

## Why Eleanor Farjeon should be considered one of the Dymock poets

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Eleanor Farjeon has been included by some people as a Dymock poet, but left out by others. Perhaps more typically, she has been included but not enthusiastically, for example, by Keith Clark in his book *The Muse Colony*, published in 1992. Clark includes Farjeon but allocates her only a supporting role. He speaks of her love for Edward Thomas and devotes virtually his entire section on Farjeon to her report of the cider supper which took place while she was staying in Dymock in August 1914.

In fact, Eleanor Farjeon was a published poet with two volumes of poetry under her belt before she arrived in Dymock. She continued to write poetry all her life, but by the mid-1920s was concentrating mainly on work for children – writing dramas, poems, stories, tales of history and musical compositions. Today, it is her output for children for which she is best known.

Nonetheless, alongside Farjeon's compositions for children she continued to pen poems for adults, particularly sonnets. It was sonnets she was writing immediately after her contact with the Dymock poets and her two sojourns in the Dymock area.

This work was taken seriously by other poets. For instance, D H Lawrence commented in May 1915: 'There is dignity and beauty and worth in these sonnets'.<sup>1</sup> Farjeon herself described the process of creation of one of them in a letter to her friend Maitland Radford, then serving as a doctor in the British Army in France, in December 1915: 'I've been writing hard, which has been a great joy to me – writing in the way I like best too ... with a kind of 'possessed' concentration so that I spend three hours perhaps on fourteen lines, without a sense of time or labour, and emerge at the end with my sonnet almost as I want it. ... I do enjoy that sense of timeless absorption in work better than any other direct personal experience I get out of life.'<sup>2</sup>

Blackwell published *Sonnets and Poems by Eleanor Farjeon* in 1918. Many of the sonnets in that book were brought together in a slim volume called *First and Second Love*, published first by Michael Joseph in 1947 and reissued by Oxford University Press in 1959. These sonnets, such as 'When you are by, what things are said and done' and 'Love needs not two to render it complete' are exquisite. The 'second love' of the title of her book is Edward Thomas.

The sonnets mark some of the first fruits of a radical change in Farjeon's style, a change that bears the imprint of Farjeon's contact with the Dymock area and the Dymock poets.

She abandoned the unnatural speech of Victorian and turn-of-the-century poems and odes with their florid adjectives and archaic poetic vocabulary that you will see in some of her early poems. Instead, she came to use pared-down language culled from everyday speech. This decision to use everyday speech and to make meaning clear was a key feature of the revolution that the Dymock poets brought to poetry.

It was an approach which Robert Frost in particular pioneered, and he was supported in this by the other poets. We tend to think of Farjeon's contact as being mainly with Edward Thomas. It is true that they shared many walks and many conversations over several years; often this was at Thomas' request. It is however important also to recognise her contact with Robert Frost. One of her main reasons for making her trip to Dymock in August 1914 was to meet Frost, as she much admired his book of poems *North of Boston*. In February 1915 she returned to stay for a week at The Gallows with the Frosts, at their invitation, of course. It is recorded that she and Robert went for walks together then; Edward Thomas was not in the area at that time. When Frost returned to Britain in 1957, he sought her out.

It is clear that Eleanor Farjeon was involved in at least some of the Dymock discussions about the form poetry should take. For instance, she was on the walks-talk with Frost and Thomas when Frost bowled a question over a hedgerow to a farm labourer and understood his answer (and the labourer Frost's question) not from the actual words used, but from the cadence of the sound – what the poets called 'sound-sense'. We know she was present because it was she who recorded the incident.

Why has Eleanor Farjeon not been included as a Dymock poet in the past? I think one of the main reasons is that she devoted most of her time to writing for children. It can be hard to be taken seriously in two different fields. There has also been a tendency to assume she played a supportive role because of her gender. For some, the fact that she felt a deep personal link with Edward Thomas somehow makes her seem lightweight. Yet Frost was devoted to Thomas too, and love for Thomas inspired the poetry of each of them in different ways.

We owe Farjeon a huge debt for recording the everyday life of the poets during her stay in Dymock in August 1914, including the cider supper, often first in letters to Maitland Radford which were incorporated into her book about Thomas, *The Last Four Years*.

It would be wrong that this function should obscure her role as a poet in her own right.

1 Farjeon, E (1958) *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* , Oxford University Press, p 140

2 Farjeon, A (1986) *Morning has Broken: a Biography of Eleanor Farjeon* London: Julia MacRae, p 116