

**Ted Hughes**

**Terry Gifford**



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*Terry Gifford*

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Fred Rue Jacobs, an enthusiastic Ted Hughes bibliophile, was the Librarian at Bakersfield College in a bleak part of California to which he gave much-appreciated eccentric and loving life. He became a friend of Ted Hughes, later visiting him annually when Fred came to England for treatments for his cancer at health farms in Devon. He was the first, and most serious, collector of Hughes material in the USA and the first scholar to write about Hughes's dramatic work. Every time I visited him at his small apartment I laid out my mat and sleeping bag on the floor of the 'Hughes shrine' (a room containing nothing but bookshelves and filing cabinets devoted to Hughes material) before Fred regaled me with stories and offered copies of the latest esoteric publications on Hughes that I had missed. When Hughes died of cancer, Fred was distraught that Hughes, private until the last, had not contacted him on the very subject on which Fred regarded himself as an expert and a survivor for at least twelve years. Fred's sheer enthusiasm for the work of Hughes and for documenting it, talking about it and loving its spirit, was a gift I felt privileged to have shared.

Len Scigaj came from Virginia Tech to every Ted Hughes conference with the unflinching seriousness of a tennis-player and scholar. He had a passion for getting things right, for going to the sources and checking them with Hughes directly. Len hated my quoting him in *Green Voices* 'out of context', but he brought me into his pioneering classes in ecocriticism at Virginia Tech and we talked long and hard about the works of Hughes on bicycle rides from his home. Len's students became the environmentalist activists on campus and Len marched with them on protests. Len felt the isolation of a committed teacher of the works of Hughes in 1990s America where the prejudices of Plath partisans held sway. More than anyone else in America at the time, Len tried to gain

recognition for studies of the works of Hughes, at the Modern Language Association's annual conference, with publishers and with the growing number of ecocritics who appreciated writers concerned with the environment in all its forms and discourses. Len's sudden heart attack prevented him from taking satisfaction in some of the later signs of hope for Hughes studies in the USA.

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In the 1970s when I began serious research on the works of Ted Hughes I was grateful to Sheffield City Libraries who, through the wonderful resource of the British Library's Interlibrary Loans system, delivered into my hands rare limited editions and much more beyond my reach as a local secondary school teacher with a passion for the work of Hughes. The supportive role of a civic library in that era ought to be acknowledged, and its support for British readers of this book who do not have access to a university library should hopefully continue to be sustained.

Neil Roberts at Sheffield University took on my proposal for MA research on Hughes and when we became neighbours, with our young children playing in the same streets, Neil suggested, at the completion of my MA, that we write a book together. We were amused to find that Hughes himself wrote to Sagar that we probably wrote alternate chapters (which we did in first draft, but handed over to the other to rewrite, with the proviso that we both agreed on every final sentence) and that one of us was more right than the other (26. 2. 1979, BL ADD 78757, f. 18). Hughes took our royalties in permission fees and when *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (1981) went out of print we each received from Faber a royalty statement of minus £11. Thus are academics often financially rewarded. Fortunately the real rewards lie elsewhere, as these acknowledgements might suggest.

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The staff at Special Collections in the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA make every visit a delight. Their enthusiasm for sharing their treasures led to their showing me not only an unsent letter, but a volume of my poems in Hughes's library – a sadly neglected influence yet to be pursued by Hughes scholars.

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Terry Gifford  
Sella, Alicante, 2008

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# Introduction

Ted Hughes is already regarded as a major poet of the twentieth century. This book presents the evidence for his being read as a writer with huge significance for the future of the human species in the twenty-first century. Although the complete body of his work is still in the process of being archived and published, there is plenty of evidence for such a claim. We have a *Collected Poems*, together with selections of his essays, translations and letters which include useful annotations and notes. And the bulk of Hughes's papers are now available to scholars in two great libraries in Britain and America. Essentially a poet, the range of his work also includes stories, plays, translations, essays and letters. Within them is a body of work that Hughes called 'within hearing of children' that is not only of great educational value, but also essential for adult readers who wish to hear what Hughes has to say to the twenty-first century.

