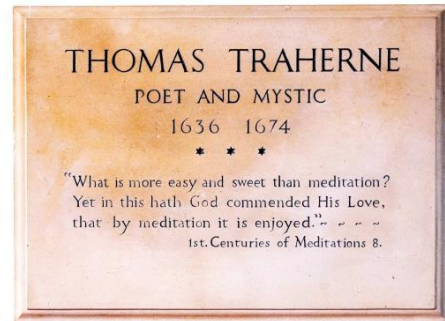


THOMAS TRAHERNE



He died on 27 September 1674, and was buried “under the reading desk” in this church on 10 October 1674. He is pictured in the lower right-hand corner of the east window, and a memorial tablet for him is on the north wall of the chancel.

But who was he or is he?

His Life

Thomas was born in Hereford in 1636 or 1637, was educated at Hereford Cathedral School, and studied at Brasenose College, Oxford, gaining successively a BA (1656), MA(1661) and Bachelor of Divinity(1669). He entered church ministry in 1656, and was appointed rector of Credenhill, near Hereford, in 1657, though was not yet ordained. Under the Commonwealth regime he gained authority from the Commissioners for the Approbation of Public Preachers.

Following the restoration of the monarchy and the return of Charles II, Thomas was ordained priest on 20 October 1660 by the Bishop of Oxford, Robert Skinner, at Launton near Bicester. In 1667, Thomas became the private chaplain to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal to King Charles II (whose imposing memorial is on the south side of the chancel) and moved to Teddington. It was here that Thomas died and was buried in 1674.

His Character

Thomas was described by one of his contemporaries as "one of the most pious ingenious men that ever I was acquainted with", and "a man of a cheerful and sprightly temper ... ready to do all good offices to his friends, and charitable to the poor almost beyond his ability". Another wrote: "He always led a simple and devout life; his will shows that he possessed little beyond his books".

His Works

Although Thomas read and wrote much during his somewhat short life, he was an inconsequential literary figure during his lifetime and his works were not known or appreciated until long after his death. As a country priest he led a devout, humble life and did not participate in literary circles. Only one of his works, *Roman Forgeries* (1673), was published in his lifetime. *Christian Ethicks* (1675) followed soon after his death, and later *A Serious and Patheticall Contemplation of the Mercies of God* (1699), published as the work of an anonymous author whose character and background were discussed in a brief introduction by the publisher.

On Thomas's death most of his manuscripts were bequeathed to his brother Philip, and after his death they apparently passed into the possession of the Skipp family of Ledbury in Herefordshire, where they languished for almost 200 years. In 1888 the family's assets were dissolved, yet the manuscripts did not re-emerge until 10 years later. In the winter of 1896–97, a William T. Brooke of London discovered some anonymous manuscripts in a "barrow of books about to be trashed" or a "street bookstall" and thought that they might be lost works by Henry Vaughan and showed them to Alexander Grosart an expert on Elizabethan and Jacobean literature who reprinted rare works. He planned to include them in an edition that he was preparing for publication but this was never completed.^[18]

Grosart's collection, including the manuscripts, was purchased by Charles Higham, a London bookseller, who asked his friend Bertram Dobell to examine them.^[1] Dobell was convinced that they were not by Vaughan and soon deduced that they were by Thomas Traherne. The manuscripts included poetry as well as a collection of contemplative paragraphs "embodying reflexions on religion and morals".

The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne was published in 1903 and *Centuries of Meditations* in 1908. Other publications followed. Eventually the *Centuries* were to be described as "one of the finest prose-poems in our language" and passages from them were set to music almost as often as the poems.

The essence of his writing

Thomas's works are inherently mystical in that they seek to understand and embrace the nature of God within his creation and within man's soul. His work is said to look "upon the hidden things of the soul, and, in them, he sees the image of the glory and love of God" and "the eternal theme of the goodness and the splendour of God." At the core of Traherne's work is the concept of "felicity", that highest state of bliss in which he describes the essence of God as a source of "delights of inestimable value." Another great passion that is depicted in Thomas's work is his love of nature and the natural world, and in his writing he seems to have tried to reclaim the lost appreciation for this, as well as paying tribute to what he knew of in nature that was more powerful than he was. His poems frequently explore the glory of creation and what he perceived as his intimate relationship with God.

It has been observed of Thomas that "more than any other form of art, if one may judge from the frequency and fervour of the references, Traherne loved music". The Traherne Association has compiled a check list of some 100 composers who have recognised the lyrical power of his writing and set words by him to music.^[60] Several of these are from the poet's native Herefordshire, while a significant proportion come from other countries and not all from the English-speaking world. There have also been a wide variety of musical styles over the past century, from art song to devotional motets, from advanced modernism to minimalism, and there have been some purely instrumental interpretations as well.

Honouring his memory

In commemoration of his poems and spiritual writings, Thomas Traherne is included in the Calendar of Saints in many national churches within the Anglican Communion. He is remembered in the Church of England with a commemoration, and on the 350th anniversary of his funeral it is fitting that we should remember Thomas and mark the occasion here.



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