Thomas, R. S.  

Until the daunting task of compiling a scholarly edition of R. S. Thomas’s poems is undertaken, *Uncollected Poems* has positioned itself as the last word from the great Welsh poet and Anglican priest. This book, published to mark the centenary of Thomas’s birth, follows *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (J. M. Dent, 1993) and its sequel, *Collected Later Poems 1988–2000* (Bloodaxe, 2004). Compared with these two behemoths, which contain more than 700 poems between them, *Uncollected Poems* will seem a rather slim volume, containing as it does a mere 150 or so poems. That these are previously “uncollected” poems, however, does not diminish their significance or value for scholars of Thomas or lovers of his Welsh-inflected poetry. Brown and Walford Davies, Thomas’s editors and the co-directors of the R. S. Thomas Study Centre at Bangor University, have gathered what in their view is the best of Thomas’s “lost” poetry; i.e., poems that Thomas published in magazines, newspapers, journals, pamphlets, etc., but did not include in any of his book-length collections. Their scholarly canvassing has been admirably thorough, and their bibliography included at the end of the book lists even more uncollected poems that did not make the cut into this volume. Though Thomas did not choose to include any of these poems in his individual collections, there should be no inference that these are of secondary quality.

The chronological arrangement of poems serves to highlight Thomas’s stylistic growth as well as his thematic fertility. In spanning the period from 1939 to 2010 with a fairly small number of poems, the editors have highlighted the remarkable developments in Thomas’s poetic career, which grew out of a fairly conventional Georgian perspective in the late 1930s to a starkly post-modern one in the 1990s. Despite the chronological arrangement, clear thematic patterns emerge. One of the most significant of these is his evocation of the Welsh landscape and people. A number of new Iago Prytherch poems surface in this collection, as do several biting critiques of the cultural and political relationship between Wales and England. “The Return” (1967), inspired by a journey from England back to Wales, evokes in Thomas a sense of frustration at Welsh insignificance: “It is true / That history going on as long / As ours creates an illusion / Of size, as the failure to grow / Does also.” Yet in 1969, the year of the Investiture of Prince Charles as Prince of Wales, Thomas’s anger is directed at the English: “In the striped flag / On the tower there is the insolence / Of a poster advertising / A nation for sale” (“Shame”). Despite his hostility to the
oppressiveness of English culture, Thomas frequently expresses his indebtedness and gratitude to the British poetic tradition. He begins “Confessions of an Anglo-Welshman” (1943) by acknowledging his failure to know “my own country’s ... lore and language ... by heart,” but he concludes with the assertion that poetry does not recognize political borders: “No patriotism dulls / The true and the beautiful / Bequeathed to me by Blake, / Shelley and Shakespeare and the ravished Keats.”

Such personal confessions make for some of the most powerful and affecting verses in this collection. These include poems about his parents and about the formation of his own identity, like “Autobiography” (1973), in which he explores with cold eyes the competing exactions of parental and personal determination: “They invent / my name. I am born / to a concept, answering / to it with reluctance,” he admits, but the will to define himself is stronger. “I study to become the rat / that will desert / the foundering vessel / of their pride; but home / is a long time sinking.” Other personal confessions are less crabbed and frosty; among these are poems about Elsi, his wife of fifty years. The tenderness of Thomas in his epithalamion is revelatory: “The thoughts of the trees at eventide, the hush / In the dark corn at morning, / And the wish / In your own heart still but dawning” (“July 5 1940”). Connubial love is the one force that for Thomas can resist the ravages of time: “Before a green altar / with the thrush for priest / I took those gossamer / vows that neither the Church / could stale nor the Machine / tarnish” (“Luminary,” 2002).

A likely question many readers of this journal might have of Uncollected Poems is whether Thomas the priest appears in very many of these poems. In fact, Thomas speaks theologically in only a handful, but these few offer up surprises and delights. On occasion, he startles the reader with a Transcendentalism-infused Anglicanism: “The universe is / our parish, and each of us / is his own church with an altar / waiting for the sacrifice of his superstition” (“Coming True,” 1979). Recalling some of the Buddhist inflections of his 1972 collection H’m is the poem “Converse” (1979); when Thomas addresses yet again God’s silence, the response is unusual: God’s being “throbs with the language / that is as unknown / to us as it is / familiar, / that is the communing / at the centre of agitation / of the self with the self.” Here too one may find the post-modern God of Mass for Hard Times (1992): “and God leers out of the nuclear / cloud to imply how it is for this, too, / he has been waiting from the beginning” (“Dreams” [1998]). The most striking of Thomas’s religious poems in this collection is the most orthodox; in its brevity and simplicity “One drop of blood” (2009) encapsulates the stark beauty of R. S. Thomas’s poetic voice and vision: