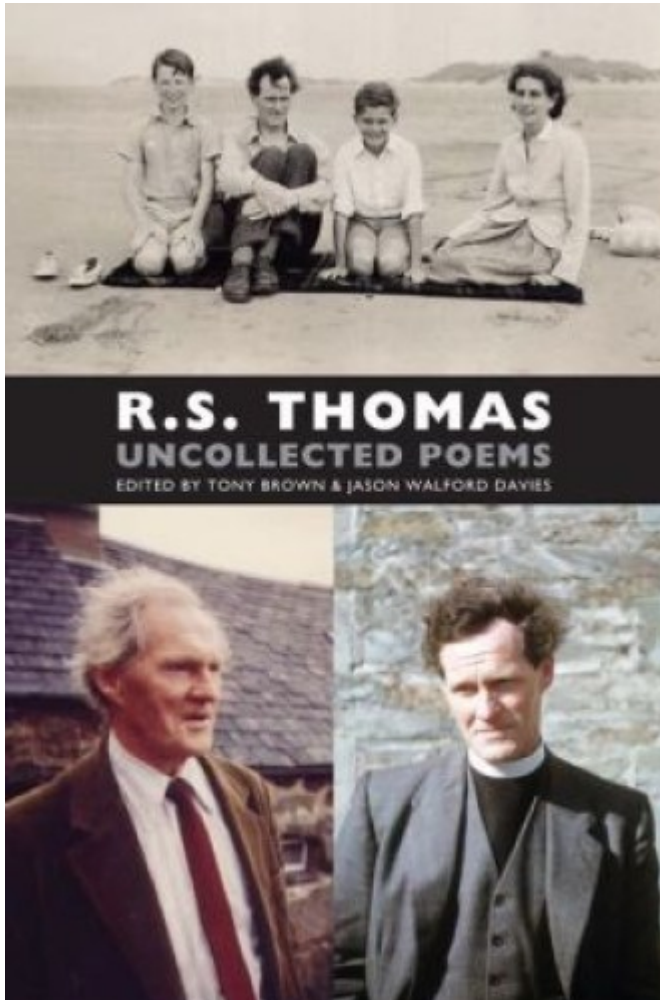


Uncollected Poems, by R. S. Thomas; edited by Jason Walford Davies and Tony Brown

reviewed by [Jeffrey L. Johnson](#) in the [October 30, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Uncollected Poems

By R. S. Thomas; edited by Jason Walford Davies and Tony Brown
Bloodaxe Books

Ronald Stuart Thomas, poet and priest of the Church in Wales, died in 2000. With creative energy that spanned the second half of the 20th century, Thomas produced

dozens of volumes of original work. The poems in the present volume, published now in the centenary of his birth, appeared in journals and newspapers throughout his long literary career.

Thomas served as a parish priest for 40 years. His poem "Vocation" is a reflection on parish ministry that lightly traces the sacramental offerings of the church from the point of view of a settled priest. Against long predictable absences and reappearances of the people, and against the challenges of changing times, the priest maintains a patient sacramental presence: "Against times / That infect I offer my / Priceless inoculation."

In a 1990 interview Thomas said, "Who can be dogmatic about Christ? He was a poet and he drew his imagery largely from nature." Thomas listened for Christ in voices from the sea and from the fields of Wales. He wrote in 1986 that he "moved in unimportant circles, avoiding or being excluded from the busier and more imposing walks of life" and that he was "rarely happy in numerous company and kept out of literary circles." He described his poetic method as growing out of a "small talent for turning limited thoughts and experience and meditation on them into verse."

Although he may have been a homebody, Thomas was honored in his lifetime with prizes befitting an important poet. In 1996 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Still, he remains a contradictory and perplexing figure to many readers and critics.

Few examples of Thomas's more difficult poems are included in this volume. Still, readers of this collection who look to the Christian priest-poet for tender verses or warm devotions might be put off by his blunt assessments of people and by his jagged, enjambed lines. In "Thoughts by the Sea" from 1968, for example, the poet looks out on beachgoers and thinks about "the consortium of fools . . . / . . . without poetry, without art."

An Oxford professor of poetry said that Thomas wrote on "depressing" subjects—for example, the general decline of imagination and belief, and the disappearance of old, rooted ways of Welsh life. The same professor said that in his later poems Thomas gave up even the rhythm and form that in part redeemed his work. For his part, Thomas once said, "We are all afraid of laughter, of being called soft or sentimental; and certainly such states destroy art." Throughout the full decades of

his literary career, the words *soft* and *sentimental* were rarely if ever used in appraisals of his poems. In the poem “The Father Dies,” he called love “a fine thing / but destructive”

Such hard discipline notwithstanding, this volume contains at least one straight-on love poem. “Luminary” shines with time-tested human love and presents two important threads that run through Thomas’s work: the imagination-sapping, soul-draining invasion of technology and the constant if ignored invitations of the natural world, often represented by birds and their singing, which Thomas heard and studied as an amateur ornithologist. Thomas was the son of a seafarer, and the sea remained a spiritual home to him through the years. A short poem titled “Dimensions” shows the mystery of the sea paired with the unreachable mystery of childhood.

As a nature poet Thomas did not romanticize the natural world or let feelings overrun thinking. As a pastoral poet of Welsh village life, he did not patronize the people he knew by imagining them to be noble or virtuous or by pitying them. The poem “Cancellation” reflects an artistic decision to turn from the natural world and the rural people around him to more abstract and theological topics, such as God’s relation to the 20th-century world of science and technology. This decision marked an evolution in Thomas’s art, leading to sustained attempts to work with the terms of the forces that were bringing great changes to the world around him.

Thomas said that he preferred being outdoors to being in the classroom or the study. Speaking to a television reporter in the year he was nominated for the Nobel Prize, he said that he might be remembered for a few of his poems, but that as a man he hoped that people might benefit from his example of living close to the earth and listening to the voices of its creatures.