Reviews

The Man Who Went Into the West: The Life of R. S. Thomas, Byron Rogers, London: Aurum Press, 2006, pp. 315; ISBN 1845131460. £16.99

If this were just the biography of an eccentric, it would still deserve to be published, for here is a fascinating and hilarious portrait of a rare and odd personality, one whose strangeness adds spice to our dull world. R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) was strange by any standards. He was a mass of contradictions. He was uneasy in company, but chose the Christian ministry, a vocation that demands constant relating to people. He was a strident advocate of Welsh nationalism, yet spoke with a 'cut-glass' English accent which made him sound more 'posh' than the Queen. He was a vigorous advocate of the Welsh language, yet only learned it in his thirties and wrote poetry in English. Indeed he sent his son to be educated at an expensive English boarding school. Late in life living as a kind of recluse, he gained a reputation as 'the Ogre of Wales' by showing hostility and rudeness to strangers, visitors and fans. Yet those, whom he admitted to his company, he could charm and delight with wit and humour.

Crammed as it is with Thomas' many strange adventures and with examples of his weird behaviour, this book has many delights for the reader. Indeed it is impossible to read parts of it without laughing out loud. But Thomas was not only an eccentric, he was also a poet. And what a poet! At his death *The Daily Telegraph* described him as "one of the best poets writing in English since the Second World War". Kingsley Amis called him "one of the half-dozen best poets now writing in English". His early poems celebrate and portray rural Wales, its earthy people and its bleak landscape. Later the poems explore the presence and more often, the absence of God. They deplore the inexorable advance of 'The Machine' threatening the landscape. They celebrate love and probe the poet's long and unique marriage to the artist Elsi Eldridge. The poems speak for themselves and the poet is in the poems. Yet the art of biography is not redundant. Rogers opens the

heart of the reader to embrace Thomas, both the man and his literary achievement. One cannot help admiring R. S., while being relieved that one does not have to live next door to him.

R. S. Thomas was born in Cardiff in 1913. He grew up in the dull port of Holyhead and was educated at Bangor University before training in Cardiff for the priesthood of the Anglican Church of Wales. His ministry was always in country parishes, first in Manafon near the English border, then further west in Eglwys Fach and finally as far west as one can go at Aberdaron near the cliffs overlooking the Irish Sea. Thomas always wrote poetry but his early efforts were mediocre. However in his first parish he met the hill farmers, earthy and earthbound, not gospel greedy, fitting no formula of humanity congenial to the middle-class, university-educated parson. This encounter uncovered a well of creativeness in the young vicar. In poems of great power Thomas celebrates the true nature of these hill farmers. Without sentiment, without gift-wrapping, without turning them into symbols of anything, he takes us to meet these alien creatures in their own environment:

> *Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills,*
> *Who pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud.* […]
> *There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind.*
> *His clothes, sour with years of sweat*
> *And animal contact, shock the refined,*
> *But affected, sense with their stark naturalness.*

His love of the Welsh countryside is expressed in vivid description:

> *You go up the long track*
> *That will take a car, but is best walked*
> *On slow foot, noting the lichen*
> *That writes history on the page*
> *Of the grey rock. Trees are about you*
> *At first, but yield to the green bracken,*
> *The nightjar's house: you can hear it spin*
> *On warm evenings; it is still now*
> *In the noonday heat, only the lesser*

Voices sound, blue-fly and gnat
And the stream's whisper.

The later poems are not so much about people as ideas and concepts. He celebrates his marriage and the unique experience of love that accompanied it for decade after decade. He wrestles with God, finds traces of God, deplores and explores the absence of God.

Thomas took his duties as a clergyman seriously, but knew well the truth uttered by another poet, Second Isaiah [45:15], when he lamented, 'Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour'. With a poet's sensitivity Thomas knew the depths of the struggle that is required of those who would cling to faith:

I take the word 'prayer'
And present it to them. I wait idly
Wondering what their lips will
Make of it. But they hand back
Such presents. I am left alone
With no echoes to the amen
I dreamed of […]
I call on God
In the after silence, and my shadow
Wrestles with him upon a wall
Of plaster, that has all the nation's
Hardness in it. They see me thrown
Without movement of their oblique eyes.

That word 'oblique' is in many ways a key to the theology of the poems. Thomas presents us with an oblique view of the Creator. With biblical images hinted at, but not emphasized, he pursues God by means of metaphor:

So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,

Making such music as lives still,
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.

Those to whom Christian faith comes easily and who have no problems with doctrine and dogma will find little of interest in Thomas' poems. But people who are clinging to faith by their fingers' ends will find much here to help them reclaim their Christian identity. Those for whom believing is a struggle will identify with Thomas' oblique entry into the realm of God, with his masterly use of metaphor drawn from biblical and theological sources and with his willingness to wrestle with the One whose presence or absence is highly significant, saying with Jacob, 'I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.'

Byron Rogers was a personal friend of Thomas, one of the rare visitors allowed into the inner sanctum of the hovel-like cottage of his retirement years. He learned to love the man and to appreciate his eccentricities and foibles as part of the wonderful creative process of a poet of rare power. It is obvious that for Rogers writing this book was a labour of love; reading it is sheer enjoyment.

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Go, Tell Them: Thoughts Towards a Theology of Preaching, Robert Hendrie, London: St Paul's Publishing, 2006, pp. 252, ISBN 0854397205. £10.99

Two generations have passed since the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church but some of the revolutionary changes it effected in the life and worship of that Church have still not been recognised by other Christian Churches. How many, for example, still hold to the conventional view that preaching is the badge and property of Protestant or Reformed Churches, Roman Catholics making do with