topographical books deliberately vague ... Thomas was able to use old or extraneous material" (Wilson 2015: 152) and, while writing about *The Heart of England,* she pointed to three chapters "written in 1902 or earlier ("Village", "Frieze at the 4 Elms" and "August") which he inserted in a panic when the publisher Dent informed him that he was 5,000 words short of the agreed length" (Wilson 2015: 151), and to the last chapter entitled "The Castle of Carbonek": "ostensibly a mythical castle from Arthurian legend but in reality based on Penard Castle near Swansea" (Wilson 2015: 152) (that is in Wales, not in 'the heart of England').

    The South Country, published by J. M. Dent, was part of a topographical-pastoral series which also included Belloc's *The Historic Thames,* and Thomas's own *The Heart of England* (in this edition it was printed without any of the forty-eight coloured Richardson illustrations; the other two books in this series were also unillustrated). In the Preface to the 1932 edition Thomas's wife Helen stated:

The South Country is one of the happiest of the prose works of Edward Thomas. It was written at the period of comparative ease and tranquillity, and was, as not many of his books could be, written for his own pleasure, and is therefore characteristic of the author at his best. (Thomas 2009: 13)

From the perspective of the development of Thomas as a travel writer it is interesting to observe that, even though *The South Country* was written "for his own pleasure" and not as a commission with a short deadline and a high minimum number of words, as had been the case with *Beautiful Wales* and *The Heart of England,* Thomas used and perfected in it his 'landscape technique', which he had 'invented' while struggling with *Beautiful Wales* and developed in *The Heart of England.* In his 2009 Introduction to *The South Country,*

Robert Macfarlane, a contemporary nature and travel writer, and an enthusiastic follower in the topographical and literary footsteps of Edward Thomas, wrote:

> The book jumps about: geographically, seasonally, meteorologically. One moment you are in Suffolk, then you're in Hampshire. One chapter is summer, the next is autumn. One sentence it's raining, the next it's blazing. There's something hypermodern about the book's collage-like feel, it shifts and bucks. (Macfarlane 2009: 9)

For Macfarlane "the collage-like feel" is something "hypermodern" and thus, presumably, new, innovative and creative. It is its "absence of a continuous journey, or an ever-present walker narrator, that distinguishes *The South Country* from other Edwardian nature-travelogues" (Macfarlane 2009: 9). I believe that when Joan Wilson wrote in 2015 about Thomas's first use of this 'collage' method in *Beautiful Wales* that it anticipates "innovations in travel book over the century" (2015:137) she expressed a similar positive, progressive assessment of it. However, immediately after the publication of *The South Country,* Edward Thomas's own assessment of the structure of the book was much less enthusiastic. In 1910 he found the book "full of nasty jingling rhythms", of "endless description", and, last but not least, with "an insufficient thread running through and no connecting links" (quoted in Macfarlane 2009: 8).

When Thomas returned to representing his real journeys in *The Icknield Way* (1913) and *In Pursuit of Spring* (1914), he was to rely on a very different strategy than in his 'topographical trilogy' (*Beautiful Wales*, *The Heart of England* and *The South Country*). In between self-depreciation of *The South Country* and the writing of *The Icknield Way* Thomas was involved in reading and writing about the travel books of other writers. Thomas's "Introduction" to William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* for the Everyman Library's *Travel Series,* and his book *George Barrow: The Man and his Books* were published in 1912. Wiśniewski wrote of the former that "seldom can one find such vivid and authoritative arguments for Cobbett's literary gifts and his book's deserved fame" (Wiśniewski 2009: 92), and of the latter:

> In *George Borrow: The Man and his Books,* Thomas remarked that in most of his books, novels and travel accounts, Borrow is his own hero, and his principal study is himself. He shows how Borrow's books are held together by the author's personality and extraordinary powers of observation. (Wiśniewski 2009: 93)

I would like to argue that it seems highly plausible that Thomas found in the 'classical' nineteenth-century travel books of Cobbett and Borrow, two travel writers he valued highly, such elements which he had found wanting in *The South Country,* elements which could provide both 'sufficient threads' and 'connecting links': Borrow's strong narrative persona and Cobbett's journal-like day-by-day manner of reporting a journey.

The formats of *The Icknield Way* and *The Pursuit of Spring* are almost identical. The former consists of twelve chapters: the 'introductory' one followed by ten 'main' ones, each being a description of a topographically specific day of the narrative persona's walk following the ancient Icknield Way from Thetford in Norfolk to Wanborough in Wiltshire (over 200 kilometres). The latter consists of ten chapters: the first, 'introductory', is followed by nine 'main' ones. Each chapter, preceded by a detailed map, is a description of a topographically specific day of the narrative persona's bicycle tour undertaken at Easter 1913 from London to Cothelstone Hill in Somerset (over 250 kilometres). These formats differ markedly from the structurally, topographically and temporally nebulous *Beautiful Wales* or *The South Country*. However, for all these differences, it is the evocative and impressionistic poetic prose of Thomas that connects all these books: the style, which could be assessed in terms of development rather than radical change, all the way from the first brief descriptions of Thomas's own wanderings in *Oxford* to his 'orthodox' travel book *In Pursuit of the Spring*.

