

Land Writings

"Elegant, scrupulous and excitingly experimental, James Riding's walking-acts find new ways back into – and out from – Edward Thomas's life and work. His book – *Land Writings* – sets out the political worth of being artistic in an era when the humanities are under widespread pressure." **Robert Macfarlane**, Reader in Literature and the Geohumanities, University of Cambridge, and author of *Mountains of the Mind*, *The Old Ways*, *The Wild Places* and *Landmarks*

"Riding offers us a strikingly original take on Thomas, and at the same time delivers a very different way of writing geography imaginatively. Journeying by stages and phases, the worlds his words evoke are anguished, eloquent, tormented, candid, addled, claustrophobic, schizoid, snarky, scabrous, enigmatic, dizzying, difficult, daring, grotty, crotchety, conversational, melancholic, sensational, and magical. And that's not the half of it." **Hayden Lorimer**, Professor of Cultural Geography, University of Glasgow, and editor of *Cultural Geographies in Practice* and *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies*

"This is a complex, rich and risk-taking piece of work... a fascinating read. It is memorable, 'gets you', and makes theoretical arguments current in human geography about landscape, poetics, authorship, embodiment, memory and experience. What got me the most was its swooping quality, whether it was swooping through Thomas's poetry and life from tranquil rural England to the hell of trench warfare, being swept through the streets of central London in a peaceful protest met by police violence, or just freewheeling down a hill on a bike at dangerous speed. There is also its mashup/juxtapositional aesthetic which emerges most strongly through the remembering of fragments of poetry in landscape, but also through recurring oddities like the lyrics to the Smiths' song, *Heaven knows I'm miserable now*." **Ian Cook**, Professor of Geography, University of Exeter, and co-author of *Doing Ethnographies* and co-founder of the *Museum of Contemporary Commodities*

"The clue is in the title. As he trails Edward Thomas and leads us hand in hand, James Riding's questing and questioning reflections in, on and about the British landscape – personal, sceptical, celebratory, performative – help refashion our attitudes to notions of place, once more. Unafraid to trouble the past, to reveal his own wayward attitudes and approaches, and to describe his perceptions, involvements and experiences in candid detail, he achieves an enfolding that successfully evokes what it is *to be fully present in a landscape*. A significant and provocative addition to new writing in geography, in a challenging range of registers that wear their scholarship easily." **Mike Pearson**, Emeritus Professor of Performance Studies, Aberystwyth University, and author of *Site-Specific Performance*, *Marking Time: Performance, Archaeology and the City*, and *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape*

"As he journeys in imaginary fellowship with Thomas, Riding goes to the heart of a landscape *methodos*: a mode of thinking about place that is also a way of travelling through it, linking the walk to the peripatetics of memory and mood, intimation and association. A quiet and beautiful book, Thomas's poetry is never far away from this most personal of engagements." **Jessica Dubow**, Reader in Cultural Geography, University of Sheffield, and author of *Settling the Self: Colonial Space, Colonial Identity and the South African Landscape*

"In this breakthrough text, James Riding establishes himself as a significant land writer and voice in contemporary cultural geography. Riding's work arrives at a time when there is much discussion and debate regarding 'creative turns' in cultural geography. In this context, *Land Writings* offers a sustained, full-throttle engagement with traditions of narrating landscape, selfhood, memory and travel, and one that is notably shorn of the timidity and qualifying that often accompanies academic ventures into creative registers. From the start, you hear a confident, original voice, and as the chapters unfold, so does a story quite different from the one you might imagine." **John Wylie**, Professor of Cultural Geography, University of Exeter, and author of *Landscape*

Land Writings:

Excursions in the Footprints of Edward Thomas

By

James Riding

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



Land Writings: Excursions in the Footprints of Edward Thomas

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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9138-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9138-7

For Mum, Dad, and my Grandma Eileen

“It becomes clear, as it is not in a city, that the world is old and troubled,
and that light and warmth and fellowship are good.”

—*Beautiful Wales*, Edward Thomas

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to note here that this is a book based on the books of other writers. As such in this book when words are *italicised*, they are words taken from other texts encountered in landscape, or, they are the words of others recalled whilst wandering through my memory of these journeys on the language of landscape. The encountered writers and their texts are included in a bibliography at the end of this book. I would also like to thank here, supportive colleagues in the Department of Geography at the University of Exeter and supportive colleagues in the Department of Geography at the University of Sheffield, the Edward Thomas Fellowship, Colin Thornton, John Wylie, Jessica Dubow, Hayden Lorimer, Ian Cook, Mike Pearson, Robert Macfarlane, and the subject of this book, Edward Thomas.

EDWARD THOMAS: A GEOGRAPHICAL BIOGRAPHY

“He [Hilaire Belloc] is such a geographer as I wish many historians were, such a poet as all geographers ought to be, and hardly any other has been.”

—*A Literary Pilgrim in England*, Edward Thomas

“Edward Thomas was, from a young age, a walker, both by night and day. In his mid-twenties, when he was suffering from depression, he would often set off on long walking tours, alone, in the march-lands of Wales and England. Like so many melancholics, he developed his own rituals of relief, in the hope that these might abate his suffering, and that he might out-march the cause of his sadness.”

—*The Wild Places*, Robert Macfarlane

Whilst out walking one day, in the shade at the age of thirty-six, with the First World War looming, Edward Thomas decided to become a poet. In the few years that followed, believing he belonged nowhere, he tramped across rolling chalk downland, stitching himself to the landscape. Gently slanting from the door of his stone cottage, the South Downs – a range of chalk hills that extend across the southeastern coastal counties of England from Hampshire in the west to Sussex in the east – became day by day the mainspring of his poetry. As a perennial poet and essayist of the South Downs, he remains an enduring presence a century later in the downland he trampled daily, treading and documenting a series of paths around the village of Steep, East Hampshire, where he lived until enlisting. Since his death, in 1917, at the Battle of Arras, Edward Thomas has been habitually reappraised and channelled by poets and writers tracing his tracks through the British countryside. This continued presence prompted J.M. Coetzee, writing scenes from a provincial life in 1960s London, to ask, “What has happened to the ambitions of poets here in Britain? Have they not digested the news that Edward Thomas and his world are gone forever?”

