Versions of Englishness: George Sturt and his influence on Edward Thomas

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Soon after finishing his critical review of Walter Pater, Edward Thomas told his younger brother Julian that he wanted to write prose 'as near akin as possible to the talk of a Surrey peasant'.[10] Julian reveals (in his preface to *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*) that 'he was thinking no doubt of George Sturt's Bettesworth'.

Although Robert Frost is credited for kick-starting Thomas's poetic journey, it is clear that Thomas's desire to write in the 'language of common speech' - which permeated his later prose and subsequent poetry - had many influences, which predated Frost. What Thomas admired most in Sturt's writing was his ability to describe rural England, without becoming 'literary' about it. It was as vital a lesson as any he could have learnt from Frost. The critic David Gervais [11] believes that the reason for Thomas's delay in finding his own poetic voice was that he was so steeped in literature; he heard so many literary voices in his head that he found it difficult to distinguish his own. When Thomas started to use his own voice (as *'In Pursuit of Spring'* and early poems) his voice sounded more assured and less anxious to be noticed. Ironically, many of the writers who helped him to become the poet he was, were all prose writers (Jefferies, Cobbett and Sturt). Thomas's poetry would be unthinkable without English literature, but it only came to life as his writing ceased to be 'literary'. Perhaps Sturt's books gave him a blueprint for the sort of poetry he would subsequently write.

George Sturt was a wheelwright and author, whose books were published under the pseudonym, George Bourne. He was born in Farnham in 1863 and educated at Farnham Grammar School; he also worked as a pupil teacher at the grammar school for a number of years. When his father died in 1884 he resigned from his post at the school to take over the administration of the family wheelwright business. As well as learning the basic skills, Sturt had to do the necessary clerical work, keep the accounts, judge the quality and suitability of the timber and negotiate with clients and customers.[12] It was a great deal for a young man to take on. He once remarked: 'how pleasant business might be, were it not for the customers!'. The business involved making, maintaining and repairing farm waggons and other vehicles. The surfaces of farm tracks and lanes were rough and many had deep ruts, up to the hub of the cartwheel. It was critical that the distance between the wheels complied with a pre-defined specification, like the gauge of a railway. If the wheels were too wide or too narrow, one wheel

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[10] E Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, Faber and Faber, London, 1938 (see 'Preface' by Julian Thomas).

[11] D Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness ' in Modern Writing*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, chapter 2; Edward Thomas: an England of 'holes and corners'.

[12] V Lewis, *A Man of Parts: George Sturt, Writer of Farnham and the Bourne*, The Farnham and District Museum Society, 2024

would follow the rut whilst the other rode on top and the waggon would overturn. The building of a waggon involved the skills of various tradesmen: carpenters, wheelwrights, blacksmiths and painters. Due to poor health, Sturt eventually sold the wheelwright's shop to a business partner to concentrate on his writing.

The writer Arnold Bennett (best known for his novels of the Staffordshire Potteries), encouraged Sturt to keep a journal, to use as reference material.[13] Many years later Bennett wrote in his published letters: 'Writing occupies all his thoughts in a way I had never suspected. A more literary temperament than his would be difficult to conceive'.

In 1891, George Sturt and his sisters, Mary and Susan, moved to Vine Cottage in The Bourne. *The Bettesworth Book* [14] was published in 1901 and is a compilation of rural episodes, thoughts and conversations recorded in his journal. Its central character is Frederick Bettesworth - the pseudonym Sturt chose for his odd-job man and gardener at Vine Cottage, Fred Grover - who was an archetypal countryman with an unending store of dialect stories, cures, sayings and wise country saws. Bettesworth became a source of delight and inspiration to Sturt in his writing. His anecdotes ranged from harvesting in Sussex to the adventures of a troublesome horse; from his enjoyment of a robin's song as he worked in the garden of Vine Cottage, to the scraps of gossip picked up at the public house.

George Sturt and his sisters (Mary and Susan) outside Vine Cottage (Bourne Conservation Group)

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[13] R Sanders, *George Sturt 1863 – 1927,* R Sandars. See website: www.bourneconservation.org.uk (accessed January 2025).

[14] Bourne, *The Bettesworth Book: Talks with a Surrey Peasant*, Duckworth, London,1901.