When we have learned to undo the artificial separations we have erected between forms of knowledge (the humanities and the sciences; art and activism, for example) we shall not only be able to appreciate the range of Hughes's interests, including esoteric forms of knowledge, in relation to his writing, but be able to reconnect the 'work' of the poet with his life's 'work' as supporter of educational broadcasting, the creative writing movement, local environmental activism and national campaigns against agricultural and industrial pollution. Hughes himself was deeply read, for example, in both astrology and the science of water pollution. He was also a literary historian, tracing the path Western culture has taken that led to our self-destructive separations of knowledge. So this book attempts to reconnect and cross-reference the 'whole work' of Ted Hughes, from all aspects of the life to the work and to its impact.

From the beginning Hughes possessed an amazingly coherent sense of the field he wanted to explore and articulate, first through poetry, and then quickly also through stories and plays. He knew that he needed to break with the conventional wisdom, preoccupations and modes of poetry that dominated in England when he began publishing his poetry. He felt that the Movement poets were avoiding the most urgent questions facing human beings in a post-industrial society. From the beginning his work was a radical attempt to challenge the taken-for-granted by addressing those urgent questions: What connected human nature, the inner lives of people, with the great forces of nature around them? How could people negotiate a relationship with the apparently battling

life and death processes of the earth in which they had their home? How should a responsible, morally aware, decision-making animal find its home in the elemental and subtle dynamics of ecology? How could the observation of those dynamics in nature inform both the quality of unconscious life – its passions, fears and desires – and the conscious decisions of a species that is clearly on a path of self-destruction? What can the natural gift of the imagination do to engage with these questions? It is common to find critics speaking of the vision of Ted Hughes and it is true that a coherent body of insights into these questions can be articulated from reading his work. But in the writing itself the poet is conducting an enquiry with all the resources of language in its most subtle and sensitive mode. The poetry is an imaginative exploration that can only hint at answers to these questions. This gives us the enjoyment – and now the sense of urgent importance – of discussing our readings of this challenging and increasingly relevant work.

Of course, Hughes himself believed that the poet had a public duty to explore the most troubling questions of his time and to produce work that might have a healing function if the poet has faced up to the most dangerous risks, and kept his moral and linguistic focus. From his university studies in anthropology he understood the ancient discipline of the poet as shaman of his tribe. Hughes's personal experience, his wide reading and his studies of other poets, all gave him rich and sometimes painful resources with which to undertake the imaginative journeys that resulted in the poems, stories and plays. Our responsibility is to discuss them as clearly as we can in our search for their healing qualities and insights. Again, the parts of this book that attend to the life, the work and the criticism should all be seen as essential to our consideration of those key questions for our time that Hughes was imaginatively investigating on our behalf.

Some of the information presented here is published for the first time, especially on the environmental concerns and activities of Hughes. To read Elaine Feinstein's first and only biography one would hardly think of Ted Hughes as an environmental writer and activist. Frustrating in its errors as this biography is to the participants, it does represent a first attempt to chronicle the life to which Chapter 1 'Life and contexts' of this book is indebted. Restrictions of space have necessarily required much omission of detail in Chapter 1. For example, those interested in the competing claims of lovers will have to consult Feinstein. But if this book is, in part, the first 'green' biography, it also includes the first recent survey of the critical reception of the work in Chapter 3 'Criticism'. Again, apologies should be offered to those critics who might feel that their contributions to debates about Hughes's work have been overlooked or underplayed.

The readings of the works offered in Chapter 2 are intended to provide a starting point for the reader's own interpretation of the texts, not to substitute for them. As the Chapter 3 survey of critical positions demonstrates, there is always room for different theoretical frames of reference, for differences of emphasis, for identifying omissions and for downright disagreement. Hughes himself said, 'Finally, poems belong to readers – just as houses belong to those who live in them and not to the builders' (17. 3. 1975, BL ADD 78756, f. 20).