Almost one hundred years to the day after Edward Thomas completed his first poem, about a pub near the village of Steep – where a sarsen stone memorial was installed on a wooded escarpment in 1937, dedicating the entire hillside to the poet forever after – this book gives consideration to the question J.M. Coetzee poses, gathering whether Edward Thomas and

his world are gone forever. Or if indeed, as Walter Benjamin writes of the language of landscape, each poem, its content, its world, is palpably there, in and of the world, sparked into presence like the little heap of magnesium powder lit by the flame of a match, when moving through landscapes. Travelling in the main with a literary society named the Edward Thomas Fellowship, founded over a quarter of a century ago to foster interest in the life and work of Edward Thomas and to preserve the landscape he knew of, the following book is a description of memories materialising and shards of text manifesting themselves at moments, when walking in the South Downs and beyond.

Of course in recent years, the rhythms of the subject in landscape, as it lingers, waits, detours and ruminates, has established itself quite comfortably as a method of researching landscapes in the area of the humanities that attends to the experience of the phenomenological body (see for example the geographical writings of Tim Cresswell, Stephen Daniels, Dydia DeLyser, Caitlin DeSilvey, Jessica Dubow, Tim Edensor, Tim Ingold, Hayden Lorimer, David Matless, Mike Pearson, Mitch Rose, and John Wylie). Yet such work, even when it does involve specific representations of the world, has tended to abstract that work from the landscape in which it was written, and in so doing, has used representation to reflect back upon landscape, noting the historical importance of representation in creating an image of a region. My concerns in this book are therefore twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to remain within and expand the phenomenological re-turn in the humanities and, on the other, it seeks to encourage a phenomenological re-reading of the way in which humanities scholars have dealt with representation – or what in the discipline of human geography may be read as a non-representational perception of representation. In this way, I suggest that one can both retain the impulse of phenomenological investigation – foregrounding the shock of the poetic – while also addressing an aspect with which recent critics have taken issue. Namely, a de-centring of the very individual and emotional experience of travelling in landscape, and the old concern that phenomenological and existentialist research has jettisoned the substantial power of representational acts.

On a literary walk, I follow members of a literary society around a place which their literary hero portrayed in writing or held dear, until they have had enough or have seen all there is to see. When we reach a spot where an event occurred, or a memory is recollected, or maybe a poem was written, we stop to undertake a ritual reading, or memorialising, before moving on. This is then repeated until the loop is complete or a pub is reached. A walk practising poetry usually happens two or three times a

year. The regular meets when the society of fellows actively travel to and within a literary landscape are a vital part of their voluntary memorialising, and the mutual enactment of literature and place – with the literature mediating, altering and enhancing their experience of place and the place doing the same to the literature. Hitching a ride with such literary societies who memorialise, preserve and claim landscape in this way, through what Tim Ingold has called a form of “right” or “correct” walking – reasserting poetry as they go – highlighted the individuality of a poetic landscape. I witnessed their movements, garnered their knowledge of poetry, monitored at poetic sites their detective-work, borrowed their representational findings from their regular reenactments, spoke of memories from previous loops and – legitimised by the undertaking of an outdoor leisure pursuit – mimicked their art of being moral, occasionally mobile, historically and environmentally sensitive healthy citizens.

On these loops of the South Downs, representation – for so long deemed a “dead” sphere of critique – could actually be witnessed, felt, seen, heard, or bumped into and could therefore be researched like any other thing. Literature moored itself, detached itself, interacted with, reassembled and transformed the multiple places we travelled through. Far from being abstract text, literature became a part of the vitality of those places, affecting how we moved through them, manifesting itself as a material composition, a presentation, in and of the world – not as representational imaginary, pattern, gaze or construction overarching landscape. In the *mêlée*, the place and literature mutually perform each other – adding, dissolving, maintaining, circulating and deconstructing meaning, symbolism, identity. Here, the two are being held in a porous process of intertwining, becoming and disentangling.

Now, to return to the subject of this book. The articulation of the life of Richard Jefferies, written by Edward Thomas in 1909, anticipated his own future. For Thomas, Richard Jefferies was more than a nature writer – he was a guiding spirit of the English landscape, affecting a profound influence upon his own writings. Thomas regarded Jefferies as something of a mentor, once describing the body of work he created as a gospel, an incantation. A similar mystic communion with nature draws them together, alongside a number of sympathetic resonances. A family connection – Thomas holidayed as a child in Swindon, where his grandmother lived, part of his intellectual and spiritual development – their life spans – Thomas lived only four months longer – and a creative intensity squeezed into the last few years – a slow gathering, followed by a late spate. Their work is not a naive celebration of flora and fauna, and a dumb blast at modern society, a meditation on purely the trees and the

hills. The landscape is specifically peopled and their books are altogether more complicated, precise, witty, technical, nuanced, scholarly and painterly. Jefferies is best known for his writings about nature, agriculture and the countryside. *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *Wildlife in a Southern County*, *The Amateur Poacher*, and *Round About a Great Estate* are his most celebrated pieces. In *Nature Near London* and *After London; Or, Wild England*, he also writes extensively about London and its surrounds, about satellite towns, about the salvo of coming industrialisation and about the perceived loss of a harmonious interaction between nature and people, a rural order. Loss came to define Jefferies as a writer. For Thomas, loss, the loss of a connection with nature, and the inability of the individual poet to fully represent this loss became his poetic source, down the line. Admixtures of social commentary, environmental action and personal musing, describing the half-ruined buildings and disappearing practices of the time, for leisure and work, their words act like little time capsules, demonstrating the value of representational acts.

In 1906, Edward Thomas published *The Heart of England*. The book begins with Thomas leaving London, on foot, with the reader initially stumbling upon an archetypal suburban street scene, unbroken rows of houses, all the same. Everything is described in vivid detail, as Thomas follows a boy of nine years old, moving briskly in every direction, and a strange, free, hatless man, ignoring puddles – a traveller. Colours, angles, flows, lines, loops, patterns, textures, sounds, smells. The mood becomes darker as night falls and Thomas travels further into a pre-emptive Ballardian suburbia. It is a place which has no meaning, no history, and as such nothing understandable to Thomas – half-built, unnaturally devastated, dejected, sorrowful, and despairing. “The rain formed a mist and a veil over the skeletons round about, but it revealed more than it took away; Nature gained courage in the gloom” (Thomas, 1906: 7). Thomas sets out that night, so as not to endure another night of torment, the noise of his heels and stick staining the immense silence. He feels entrapped on his exit from the city – in a borough of London once nothing but fields. Looking up at the thousands of people in their lighted windows, he proclaims, “most men are prisons to themselves” (Thomas, 1906: 8). Not the brave, cheerful lights, in the distance, which we strain our eyes for as we descend from the hills of Kent or Wales: a place of refuge in complete darkness.