A Surrey countryman (believed to be Fred Grover) with besom and wicker basket (Bourne Conservation Group)

Edward Thomas reviewed *The Bettesworth Book* for The Daily Chronicle [15] in 1901. He began by noting the serious shortcomings of many nature and country books of the period and how, at their worse, they try to persuade people to go out into the fields 'with the fervour of an auctioneer'. This school of writing is often either 'didactic or oracular', he says. Even Jefferies, Wordsworth and Shelley are not let off the hook, when their writing is 'lured into inveracity'. Thomas ends by saying that we look in vain for the kind of writing that has intimacy, simplicity and mellowness and calls *The Bettesworth Book* a 'near approach to perfection, or a delightful substitute'. Thomas continues to heap praise on the book by comparing it to 'an eagle's feather, a hazel-cluster of a long-past autumn, or an old coat'. However, 'pain and sorrow are not absent and afar off we see a grey glimpse of the workhouse'. And yet, the total impression is 'ruddy as a picture by Rubens' and some of the chapters contain 'tonics more puissant than any in the pharmacopeia'. When Bettesworth's wife tells him that he has been laughing in his sleep, Thomas exclaims that 'half the metaphysics and theology in the Bodleian might have escaped print, if their authors had only been able to laugh in their sleep'.[16]

The sequel to *The Bettesworth Book* was *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer'*[17] , which charts the last years of Bettesworth's life and his tragic demise. Again these are largely based on verbatim reports and conversations with the old man at Vine Cottage, The Bourne. Sturt was amazed at Bettesworth's gift of expression and 'the pleasant chatter that quietly oozed out of him as he worked'. The thousands of unsorted facts in the old man's brain could be summoned into his consciousness at a moment's notice. Sturt not only records the 'queer anecdotes and shrewd observations' but also the regional dialect in which they were delivered. Both Bettesworth books are a captivating first-hand account of the life and work of a Surrey labourer around the turn of the 20th century. The old man was never told by Sturt that he was the subject of a book, although it 'would have pleased him vastly … the little fame he had justly earned'. Sturt feared that it might have sent him boastfully drinking about the parish making him intolerable to his

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[15] ELongley, *A Language Not to be Betrayed*, Carcanet New Press, 1981, p. 182.

[16] *Daily Chronicle*, London, 25 November 1901. (British Library Microfilm MLD 10).

[17] *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer: a Record of the Last Years of Frederick Bettesworth*; Duckworth, London, 1907. (See also www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/42092 (accessed January 2025)).

peers and employer, and concluded that 'it would have been a mistake to tell him about it' because 'his upbringing had not fitted him for publicity'.

Thomas reviewed *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer* for The Daily Chronicle in 1907.[18] He titles it *The Real Hodge* (alluding to Hardy's poem) and divides the review into three sections: 'Gathered Lights', 'War in the Crimea' and 'In Hodden-Grey'. He suggests that *Memoirs* is nearly like the 'book which (as Richard Jefferies lamented) Gilbert White never wrote, about the human life of his neighbourhood'. He states that only by arranging or putting together the country conversations in Hardy's novels 'could anything like an equivalent' be found. Some of the highlights of this review are reproduced in Thomas's book *In Pursuit of Spring* - the section on 'laying turfs' is one example. It is rare for Thomas to duplicate his own work, but perhaps he felt that what he had written in this review couldn't be improved upon. He states that 'the true sound of the life of the village is in this book, and in few others, except the original *Bettesworth Book*. And yet, the book is 'shadowed from the first by Bettesworth's epileptic wife, and the whole of his last year was a dimly-lighted, manly, solitary, agony'.

Little Willows, one of the cottages rented by Fred and Lucy Grover (Bourne Conservation Group)

Sturt enjoyed daily contact with the country men and women he wrote about, and worked very closely on the shop floor with his artisan craftsmen

[18] *Daily Chronicle*, London, 26 November 1907. (British Library Microfilm MLD 10).

at the wheelwright's shop - an experience which built on his empathy and understanding of local communities, both urban and rural. Although his class and education set him at a remove, his roots were similar and he didn't speak down to his craftsmen as a superior. He recalls the 'broad Hampshire' and racy Surrey variant, as the kind of speech he could share in. He talked a weak provincial language tinged with dialect. He once said 'many of my relatives are still ignorant of aspirates', and many of his conversations with Bettesworth show him speaking dialect himself.[19] Sturt is rarely sentimental about life in the country – he was very much an insider who lived alongside the rural labourers in the village, and yet at a remove by trade, class and education. His great skill was 'to create a prose like a clear window pane through which the reader could see ordinary life undistorted, uncoloured by personal mood or prejudice'.[20,1221] Sturt always allowed Bettesworth to speak for himself, and the books are mainly a record of conversations between Sturt and his gardener. Fiction was never Sturt's metier and most of his published works contain a fair amount of biographical material. He once acknowledged: 'My journal is the best book I shall ever write'.[22]

