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## **REPORT ON MA THESIS**

### **Jan Zikmund: 'Edward Thomas as a Critic'**

I recommend that this thesis should be awarded the top MA grade: 1. Jan Zikmund's work is notable for the originality of his focus, the extent of his well-applied research, and the quality of his argument. He has chosen a neglected area of literary study, and persuasively established both its significance and its rich potential for further research; whether by Zikmund himself or by other scholars. His central proposition, which has not been formulated in such terms by previous critics of Edward Thomas, is that Thomas's criticism (especially of poetry) is 'strong and extensive enough to be considered independently of his own poetry'. It is an excellent strategy that each of Zikmund's three chapters should substantiate this claim from a different angle – evidently well-considered choices. Thus Thomas figures as advocate of a then-underrated poet, Thomas Hardy; as mentor of an unusual new poet, W. H. Davies; and finally as deploying his accumulated critical experience to edit his wartime anthology *This England*: itself an oblique work of criticism. Zikmund makes an especially good case for selecting Davies from among other poets whose careers Thomas followed. Overall, the trajectory of this thesis justifies Zikmund's contentions in his Conclusion that he has demonstrated 'the interconnectedness, or harmony, of Thomas's critical work'; and that his criticism 'represents, among other things, an intelligible outline of British poetry in the 1900s and the first half of the 1910s'.

In each chapter Zikmund displays his own critical independence by providing fresh insights into its particular concern, and into Thomas's capacities as a critic: his wide-ranging receptiveness, his lack of 'moralism', his resistance to received opinion. For instance, the first chapter opens up the implications of Thomas's interest in other writers who moved between poetry and prose, including the broader issue of relations between those two modes of

writing. His second chapter illuminates the sensitivity that Thomas brought, both personally and in critical articles, to the mentoring of W. H. Davies ('Nurturing the Super-Tramp' is a good title here). This, too, has wider implications: e.g., for the relation of poet to critic (or to teachers of 'creative writing'). Zikmund also subtly brings out the extent to which Thomas's own artistic sensibility is involved in this mentorship, as in his attraction to Davies's 'extra-literary qualities'. Finally, Zikmund's reading of *This England* as a critical intervention, an exercise in 'taste-making' and 'canon-making', left me wanting more. He perceptively stresses Thomas's 'structuring' of his anthologies, and the way in which *This England* 'speaks through its absences' – a fine phrase. It should be said that, throughout the thesis Zikmund is pleasingly unafraid to question the judgments of established critics of Thomas, such as Jonathan Bate, Peter Howarth and myself.

If I now raise one or two points regarding omissions or gaps, I recognise that the length of the thesis has precluded matters and material which lie outside its carefully defined scope. But I notice that, with the exception of the prose-extracts in *This England*, the title might well have been 'Edward Thomas as a Critic of Poetry'. Thomas also reviewed many books about the countryside, for instance; while his wartime essays as a cultural critic of 'Englishness' are relevant to the contents of *This England*. At the same time, it was not only 'British poetry' that Thomas reviewed. Zikmund rightly notes his prescient attention to J. M. Synge. But Thomas also closely followed the development of W. B. Yeats (he had a huge admiration for Yeats), and was very conscious of the Irish Literary Revival more generally, as he was of American poetry.

I would like to know whether, in considering his future research, Zikmund would also plan to investigate Thomas as a critic of 'country books' (a focus on *A Literary Pilgrim in England* would seem to require this). I would also like to know whether research into Thomas and Edward Garnett, or into Thomas's wider contexts as a literary journalist in the early twentieth century, would involve comparisons with other literary journalists/ critics/ poetry critics, and who the most revealing comparators might be. I think this would be a key element in Zikmund's continuing to explore Thomas's significance as a literary critic – which I very much hope he does.

I repeat my recommendation that this excellent thesis should be awarded the top grade. As regards presentation – footnoting, bibliography, accuracy in quotation and citation – I have noticed only a small number of errors.

**Edna Longley, Professor Emerita, FBA, MRIA**

**Some minor points for Zikmund:**

5 it should be the Mont Blanc café; 6 ‘oversees’, and it should be Artists (or Artists’) not Artist’s Rifles; 7 Thomas began writing poetry in December, not November 1914; 8 climatic should be climactic; 22 odd use of ‘towards’ at foot of page; 24 omission of ‘due’ in quotation from Hardy review; 28 it should be *Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*; 31 it should be Judy Kendall; 36 ‘stroke’ for ‘struck’; 47 it should be Verrall; 51 Charles M. Doughty’s style is not so much ‘old-fashioned’ as a deliberately archaic construction; 54 ‘both’ should be ‘not only’; 60 Thomas reviewed for the *Daily Chronicle* until 1914: he also reviewed extensively for the *Morning Post*, another daily newspaper, from 1906 to 1911.

**Bibliography:** this should include Rory Waterman (ed.), W. H. Davies: *The True Traveller: A Reader* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015). This anthology is relevant to Davies’s currency today. The Richard Emeny/ Jeff Cooper *Checklist* should also be included here. 63 It should be Lucy Newlyn. Thomas’s *Letters to Edward Garnett* were not edited by Garnett himself.

Zikmund’s style is clear and vigorous, but he tends to omit ‘that’ after verbs like ‘note’ or ‘suggest’. There are a couple of dangling participles: 18 ‘Based on the quotes’ 50 ‘After examining Thomas’s critical texts’. He lapses into present tense in part of his discussion of Thomas’s *Walter Pater* 40.