The first landscape Thomas encounters after leaving London is *The Lowland*. Of the landscape, Thomas writes, “how nobly the ploughman and the plough and three horses, two chestnuts and a white leader, glide over the broad swelling field in the early morning” (1906: 23). He

continues to express his love of ploughs and what they represent for a further five pages. Evident in these pages, is a desire to preserve practices, which due to mechanisation during the Industrial Revolution of the previous century, are witnessed less and less. By writing about traditional rural practice, he is preserving something of the landscape before him. It is this longing to “make the glimpsed good place permanent”, which is evident in Thomas’s later – more famous – poetry, “although somewhere beyond the borders of Thomas’s mind, there was a world he could never quite come at” (Thomas, 1964: 11). The book ends with a collection of traditional folk songs.

I decided to begin with this particular Edward Thomas book, as it turns out to carry thought on landscape-performance-memory to challenge, echo, and surprise our own. As David Matless (2014) has emphasised in his writings on the Norfolk Broads, older books, perhaps beyond where we would normally look, also offer a resource, for our thinking of current *living* landscapes. I could easily have begun with the book, *The South Country* from 1909, in which Thomas wanders through every season, and covers all the counties from Hampshire to Cornwall, and from Surrey to Sussex. As he travels, his mind also wanders, involuntary memories materialise, and past events are recollected. Whilst in East Hampshire, Thomas (1909:9), foreseeing our current wonderment with representing immediacy, perception, and affect, writes:

“The spirit of the place, all this council of time and Nature and men, encircles the air with a bloom deeper than summer’s blue of distance; it drowns while it delights the responding mind with a magic such as once upon a time men thought to express by gods of the hearth, by Faunus and the flying nymphs, by fairies, angels, saints, a magic which none of these things is too strange and supernatural to represent. For after the longest inventory of what is here visible and open to analysis, much remains over, imponderable but mighty. Often when the lark is high he seems to be singing in some keyless chamber of the brain; so here the house is built in shadowy replica. If only we could make a graven image of this spirit instead of a muddy untruthful reflection of words!”

In 1913, Thomas set off on a bicycle from London when spring was about to begin. The plan was to pursue spring and witness the metamorphosis of the landscape, the further he got along a preordained route westerly. It was not until more than a month after a false spring had visited London though that he finally did get going, in the second week of March. The journey along roads and lanes from London to the Quantock Hills – to Nether Stowey and Coleridge Cottage, Kilve, Crowcombe, and West Bagborough,

via Guildford, Dunbridge, Salisbury Plain, Bradford-on-Avon, Trowbridge, the Avon, the Biss, the Frome, Shepton Mallet, and Bridgwater – in pursuit of spring was published in 1914. His soon to be good friend, the poet Robert Frost, concluded that the book was poetic and that “Thomas was a poet behind the disguise of his prose”, encouraging him on their first meeting to begin writing poetry (Thomas, 1985: 223). This is unclearly discussed in a number of biographies, where Thomas appears Frost’s “debtor, in verse and in inspiration” (Sergeant, 1960: 209). Thomas though was in pursuit of the poetic long before meeting Frost. Riding out of the capital westward following the return of spring, to the sacred site of Coleridge Cottage in Nether Stowey, Somerset, was not his first poetic excursion. As R.G. Thomas (1985: 223) writes, “we can see Thomas clearing the ground [in his prose] in preparation for a thorough understanding of the self that, he feared had gone astray”. On returning from the pursuit springwards Thomas wrote eighty-five poems in seven months, from November 1914 to the day he enlisted. It is now widely understood, rightly so, that Thomas had been a poet all his life, and that “Frost produced the enharmonic change, which made him not a different man, but the same man in another key” (Farjeon, 1958: 56). Put simply, “Robert Frost kick-started Thomas’s poetry” (Longley, 2008: 15).

Of the one hundred and forty four poems written, during the final two years of his life, “sometimes at the rate of one a day”, *The Manor Farm* (1914), *The Combe* (1914), *Adlestrop* (1915), *The Chalk Pit* (1915), *A Tale* (1915), *The Path* (1915), *Lob* (1915), *Aspens* (1915), *The Mill Water* (1915), *Wind and Mist* (1915) and many others still resonate, despite their speedy execution (Sacks, 2004: xxiv). The startlingly arresting views of English landscape, the eulogies for ancient beasts of the British countryside and the descriptions of disturbing, strange and beautiful folkloric archetypes have defined him as a person, after extended periods spent withdrawn and morose doing hack work. The prolonged state of introspection Thomas suffered before eventually deciding to become a poet is played out in his poems in what Edna Longley (2008: 14) terms “poetic psychodrama”. The poems habitually feature a split self or a “switch between patient and analyst”, reflecting the mild schizophrenia he was diagnosed with after undergoing psychoanalysis in 1912 (Longley, 2008: 14). A doppelganger, performing the role of his analyst, haunts the landscapes Edward Thomas wanders, acting as a knowledgeable precursor, taunting his attempts at nature writing and poetry. Alongside a landscape imbued with a human agency, the doppelganger is played off against the voice of the poet, redirecting his feelings, as if in a process of transference.

Thomas captures the fleeting, fractured moments, of intimate disintegrating places, set in the wider context of a disappearing, encroached upon English countryside, preserved for eternity in dark, eerie, haunted, uncanny verse, beset with loss, due to his “residual mystical inclinations” (Longley, 2008: 14). His poetry is conversational, and it is simple, honest, and understated, in a “disarmingly low-keyed tone of voice” (Motion, 1980: 169). “The sound of sense” (Motion, 1980). Moments of thought and memory perforate, and expound all that is “ungraspable in the very nature of words, and memory, and consciousness” (Danby, 1959: 313), leaving, therefore, only *disconnected* impressions of landscape, providing merely a series of *fragments* for the reader. Lanes, trees, woods, brooks, pits, roads, hills, farms, pubs, paths, houses, chapels, signposts, and animals are interwoven with places, weather, people, and countryside practices. Rejecting the fuss of modernism and the pomp of traditionalism, Thomas continues the distinctly English plain style of Chaucer, early Wordsworth, John Clare, Richard Jefferies and Thomas Hardy. He does not sit very easily with the present, preferring the past, but is in many ways a covert modernist in his style. His verse subtly upsets. Rhyme schemes are rarely used, and a rhyming couplet is particularly rare. In short, his poetry resists categorisation. He is on the cusp of old and new, “between antiquated traditionalism and elitist modernism”, an isolated figure, not included in Michael Robert’s epoch-defining *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936) (Wisniewski, 2009: 1). Despite this, Ted Hughes once described Edward Thomas as “the father of us all”. Edna Longley reiterated this statement, arguing Thomas began the modern poetry movement with Robert Frost and W.B. Yeats, due to their rejection of a constricted verse and imagism led poetry, allowing freedom (Longley, 2008: 20). Furthermore, his melancholic version of Romantic Ecology (Bate, 1991), or eco-historical writing, naturalistic but very much committed to the workers who cultivate the landscape, shares many similarities with current ecological thought. He is a pastoral melancholic, “longing to make the glimpsed good place permanent” (Thomas, 1964: 11). Today, Thomas’s poems are disturbingly in a time of renewed nationalism, appropriated and often praised for their “Englishness”, in spite of his Welsh heritage (see Wisniewski, 2009), and the landscapes he represented have in many ways become an archetypal “rural idyll”. An idyll, which due to Thomas’s hatred of nationalism and his feeling of belonging nowhere, subversively remains preserved for eternity in eerie, haunted, uncanny verse.