In his later book *Change in the Village*,[23] Sturt describes what life was really like amongst the villagers of The Bourne, Farnham, when it was being transformed from a rural agricultural community into a 'residential centre' populated by wealthy outsiders from London. There is no sentimental mawkishness, but a pared-down account of their situation, together with an assessment of the inevitable changes they were facing. We learn that a large number of the villagers lived on the brink of destitution with many signs of squalid and disordered living and the lack of proper sanitation. Their knowledge of the world outside the village was limited and the names of famous potatoes, such as 'red nosed kidneys', were better known than the names of politicians or newspapers. Villagers were often indifferent to anything that happened farther out than the neighbouring town. Not for a moment was village life idyllic, but patience and industry dignified it. The rural labourer did not just reside in the countryside, he was part of it, as one of its natural denizens, 'like the hedgehogs and thrushes'. The body of customs they followed was a system of accepted ideas of what should be done in any contingency and the proper way to do it. It was an unwritten code which instructed the labourer through his daily life. This could be detected in many a mellow folk saying or even in a folk song.

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[19] D Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, chapter 4 , Late witness: George Sturt and village England.

[20] D Gervais, *George Sturt: Local Writer and National Thinker*, Grayshott Literary Festival, 1996.

[21] M Leishman, Unpublished papers (archive reference number 9727), Surrey History Centre, Woking, Surrey.

[22] ED Mackerness (ed), *The Journals of George Sturt, 1890 - 1927*, Cambridge University Press, 1967.

[23] *Change in the Village*, Cambridge University Press, 2010 (first published 1912). Also see www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/27518 (accessed January 2025).

Sturt attributed the enclosures of the commons as the main cause for all the changes that passed over the village. The cottagers were shut out of the countryside and left with nothing except their gardens alone to depend on. The majority of supplies had to be procured ready-made from the local shop, which meant they had to spend money rather than rely on their own resourcefulness. This new order intensified the need for wage earning in order to procure supplies; they needed a regular supply of money and a constant stream of it. Any sense of community was broken up by the exigencies of competitive wage-earning, the labourers often competing with one another for local work. The 'cash nexus' and the pursuit of profit had finally caught up with the village and 'every man for himself' had become the rule for the villagers under the new system. Sturt comments that an 'afterglow' of the old civilisation, before the commons were enclosed and villa residents moved in to Hindhead, 'still rests on the village, but it is fast fading out'. The villagers accepted the changes, however, with stoical good temper and equanimity, since this was the only recourse left open to them.

Thomas reviewed *Change in the Village* for The Daily Chronicle in 1912.[24] He states, with friendly badinage, that the chief fault of the book is 'that there is no Bettesworth in it, and no one equal to him'. (Thomas knew of Bettesworth's death, some years earlier – hence the joke, which may have been lost on his readers.) He concedes, however, that Mr Bourne (George Sturt) in 'interesting enough and makes up for Bettesworth's raciness by his greater range of ideas'. Thomas considers the book important because 'it reveals not only the old peasant economy, but the morality and mental life that went with it'.

In *In Pursuit of Spring,* Thomas spends two pages describing Sturt as he passed through Farnham with this younger brother Julian (in April 1913). He expresses his high regard for *The Bettesworth Book* and puts it on 'the most select shelf of country books, even beside those of White, Cobbett, Jefferies, Hudson and Burroughs'. He goes on to give a brief account of *The Bettesworth Book* and states that, in most cases, it is all the gardener's words and Sturt 'never interferes, except to help'. Even when Bettesworth 'felt a bit Christmassy', there is no melancholy, his head merely is 'all mops and brooms'. Kirkham[25] makes the point that Sturt's vigorous, earthy prose style, as revealed in Bettesworth's country sayings, would certainly have appealed to Thomas. What Thomas admired, even envied, was the pervasive joyousness in Bettesworth's life and the buoyancy of his 'peasant speech'. There is no trace of melancholy or self-engrossment in the stories he recounts.