The only abbreviation used in this book is *Letters* for *Letters of Ted Hughes*, London: Faber & Faber, 2007. Cross-referencing between chapters is a feature

of each volume in the Routledge Guides to Literature series. Cross-references appear in brackets and include a chapter title as well as the relevant page numbers in bold type, e.g. (see *Life and contexts*, pp. 12–14). References beginning ‘MSS’ are to manuscripts held in the Department of Special Collections of the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. References beginning ‘BL’ are from the Manuscript Department of the British Library, London.





## **Life and contexts**



## **The childhood to undergraduate years (1930–56)**

Two themes dominate the youth of Ted Hughes: his fascination with wildlife and his early sense of himself as a future writer and poet. Both might have been thought unlikely, given Hughes's upbringing in the two different industrial areas of first West Yorkshire and then South Yorkshire. But the young Hughes's sense of being most alive in the countryside (easily accessible from each of his two childhood homes), a supportive family and nurturing state schools provided him with opportunities that were to shape his life's work. All of his resources as a writer of poetry, fiction, literary studies, book reviews, translations, letters and children's works are aimed at exploring the tensions and connections between our inner nature and the external nature, in both of which Hughes believed that we must find a way to be at home. Hughes's constructions in his work of a range of figures such as the fox, the wodwo, Crow, the Iron Man, the moors, a river, Shakespeare's goddess, Alcestis, Sylvia Plath and himself are all observed with a naturalist's attention and a storyteller's sense of aiming his construction towards healing the gap between inner and outer nature. Hughes said that when writing for children he knew that there were fewer defences thrown up across that gap: 'the audience is still open' (Kazzer 1999: 193). It is clear that in his own childhood he was increasingly 'at home' within the family, the countryside, schooling and the connections between them.

The street into which Edward James Hughes was born on 17 August 1930 was a row of terraced houses in the West Yorkshire village of Mytholmroyd that looked out across an open square of waste land and up through fields to the moors beyond. (The first syllable of this village is not pronounced 'myth' (*pace* Greening 2007: ix); the 'y' is pronounced 'I'.) Number 1 Aspinal Street is on a corner and round its side it has an open arched entrance to a cobbled yard at the back of the house. One street further back behind the house was the canal, crossed by the bridge that gives access to the main road that runs through the Calder Valley, the natural corridor that contains Mytholmroyd, and west over the Pennines from the Yorkshire to the Lancashire textile industries. In this deeply cut valley, road, railway, river and canal run close together

with factories and mills in between them. Terraced housing has crept up the sides of the valley, most notably at the steeply tiered town of Hebden Bridge, the centre of the nineteenth-century woollen industry that used water to power weaving looms. What had begun as a cottage industry in the higher villages above Hebden Bridge such as Heptonstall, where many small windows gave good light in the upper rooms of eighteenth-century cottages, developed into the centre of the industrial revolution with large mills and their tall chimneys, although industrial decline was well established by the time of Hughes's childhood in the Depression years of the 1930s.

The spirit of dogged survival in the people of West Yorkshire, that is evoked so strongly in *Remains of Elmet* (1979), is symbolised not just by the presence of the industrial past in the valley and the marginal, often abandoned, hill farms above, but by the monuments to the dead of the First World War that stand on the rim of the valley and the surprising number of huge square non-conformist chapels that, now disused, still litter the landscape. Hughes explains in his book about his earliest landscape that this area was known as Elmet. It was the last Celtic kingdom in England and was famed for its independence and resilience. The villages of the Calder Valley lost dramatic numbers of men in the First World War, but the population's ability to accept suffering had been sustained by the force of Methodism since John Wesley's preaching had first taken root here, seemingly in the bleak conditions of the landscape itself. In his introduction to *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes emphasises that growing up here, 'you could not fail to realise that cataclysms had happened ... Gradually, it dawned on you that you were living among the survivors, in the remains'. Hence the original title of his book, *Remains of Elmet*. A second version, which contained more poems about the resilience of local people, was simply titled *Elmet* (1994).