Edward Thomas died in the battle of Arras on Easter Monday 9th April 1917 at 7.36 a.m., hit by a stray shell at the Beaurains observation post (Thomas, 1985: 292). There was not a scratch on him. The sound of the

blast stopped his heart. He was thirty-nine. A sombre war diary, found in his pocket at the time of his death was included in a new edition of his collected poems. In the diary, he writes how a shell landed beside him a day earlier but did not explode. A crumpled letter containing a fragment of poetry remained with his body, along with the diary, and a photograph of his wife. The poems, which Thomas completed in the final years of his life, were first published shortly after his death, and have never since been out of print. Letters written to friends and family have also been published, a fragment of autobiography, and many biographies, including two new ones, *Now All Roads Lead to France: the Last Years of Edward Thomas* (Hollis, 2011), and *Edward Thomas: From Adlestrop to Arras: A Biography* (Moorcroft Wilson, 2015). Guides to his poetry and the landscapes that the poems represent exist too, in order to complement all of his topographical and critical work, and new poems found only recently in a box have been shared widely. Thomas has a hillside dedicated to him, which is marked with a sarsen stone, and two stained glass church windows. His name is etched on to the war poet's memorial in Westminster Abbey, and his homes are marked with plaques stating that the poet once lived there. And over a quarter of a century ago, in 1980, a *Fellowship*, a band of brothers, was established formally, to further perpetuate his life and work and to conserve the countryside known to Edward Thomas and recorded in his writings, by repeatedly walking it – its roots go back further, to the laying of the sarsen stone memorial in 1937. This desire to preserve and remember has a politics, for there is a geopolitics of memory, as certain stories are remembered and others are hidden. Indeed this archival desire, a desire that humans have in the troubled present to give meaning to and to memorialise and document a still and dead past, is described by Michel Foucault as a distinctly modern idea. And the contemporary desire to turn the lands of England into one of Thomas's poems, or the using of landscape poetry to construct an imagined past is a primary concern in this book. This appropriation of the words of poets and writers, the art of the past, has a real politics that can presently be seen in a backward looking British political landscape.

DEATH DRIVE: EDWARD THOMAS'S GRAVE

“I am not taking a pilgrimage,” I said to myself when I visited the graveyard at Port Bou in the spring of 2002. Indeed I was not even sure I wanted to visit the graveyard. I do not think this was entirely due to fear of cemeteries on my part. Nor was it because I am also attracted to them. It was more because I feel uncomfortable about what I discern as an incipient cult around the site of Benjamin’s grave, as if the drama of his death, and of the holocaust, in general, is allowed to appropriate and overshadow the enigmatic power of his writing and the meaning of his life. Put bluntly, the death comes to mean more than the life. This cult is at once too sad and sentimental, too overdetermined an event – the border crossing that failed, the beauty of the place, the horror of the epoch. It really amounts to a type of gawking, I thought to myself, in place of informed respect, a cheap frill with a frisson of tragedy further enlivened by the calm and stupendous beauty of the landscape. In any event, one does not worship at the grave of great thinkers. But what then is the appropriate gesture? Death is an awkward business. And so is remembrance.”

—*Walter Benjamin’s Grave*, Michael Taussig

09.11.11. Very early morning, Imperial War Museum archive.

“You are not allowed to take photographs.”

“They are not going to be reproduced.”

“You are not allowed to take photographs.”

Scribble it down on scraps of paper instead. Eyes clogged with sleep dust still, head a little fuzzy. There was stuff here that no one had ever bothered to look at. Why would anyone? A document about an Edward Thomas Centenary Memorial. Signed in 1978 by Myfanwy Thomas, youngest daughter of the poet and writer Edward Thomas, Alec Guinness, famous actor and local resident, Jill Balcon, famous actress and local resident, and Douglas Sneglan, the then vicar of Steep – a village in East Hampshire, where a sarsen stone memorial was installed on a hill above in 1937. It will be the centenary of his death soon. The document began with a quotation: *Steep on Tuesday, and for all I know ever after*. These words headed a letter written by Edward Thomas on July 21st 1913, as he moved

in to his third and last house in the village. He had just returned from a bike ride in pursuit of spring, a poetic undertaking out of the capital west, and had met little known American poet Robert Frost a matter of weeks earlier. Frost would tell Thomas that the pursuit springwards was a series of poems and to begin writing poetry. And he was about to learn of the First World War, where he would soon be killed by a stray shell at the Battle of Arras. Steep was to become, during his final four years, the centre of his spiralling world, the mainspring of his poetry.

The pursuit of spring, setting out from his childhood home in Clapham, London, is often overlooked as an important milestone in his life. On it, he finds the beginnings of his poetic voice. *In Pursuit of Spring* was first published in April 1914, following its writing up. By December 1914, Thomas had written his first poem. Into the next two years, he crammed all his verse writing. As the document in the Imperial War Museum archive said, most were written about Steep and its surrounds. In addition to the pursuit springwards, Thomas had been walking rough-circles almost daily from home and back since moving to the village. He abused notebooks on these loops. It was though the writing of *In Pursuit of Spring* that provided Thomas with a greater understanding of the self. It also gives the reader an insight into his split psyche, his depressive illnesses. He writes down some of the demons that had been plaguing him, using the pursuit as a form of therapy, and the pursuit itself lived on in his poems. Sections of prose from the pursuit were fashioned into haunting depictions of landscape, landscape threatened by war and the relentless force of industrialisation. While the Other Man, a doppelganger, is a recurrent character in his verse, his other self, his nagging doubt. He recurs again-and-again in his poems, and is first introduced in the book *In Pursuit of Spring*. Riding westward out of the capital was to be the start of his epically creative last four years.