The chapter on 'laying turfs', was, in Thomas's view, 'one of the most charming pieces in the world'; he enjoys Bettesworth's unexpected comment, when laying turfs in continuous rain, 'pleasant work this. I could very well spend my time at it, with good turfs'. Thomas continues: 'At first the book may seem tame, a piece of reporting which leaves the reader not

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[24] *Daily Chronicle*, London, 23 May 1912. (British Library Microfilm MLD 10)
[25] M Kirkham, *The Imagination of Edward Thomas,* Cambridge University Press, 1986

unaware of the notebooks consulted by the author. But in the end comes a picture out of the whole, painfully, dubiously emerging, truthful undoubtedly, subtle, not easy to understand, which raises George Bourne to a high place among observers'. Thomas ends his account by stating that 'the portrait of an unlettered pagan English peasant is fascinating' and jokily suggests that a statue of Frederick Bettesworth be placed at the foot of Castle Street (Farnham), 'to astonish and annoy, if a sculptor could be found'. He knows very well that no statues are ever built to celebrate the common man, or a Surrey peasant, but that Bettesworth's legacy will live on through literature (i.e.Sturt's books), just as his own writing will live on through his books and poetry.

One 21st century journalist,[26] bowled over by Sturt's account of Bettesworth, saw him as 'the last in a line of heroic and usually anonymous figures whose enduring monument is the English landscape they shaped and named', and likened him to 'Lob', the archetypal countryman in the Edward Thomas poem, who is as 'English as this gate, these flowers, this mire'. Despite the poem's virtuosity and command of the vernacular, Gervais makes the point that Thomas could never give Lob, Bettesworth's flesh-and-blood solidity - we can only guess from the poem what it was really like to be Lob. And yet Thomas may have modelled Lob around a real life character 'Dad Uzzell', an old Wilshire countryman, ex-poacher and workman who was a formative influence on Thomas as a boy.[27]

Modern literary critics, have praised Sturt's ability to capture the language and lifestyle of a Surrey peasant, in an age when encroaching urbanisation threatened its disappearance. Leavis thought that Sturt's books show that the cultivated art of speech once existed and it is only through literature that it is still available to modern readers. He also believed that the provincial language of the pre-industrial 'organic community' could also be accessed through folk song. Since the machine-age, the decisive use of words appears to have shifted to 'advertising, journalism and best sellers'. As Leavis[28] noted: 'Language tends to be debased instead of invigorated by contemporary use. It is to literature alone where its subtlest and finest use is preserved that we can look with any hope of keeping in touch with our spiritual tradition'.

Sturt's gardener and odd-job man, Fred Grover, (immortalised as Frederick Bettesworth), died in 1905, and is buried in The Bourne Old Churchyard, next to his wife, Lucy, in an unmarked grave. The Bourne Conservation Group believes it has located the two graves and recently erected information panels to mark the burial plots. In 1916, George Sturt suffered his first stroke, which left him partially paralysed, but he continued to write until his death in 1927, and is buried in Farnham Green Lane Cemetery,

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[26] M Therou, *Book of a Lifetime: Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer by George Bourne*, The Independent, 13 March 2009.
[27] J Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas: from Adlestrop to Arras: a Biography*, Bloomsbury Continuum, London, 2015, Chapter 2.
[28] FR Leavis and D Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*, Chatto and Windus, 1964, p.82.

alongside his sisters. In 1937, a memorial tablet was unveiled, at the west end of the nave of St. Andrew's Church, Farnham. The inscription reads: 'To the memory of George Sturt of this town; he wrote with understanding and distinction of the wheelwright's craft and English peasant life'.

Aerial view of St Andrew's Church, Farnham. At the west end of the nave there is a memorial plaque to George Sturt (Author).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr. Marie-Marthe Gervais for providing me with unpublished material and letters from her late husband's archive.

I wish to thank Richard Sandars and Noel Moss from the Bourne Conservation Group (www.bourneconservation.org.uk) for valuable discussions regarding Sturt and Bettesworth and for providing me with a detailed footpaths map of The Bourne and identifying the location of Fred and Lucy Grover's grave in The Bourne Old Churchyard.

Thanks are also due to Elaine Leishman for directing me to the Surrey History Centre, Woking, Surrey, where her late husband's archive is kept.

I am grateful to the Edward Thomas Study Centre in Petersfield for loan of books on Thomas and Sturt, and The British Library (London) for access to microfilm copies of 'The Daily Chronicle'.

Finally, I wish to thank Richard Emeny (former Chairman of the Edward Thomas Fellowship) whose *Edward Thomas: towards a complete checklist of his publications, White Sheep Press, 2004,* alerted me to The Daily Chronicle reviews.