As his reputation today "rests almost entirely on his poetry" (Wiśniewski 2009: 1), it is no wonder that Thomas scholars and biographers often look at books like *The Icknield Way* or *In Pursuit of Spring* as hastily written prose commissions, in which unpolished gems of great poetry to come could be discerned[8]. Yet these two books are also very fine examples of, on the one hand, Edward Thomas's writerly craft and, on the other, of the versatility, robustness and also development of the genre of the travel book in Britain in this period.

In Pursuit of Spring was written at a very professional pace in just two months (April–May 1913), quite a feat if we take into consideration that he could not devote all his time and energy to it as in these two months ten book reviews, two articles and two books (*The Icknield Way* and *The Country*) were published (Cooper 2017). This shows the pace and pressure under which Thomas was writing for almost two decades from the end of the 19th century till 1915, when he enlisted in the British Army. When in 1911 Thomas started his research on what was to be published two years later as *The Icknield Way,* he was an experienced professional writer with more than one thousand texts published (see Cooper 2017): mostly book reviews, but also his own articles and several of his own books. Quite a few of these articles had been about travel writing, particularly about its 'naturalist branch' practised by such writers as W.H. Hudson or Richard Jefferies (whose biography he published in 1909). When we take into consideration Thomas's professionalism, his remarkably literary expertise in the field of travel writing, and his own negative remarks about the lack of thread and connections in *The South Country* voiced by him in 1910, his choice of format for his next travel account should not be surprising. *The Icknield Way* is ostensibly a straightforward travel book written in the form of a journal reporting ten

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8   Edward Frost was the first reader who noticed this, see, e.g., Wiśniewski (2009: 97).

days of the persona's walking along the ancient path. So, in formal terms it follows in the footsteps of earlier British men of letters from Henry Fielding (*A Journal of the Voyage to Lisbon*) to Robert Louis Stevenson (*Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*) who used their literary fame and skills to artistically describe in the form of a journal a relatively short and uneventful journey. Yet, as Karen Attar showed, Thomas never went on a ten-day foot trek along the ancient way, although he explored it intensively otherwise:

> Thomas wrote the book [*The Icknield Way*] in 1911. He began with research at home and in the British Museum Library in February and March, when he also undertook a few short expeditions along his conjectured path. He explored the route more fully by bicycle in April and May and again in June and July before writing the book between July and September, a year and a half before publication. (Attar 2017)

Another feature of *The Icknield Way* (and also of *In Pursuit of Spring*), which was new to Thomas's rendering of his travels but is characteristic of many British 'artistic' travel books from Fielding to W.H. Hudson, is the central role of a carefully constructed narrative persona. According to Wiśniewski, "In *The Icknield Way* Thomas appears as a guide, a naturalist, and an expert on England's social and economic history, but also entertaining travelling companion" (Wiśniewski 2009: 89). In *The Icknield Way* and *In Pursuit of Spring* Thomas constructed his own persona at the centre of the narrative, with his idiosyncratic, poetic language, as the tread he could not find in *The South Country*.

7. Conclusion

Edward Thomas was a professional writer, a tireless reviewer and a biographer. He was also an enthusiastic amateur naturalist and an avid walker, and therefore it seems only 'natural' that, as his professional career developed, he moved in the direction of travel books, a genre which had been popular in Britain for more than a century. The first phase of Thomas's development as a travel writer culminated in *The South Country*, a collage-like book of poetic travel impressions. Thomas was very hard on himself and this book, and thought it lacked structural cohesion, so when he was to represent his travel experiences again, he turned to the much more orthodox and straightforward travel book format and wrote *The Icknield Way* and *In Pursuit of Spring*.

Tim Youngs, a tireless travel writing scholar, an editor of *Studies in Travel Writing*, in the monumental recent *Cambridge History of Travel Writing* (which he edited together with Nadinin Das), in a chapter written by himself, entitled "Travel Writing after 1900", stated "[s]o far as travel writing is concerned, the period [1900 till today] takes us from Edward Thomas's book on the ancient track, *The Icknield Way* (1913), to astronauts tweeting from the International Space Station and back again to renewed interest in Thomas and nature writing" (Youngs 2019: 125). It was largely thanks to Robert Macfarlane, an academic,

a nature and travel writer himself, that Youngs could envisage the development of travel writing over the last one hundred years as a circular movement from and back to *The Icknield Way.* Macfarlane wrote an enthusiastic introduction to the 2009 edition of *The South Country* and then made Edward Thomas, as a person and as a writer, one of the key 'heroes' of *The Old Ways* (2012), and also made the Icknield Way one of the key old ways he walked "in search of a route to the past, only to find myself delivered again and again to the contemporary" (Macfarlane 2013: xi). Thanks to scholars like Jacek Wiśniewski, Robert Macfarlane and Tim Youngs, the nature and travel narratives of Edward Thomas are not only saved from oblivion, but new perspectives and new leases of life are injected into them.

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