A century later I resolved to set off by bicycle, tracing the journey that Thomas had made – once I had established when spring had begun, or more accurately was about to begin. The plan was to then pursue it and witness the metamorphosis of the landscape and myself, the further I got along the preordained route. It was not until more than a month after a false spring had visited London though that I finally did get going, in the second week of March. The ride was to be my first journey of this kind. On the road for an extended period, out in the open countryside or weaving through dense traffic. It remains to be seen what remains for a poet and a topographic writer, the subject, I, in a post-human world. Riding to the holiest of holy poetic sites from the capital seemed like a good way to find out what remnants there were. A journey along roads and

lanes to the Quantock Hills in pursuit of spring. Thomas becoming a bard on that bike. It all started a couple of years prior to the false spring though, with an urge to walk in a strange way. Differently to what I was used to, and to document this act. To walk away from an industrial northern town to its nationwide opposite, an affluent rural southern village and experience what poets meant by the sublime, placing Edward Thomas at the centre of the journey as a provocation. And in a sense, to undertake a poetic apprenticeship, training myself to look again at the world. I have to admit, I have developed an unhealthy obsession with Edward Thomas, as he aided and inspired, becoming both the subject and the object of this work and at the same time neither. The ripples had to stop somewhere though. I had to give up the ghost.

The un-photographable A4 single sheet document in the Imperial War Museum confirmed that a memorial to mark the centenary of his birth – March 3rd 1978 – would be placed in Steep, complementing the entire hillside above, which had already been dedicated to the memory of Edward Thomas. He would be in Steep, *ever after*. The hill has, since 1980 especially, become a site of pilgrimage. A literary society founded then – known as the Edward Thomas Fellowship – has grown up around the site. They repeat a birthday walk yearly, culminating in a site-reading by the inscribed stone. It has essentially become a grave where flowers and poems are left – Thomas's body though is buried in Agny Military Cemetery, northeast France, near where he was killed. Like the Walter Benjamin memorial in Port Bou, on the border between Spain and France, the Edward Thomas Memorial Stone is a fake grave, depending on how we classify a grave. In his non-pilgrimage to the site where Walter Benjamin took his own life, fleeing the Nazis, Michael Taussig writes, "When we get down to it, why trust that any grave contains what it's supposed to? One of the most important events in life, namely, death, is so shrouded in secrecy and fear that most of us would never dare to check. Who knows what goes on up there in the graveyard of Port Bou? Maybe none of the graves have the right body, or any at all?" I would add to that, why does it matter whether a grave contains bones? The body does not hold the remnants of who we are in death – does it even hold who we are in life?

In addition to the memorial stone above Steep, the *Fellowship* has drawn all over the village itself. Each of the three houses that he rented there has an oval plaque adorning its frontage. *Edward Thomas Poet lived here*. And opposite a war memorial with his name on, there are two lancet windows in the church representing his life. A life that has to an extent been reduced to a final few years, the years when he reached a creative

tipping point, and began writing poetry at an astonishing rate. And to his death, his heroic death at war – a war which still haunts this quiet corner of East Hampshire. The cult is at once too sad, too sentimental, as Michael Taussig notes. Oddly, the house where he was born, 61 Shelgate Road, Clapham Junction, declares, *EDWARD THOMAS 1878-1917 ESSAYIST AND POET lived here*. The blue plaque marked his whole life – 1878-1917 – not the years he dwelt in the house, telling also something of his previous life as an essayist. It was placed there not by the Edward Thomas Fellowship but by London County Council. The terraced house was just off Northcote Road, Clapham – a typical busy London suburb. It was not a place that Thomas particularly liked, hence his move to the little village of Steep in later life, a village that has become an Edward Thomas theme village, as if all he ever was, was the local hero poet. And that poetry was something transcendental, which simply flowed forth when he looped the place.

Another poet of the same era, Thomas Sturge Moore, lived in the village but is forgotten mostly, overwritten by the memory-work of the Edward Thomas Fellowship. It is as if they have claimed the place for Edward Thomas – and all the place now is, is a memorial, a poem, an imaginary, thanks in part to their material reminders. Their name suggests so. *Fellowship* implies *stewardship*, *ownership*, *guardians*, and *protectors* of the *landscape*. It suggests an older understanding of landscape, *landschaft*, shaped not by landscape painting and photography but by stories and tales, which distribute a territorial belonging, creating a sense of community for those that are part of the cult. The village is cluttered with poems, now *landmarks*, festooned with *bookmarks*. They may have been forgotten sites without the mapping of a few intrepid members of a literary society.

Afternoon: Steep, East Hampshire, in the traces of Edward Thomas again. This is not a pilgrimage – I kept telling myself. Simply a final act of remembrance in Steep – the first without the *Fellowship* present – on the way to somewhere I had resolved to visit, despite this supposedly not being a pilgrimage: the site of his death near Arras and his grave in Agny – a place which as of yet the *Fellowship* have left well alone. The village of Steep is set around two streets at the base of a hill called the Shoulder of Mutton, and another lane runs along the ridge and leads to the memorial stone. Two of the houses rented in the village by Edward Thomas are below, and one is above on the edge of the wooded escarpment. I began my intervention at the solitary pine, covering the village with new words, alone in a field beneath the pined ridge, the stone just about visible. Bits of paper attentive to the form and experience of walking in landscape were tucked under branches ready to be found, or to decompose before any

finding. On one of the pieces of paper I carried with me on this journey was a poem, entitled *End*. It was written about the solitary pine, which was noticed in this landscape on my first meeting with two members of the Edward Thomas Fellowship, and was written of in the poem *No One So Much as You* by Thomas. It felt like an end, a gift to Edward, as he is called in the majority of this book.

End

The pit of my stomach fell out
at the sight of the solitary pine.
Seeing it alone, rooted, in the centre
of a vast expanse of dusty green
lit faded memories. They flashed
as the pine loitered in my head
bringing to an end the distant
dream of redemption I had had.