Hughes's mother Edith was a descendant of the Norman family named Ferrer (later Farrar), one of whom, Nicholas Ferrer, is the subject of a poem by Hughes. One of six children, Edith's sister Hilda lived at 13 Aspinal St and her brother Albert lived at 19 Aspinal St. Her brothers Tom and Walter also lived with their families in Mytholmroyd, so that Hughes grew up with a strong sense of a close family that he came to celebrate with the inclusion of several family poems in *Elmet*. (Mentioned in poems are uncle Albert: 1902–47, the brother of Hughes's mother Edith: 1898–1969, uncle Thomas: 1891–1951, uncle Walt: 1893–1976, and aunts Miriam: 1896–1915 and Hilda: 1908–2003). Because at least three sets of relatives had farms on the hillsides above the Calder Valley, the sense of family ownership of this landscape must have been strong. Edith must have given her children great self-confidence through allowing Ted to be taken on shooting and camping expeditions from the house by his brother Gerald, who was ten years older. Ted's sister Olwyn, who was two years older than him, came to play an important supportive role in his life, not only as a mentor through school and later as his literary agent, but by moving in and looking after his two children when his wife Sylvia Plath committed suicide. At school, Olwyn lent Ted the books of poetry she was studying in classes two years ahead of him, but it was their mother who first supported her children's early interest in literature by buying books to extend their reading experience. She herself loved poetry, Wordsworth especially, and made up stories for the



children when they were small. That Edith had a matter of fact attitude towards the occasional appearance of the ghost of her elder sister Miriam, who had died young, would also be significant in Hughes's later interest in esoteric forms of knowledge. We also now know that Edith Hughes wrote at least one poem and a narrative of her childhood (Emory, Gerald Hughes collection). Ted was later to return the debt to his mother by taking her and his father into his Devon home for long periods as she became infirm, and also in his second and more personal homage to his childhood, *Elmet*.

Hughes's father, William Henry Hughes, was one of only seventeen men in a whole regiment of the Lancashire Fusiliers to have survived the battle of Gallipoli in the First World War. (Seventeen thousand, three hundred and forty-two members of his regiment did not return from the First World War.) He was saved by his paybook from a piece of shrapnel penetrating to his heart. The young boy heard his father calling out in his sleep in the nightmares that continued to haunt him. An able footballer, William's fitness was tested to exhaustion as he repeatedly carried back wounded men at Ypres, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. He was a carpenter, who, after church on Sunday, once took Ted along the canal towpath to the pub near his mother's house to see the man who bit off rats' heads, as reconstructed in the story 'Sunday' in *Wodwo* (1967). In Hughes's writing his father is usually associated with the trauma of a survivor of the First World War. The horrors of his father's war came to be overlaid with the horrors that made such an impression on the imagination of Hughes himself in the aftermath of the Second World War when the images of the camps and the Japanese cities were finally made public.

With a group of other boys, Hughes played in the nearby woods, swam in the river and fished in the canal. For his fourth birthday he was given a simple animal identification book and Gerald taught him how to trap small animals before later taking Hughes on hunting trips in the woods and moors where Ted acted as retriever. Later Gerald taught him how to use a gun. In the story 'The Deadfall' that opens the collection *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* (1995), Hughes describes a camping trip with his brother to Crimsworth Dene as though it is autobiographical. Their purpose was shooting rabbits, but they discovered a dead young fox caught in a gamekeeper's trap. The story has a supernatural element that anticipates the even stronger fantasy element in the final one in the collection in which the narrator, sickened by his brother's relentless shooting of everything that moves, decides to quit himself, with weird consequences. But as young brothers they certainly do seem to have shot more than just rabbits, sometimes accompanied by their Uncle Walt, who appears in several poems, always closely associated with an intimate knowledge of this West Yorkshire landscape.

At the age of eight the family moved to Mexborough, a South Yorkshire mining village where, once again, a river ran behind the newspaper and tobacco-rolling shop William ran on the main street. On the other side of the river was rolling farmland with ditches and copses, pheasants and partridges, rabbits and foxes, and a farm that Hughes came to know well. Rather than move to Mexborough, at the age of seventeen his brother left the family to become a gamekeeper in Devon, but Hughes became friends with the son of a gamekeeper on a