From the solitary pine, I drove to a pub. It was frequented on my third walk in this landscape. A rough-circle walk with a solitary member, called Doug. We had walked to *The Chalk Pit* and back. Thomas had written of the accidental amphitheatre in 1915. The seventeenth century pub that we passed on the way, called the Harrow Inn, was also a regular haunt of his. I decided to write a poem after discussing the life of actor, local resident, and fan of poetry, Alec Guinness, with Doug. The pub was not open for some reason but there were people inside. As I drove away, after leaving the poem on a bench, someone came out to read it; they seemed bemused by the fly posting.

It was time to head up to the common site of pilgrimage, the memorial stone that looks down on the village. I drove back out of the village of Steep, past *The Aspens* and the two houses with their plaques. When in the car, I followed the road as it twisted uphill through a pine forest. A deep coombe was beneath, *The Path*, *The Mill-Water* and *A Tale* down there. I parked beside *The New-House* and walked the rest of the way. The view came in instalments, until I reached the stone, and out from beneath the canopy. Michael Taussig and his words haunted the journey that I was making, driving from the memorial stone to his actual grave, unsure as to whether that was a good idea. Or, whether it was a tracing too far, to follow Thomas to war, and in a sense bring war back to this place. When I got to the stone though, I realised that the war remained ever-present here. There was a poppy stuck under the octagonal plaque, on the face of the sarsen stone, and some flowers had been left. So, I got about my business of remembering and left another poem. I slipped under the flowers a poem

written about the hillside – Edward's Hill – called *Gazing*. I had written it after my walk with Doug, when we had stared from this spot.

After canvassing the village, cluttering it with representation, I drove to two other famous sites nearby. The first was the green lane. Thomas had written a poem about it in late 1916, just before he travelled to France. He was given some leave soon after, during which he returned to 13 Rusham Road, Clapham, to see his family over Christmas, before shipping out. He completed only two more poems after this date. I left down the green lane the first poem that I had ever written, after finding a dead mole with Colin and Larry, two members of the Edward Thomas Fellowship – the walk which marked the start of the *bookmarking*, chasing Thomas's footprints across poetic lay lines, between ancient literary sites.

Mole

Water had gathered in the deep trenches
where wheels had passed over for centuries,
down the narrow treacherous green lane.

Drenched cheap trainers began digging at my feet
leaving me looking down more often to concentrate,
I noticed when slowing and studying my gait
on the ground a dead mole face up arms outstretched;
there was not a scratch upon it.

Its heart stopped from a fright, a loud noise,
perhaps a blast from a gun. Bending down
I reached for the mole and stroked the fur on its belly,
before picking it up. It was not larger than my palm;
touching it I was surprised at its warmth and its softness.
Not long since it had gone.

I would drive to 13 Rusham Road in the traces of Edward Thomas, after doing one final thing – the last thing in a landscape that I had spent four years looping. From the green lane, I drove past the pub with no name, about which Thomas wrote his first poem, to *The Manor Farm*, the site of a poem written by Thomas in 1914. It is of all his poems the one where the poem does seem to “furbish the charm” of the place, much like the George Wither poem about a pond in Alresford, which does exactly that, according to Thomas when *In Pursuit of Spring*. *The Manor Farm* is the most idyllic of all his poems, the rural idyll. And you really can imagine him coming here again and again in order to write it. Before walking over to the farm, yew, and church, I left a description of a meeting. The first meeting with the group of people who work tirelessly to preserve his

memory. There is an old phone box there. Inside it, in the shadow of the manor farm I left, *A Meeting*. This place, on that first meeting with it, held no connection with my psyche. Now, in the part of the brain where psychology and topology meet, it coaxes vast forlorn horizons, monumental emptiness, whole mournful memoryscapes.

I was told on my first meeting with the *Fellowship*, a famous story. It was the story of why Edward Thomas went to war, as he was over the age of conscription. The story is often eagerly regaled on the Edward Thomas Fellowship birthday walks, or memorial-loops. Thomas was asked by his good friend Eleanor Farjeon, why he wanted to go to war and what he was fighting for. He replied by scooping up some earth, crumbling it in his hand, and sprinkling it out. "Literally for this", he said. It is a story that I have always been fascinated by, as his body was never returned to the soil he crumbled. The final thing that I was going to take from this landscape was some soil and I would transport it to Agny, France, and his grave. The ancient yew that Thomas wrote of so beautifully had been in the landscape for centuries before him, and would be there centuries after. From beneath it, I took a handful of earth.

11.11.11. Odd singularity, cosmic portal transit date. Poetic lay-lines eminent, particularly on this date of remembrance. Trekking from 15 (formerly 13) Rusham Road across the Channel, Southampton to Le Havre by boat, ending up in the flat, flat land of northeast France. Gravelines was the name of the first place in France once off the boat, suitable for this final tracing, a death drive from the memorial village, and his poems, to his grave, and on to the grave of Wilfred Owen. A transportation of earth, nature, poetry: earth-growth itself. I was glad it was nearly all over, it needed to come to an end. I wanted to be myself again, remove Edward Thomas: a part of me since summer 2008. The death drive had become apparent over the four years in the traces of Thomas. How can it be a form of therapy to write down experiences? You end up never really feeling, or confronting, anything. Instead, look down on a version of yourself moving about places. Emotions are prevented from being fully understood and bad times are never gotten over. They are instead, as if by magic, turned to prose. Or even worse, bad times are manufactured, in order to become muted prose. It is cyclical.

Mud, cloying mud, beneath a dreary sky: nothing else for miles. As if a giant rotavator had passed over the whole landscape, chopping everything up. These were the famous fields, nowhere to hide. Dug into the land are trenches – some left open, like an open wound: for memory's sake. There were no wild poppies – not even they can survive modern farming

techniques. Arras had two squares around which cafes noised. Middle-aged Americans were heard through the din. Here to re-visit the war: dark tourism – a fine line between curiosity and gawping. They spoke of memorabilia – old guns, ammunition, medals. And sites of interest. A parade passed by. I had to get out of the open. It was too busy. Heading in the car to Beaurains instead. It was seemingly just a through-place to somewhere else – flanking a single road for half a mile on leaving Arras. There was no mention of Edward Thomas in the place that he died. The observation post was nowhere to be found. You go through a field and down the back of a garage to get to the graveyard. It backs on to a street of grey houses – put there at a later date. Agny was small but it was difficult to find – hidden away, intimate. The feel of the place was a monument to death in itself. Cold scrubland: a wonderful behindness to the scene. I remembered the triumphant memorial stone at Steep – surveying all before it.

Graveyard, cemetery: peaceful. In contradistinction to the path leading to it, it was neat, ordered. Mist clung to the cherry trees around about. And as in the Edward Thomas poem *The Cherry Trees*, they *bend over and are shedding On the old road where all that are passed are dead*. Gravestones stood in numbered lines, facing a single large cross. Roots and branches encroached and overhung, as if nature was trying to take the space back. It was a deadly silent little patch of earth. Row C Grave 43, was through the only entrance and off to the right. The site mimicked the epic silence that fell, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918. When after four years of fighting, The Great War was finally over. Lest we forget: how we remember. Bits of poetry were inscribed on gravestones. Most had the *Ode of Remembrance* taken from the Laurence Binyon poem *For the Fallen* at their base.

And there it was before me, the stone I had been searching for. *Second Lieutenant P.E. Thomas, Royal Garrison Artillery, 9th April 1917, Poet*. The grave next door sadly had written on it: *A Soldier of the Great War, Known unto God*. It made the non-pilgrimage seem silly and ridiculous. Although I did feel a strange sense of an ending, a giving up of memories, of the past, knowing what was about to happen. On the grave that I had come to pay my respects to, there were previous signs of homage. Grass was slightly worn directly in front of it and it was the only grave in the cemetery with something left at its base. There was a weathered piece of paper with a poem written on it, a photograph of Adlestrop train station – closed in 1966, a bench is now all that is left, with a plaque on it that quotes the famous poem – and a couple of poppies. The poem scribbled on the decaying paper was poignant. Someone who knew Edward Thomas

well had left it. It was not a famous poem like *Adlestrop*, always included in best-loved poems anthologies. Rather an obscure one, that has recently become the title of a new biography. The final three stanzas were written down, although the last one had been taken by the rain and wind. I sprinkled the soil from beneath the yew, and patted it down, reuniting Edward Thomas with the soil of England. A collapse of self and world impossible in life, achieved in death.

Before leaving, I wanted to know something of the other dead buried in the graveyard. A register was held neatly inside a gatepost. It explained:

The cemetery contains 408 commonwealth burials of the First World War, 118 of them unidentified, and 5 German graves. It was begun by French troops, and used by Commonwealth units and field ambulances from March 1916 to June 1917. Two further burials were made in April 1918. And in 1923-24, 123 graves were brought in from battlefields east of Arras. The original 40 French graves have since been removed.

A visitor's book was attached to the register. Most comments were about Edward Thomas. Here are some of them:

I came from Spain to visit Edward Thomas, one of the greatest poets England has given, RIP / I remember Adlestrop / To honour all those brave men and to find Edward Thomas / Remembering Edward Thomas, English Lit graduate and researcher of the poet / Ex Lincoln College remembering Edward Thomas / Visiting the poet P.E. Thomas, thank you and all your comrades / In honour of all those who died and fought, and Edward Thomas / Visiting poet Edward Thomas whose poetry I admire, and which sustained me when sad / Peaceful beautiful place, remembering Philip Edward Thomas and other World War One heroes / Beautiful place, well cared for, very moving – I remember Adlestrop / We came to find Edward Thomas / Re-read 'As the team's head brass...' wonderful poem, RIP Edward Thomas / Edward Thomas, All roads lead to France / Came to see Edward Thomas's grave, RIP.

From there I drove away – my attempt to forget, through a final remembering, failed – to the graveside of another member of the Artists' Rifles, Wilfred Owen: the poet who robbed war of its last shred of glory. Unlike the poems of the period, monuments shamefully lack the nerve to project the awful purpose of themselves. They are a betrayal of the dead: victims of an incapacity, century just past, to devise a commemorative mode – a century that, more than any other, needed such a mode. Most memorials are inimical to meditative remembrance. They purposefully forget, wipe over, sanitise history. An exercise in gaining an aesthetic sensibility is

something which counteracts this, as poets of the period did. There is a poetics there which can be harnessed, if a glimmer of the subjective condition of the poet creeps in to interpretations of landscape: the shock of the poetic.

KOTOR: A VERTICAL WALK

“But the fact is that writing is the only way in which I am able to cope with the memories which overwhelm me so frequently and so unexpectedly. If they remained locked away, they would become heavier and heavier as time went on, so that in the end I would succumb under their mounting weight. Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in some way blind us to life... And yet what would we be without memory? We would not be capable of ordering even the simplest thoughts, the most sensitive heart would lose the ability to show affection, our existence would be a mere never-ending chain of meaningless moments, and there would not be the faintest trace of a past. How wretched this life of ours is! – So full of false conceits, so futile, that it is little more than the shadow of the chimeras loosed by memory. My sense of estrangement is becoming more and more dreadful.”

— *The Rings of Saturn*, W.G. Sebald

I am not a walker, well not in the rambling outdoorsy sense. Like everyone else I dislike being cold and damp and never learnt, or got taught how to walk in such a way; how to appreciate the great national parks like a poet. To clarify: I had probably been for about twenty real countryside walks in my whole life, before the summer of 2008. Of these twenty walks, the majority were with my parents in the Lake District. Even then, most of the day would be spent staring through the car window, sat in a twee little coffee shop leafing through guidebooks, or, on occasion, we would stand beside a lake, usually Windermere, admiring the view out across the great literary landscape. William Wordsworth, Beatrix Potter, Alfred Wainwright and their texts mutually encountering, enacting, unsettling, transforming, interacting, inventing and reinventing the Lakes for a kid from a cotton town.

Thinking back now, going for a walk as a child actually involved very little opportunity to stretch my legs. At most, we would walk for a few hundred metres, taking two or three hours to do so – once you include a refreshment stop. Planned walking routes which looped over hills and through trees, were very rare. I vaguely recall a moany walk which gave on to a beach somewhere. It was a line walk of roughly a mile, climbing a

knot and descending to the sea. Beyond that memory fails me. I am assured though by my parents that we walked reasonable distances on occasion. When I left school, as is common, these excursions ended altogether. Leaving me all alone with some guidebooks, stories and poems, to crack the country code and find out how to walk vast landscapes properly. Needless to say, there was no attempt made to do so and venture rural. I resolved not to leave the safe confines of the city again in order to walk, and have never owned a cagoule, some walking boots, or a stick.

I did not need to in Manchester, a city haunted by its faded past. The place where it all began: smog, chimneys, factories; industrialisation, capitalism. Remnants still exist: a shock of red brick here and there, a few canals, a number of now renovated mills and a number of ruins in Castlefield and Ancoats, and the imposing civic architecture along Oxford Road and Deansgate. While south of the city centre are Rusholme, Fallowfield, Didsbury, Levenshulme, Burnage, and Longsight and rows and rows of terraced housing. And beyond the concrete collar, the orbital motorway, sits Hulme, cut off from the city for years. The Arndale still squats hideously over Market Street too. More or less the Manchester W.G. Sebald witnessed, all lurking behind the recently fitted stone and glass facade. Derelict industrial edgelands, ruins, ignored meadows, guerrilla forests, the city parks, urban nature, found via ginnels, back streets, buildings, culverts, tunnels, and canals, as I criss-crossed the city on foot: stitching my psyche to its fabric. Places dotted around the city where I would go for bits of time: houses, pubs, lecture theatres, benches, restaurants, clubs, squares, buses, libraries, cafes, shops, bars etc. Usual haunts.

There was one walk beyond the city from that period though, which I can remember well. The only walk forever enshrined in my memory. It happened a few months before I moved down south. And I was on holiday in Montenegro with my then girlfriend, who had also participated in the no rambling rule despite being from walking stock – her great grandfather was a pivotal member of a noble body of scholarly and cheerful pedestrians, *The Order of the Sunday Tramps*.

Hippo Hostel, Budva, Montenegro. The only private room in the plain white building had squeezed in, a narrow hard bed, with a chrome fan as its face. The shower room, shared by forty or so people, was opposite, and there was a quiet, still, little garden, which you had to climb down and in to from the road. I spent a whole day there once, lazing beneath the flowering vines, reading the W.G. Sebald book, *Vertigo*, whilst my then girlfriend, C, read Kafka. The quiescence played with the range of fleeting memories written delightfully and the next day the book was taken on a

trip to the world heritage site, Kotor. It was safely stowed in a pink rucksack – a monkey key ring dangling and guarding the zips – whilst we rattled along on the humid old bus watching the landscape slide by. It took about an hour to get there, winding along possibly the most picturesque road in Europe; skirting the edge of the Bay of Kotor, beneath sheer limestone cliffs. It was familiar scenery, reminding of a youth spent driving around the Lakes. That did not stop it from being an epic and entirely different experience though. The sun helped, causing the vast bowl to glisten and blind, distancing thoughts of Cumbria.

As soon as the bus pulled in at the ruin of a bus station in the old town, we walked directly to the water and jumped off a thin stretch of boardwalk, into the crystal-clear fjord like river canyon. Being more comfortable wild swimming than rambling my body seemingly evolved to a life aquatic, free to dive down to the rocky bed visible deep below, before coming up for air. Others mirrored my movements. We all then floated for a while on our backs in the freshwater, like a wreath of lily pads, looking up at the mysterious castle. It appeared unreachable and inaccessible for tourists. C broke the silence and splashed me a few times. She wanted to reach the castle that we were all inadvertently focused upon. I was not so keen. C swam in though adamant that we should attempt the climb and transfixed her gaze on the narrow path, zigzagging upwards. Towing off in the shallows she once again implored me to walk up to the medieval fortress. I paddled in but only rested for a while on the shingle, pretending to read a little more of *Vertigo* – my mind though was on the cloud castle. Sitting and looking up into the heavens, we were drawn on to our feet simultaneously. The tip of the tower miles up above and the tiny flag fluttered proudly, beckoning us forth. It was midday and the sun was baking our faces, so we stocked up on water, weighing the pink bag down, before attempting the climb.

A few metres below a little chapel, a woman was sitting on one of the thousands of steps in the shade of a tree, selling tickets to enter the winding path through a gate. With a large yellow ticket in hand, in no time at all we were on our way up the mountain. A perfect line of poplar trees focused the eye forward, dead ahead, to the chapel the woman guarded. The path, flanked by a low banister of stone, was at this point wide enough to walk side by side, and talk of the increasingly spectacular view of the fjord from round the next zig or zag. We chose to walk on the rough gravel, rather than up the steps, as the slope was quite shallow. Walking hither and thither across it with ease, and taking lots of photos, we were scooting up the mountainside, taking hairpin bend after hairpin bend, enjoying the increasingly sublime scene laid out before us. Monumental

mountains, pretty old town, clear fjord, and clear sky. Until we stumbled upon the beginnings of the fortress, despite still being hundreds of feet beneath it. A number of half-ruined stone walls converged, creating a succession of roofless cubes. We looked inside them all. In the last was a rectangular opening, which allowed us to peer over the edge at another little church. This one was in the middle of a field and had bearded horned goats guarding it, supported by hopping bunnies. It was the rabbit hole. The field and church had no right to be there. We were ascending a slanting staircase carved into the side of a mountain. It made no sense. And a sense of disbelief occurred at what we were seeing, so surprising was it. Acres and acres of fine grazing land just appearing out of nowhere, a hidden plateau as smooth as a bowling green or the baize of a snooker table. The church was a lot further away than it seemed. C did not come down with me. I continued instead alone, with C and the hole getting smaller and smaller for a few minutes. Goats began to surround, and it was all getting a bit weird. The church could house anything, or anyone, and it was no closer than when at the gateway peering in. On turning back, C was no longer standing in the opening. The dark rectangle was the only feature on the great grey wall before me, aiming for that, quickly, leaving the church and goats behind. It took some effort to reach the opening with a hand.

Back on the path, C was snapping away at the fjord unaware of the surreal experience. Water was necessary. Gulping the liquid down provided scant relief from the sun, which had now been searing our scalps for almost two hours. We discussed giving up and going back down but the flag still beckoned us, two ships in the night drawn on to the rocks. And on continuing to climb the zigzagging path, we came across more and more bizarre walls, spreading out like the roots of a tree holding the mountainside in place. The higher we climbed the narrower the path became and it had no banister or steps at all by then, forcing us to straddle the limestone at times. Worried that C would fall off and crash to her death before my eyes – leaving me to find her smashed carcass at the bottom two hours later – I resorted to telling her about every single rock on the path. On each bend, we would stop to take on the drips of water left from our two large bottles. By then we were making incredibly slow progress, baby steps were a necessity at that altitude for novices. The path felt like it was never going to end, and we could continue forever, zigzagging all the way to space. But it did, all things always come to an end. It was an odd ending though, as the path did not stop its zigzagging. In fact, it carried on, twenty or thirty feet above us, ascending into the clouds. But we could not follow this thread any further, we had exhausted its connective possibilities.