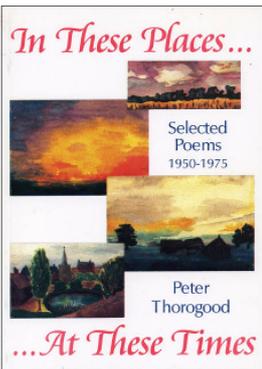


# The quintessential Peter Thorogood

## A Life with Words

PETER THOROGOOD, who celebrated his eightieth birthday with a recital of his writings and music in the Brighton Festival in May 2007, was born under the sign of Gemini, so he started life with a dual natural talent for words and music, both of which he has passionately pursued throughout his long and interesting life.

Apart from the cosy world of regular Sunday gatherings of uncles, aunts and cousins at his grandfather's farm in the charming Essex village of Writtle, his childhood on the family farm at Hornchurch — uncomfortably close to the aerodrome with nightly attacks from enemy bombers in wartime — was more solitary and made an indelible impression on him. The landscapes and sky-scapes of the Essex countryside remain to this day a precious memory of a happier pre-war England, and much of his earlier poetry is a poignant expression of that idyllic period of his life as in his poem, *Prodigal Son*.



Peter's early interest in painting watercolours led eventually to 'painting with words', a technique he learned from his English masters at Brentwood School. In his set of poems, *Under English Skies*, he reveals, between

the lines, his feelings and moods, a method he learned from the French poet, Verlaine, who asked his readers to seek the true meaning of his poems in the white of the page. This approach to words makes Peter's poems of this period deceptively simple in style, like a Japanese *haiku*. However, he was not afraid to face the critics with a volume of traditionally rhymed poems, *The Once-Contented Land*. Neither does he shun the personal and occasionally sentimental element in these poems. As *With Iago* is a journey into the darker recesses of the soul and the suffering of the human condition, which, he believes, finds salvation at the last.

Peter's childhood reading of the *Boy's Own Paper* might well have, in some measure, moulded his values and encouraged a certain conformity in his early years, but once he had broken free of family ties and had to stand on his own feet in the wider world, his natural shyness and reserve proved to be a disadvantage. The other side of the coin was a serious endeavour to succeed, a wish to achieve his own style, helped by his discovery of a small selection of the poems of Federico Garcia Lorca the translations of which he published in an anthology of British Council poets, edited by John Press. Peter was never one for giving in to fashion, though, uncharacteristically, caution quite often in



**Peter Thorogood outside his home in St. Mary's, Bramber**

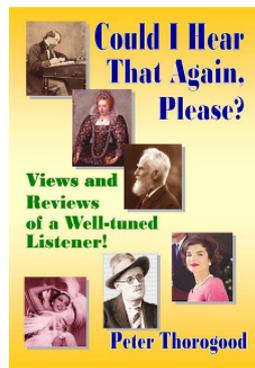
his life was thrown to the winds, as he relates in his wry set of poems of his more flamboyant younger days entitled *Riviera Diary*.

There is compassion and horror when he deals with war, as in his fear of a nuclear holocaust in *The Innocent Dream* (which he set to music for Neil Jenkins), his reflections on the Russian Revolution in *On Seeing Pasternak's 'Dr. Zhivago'* (dedicated to theatre critic Oleg Kerensky), *Lament of an Ibo Warrior for his Dead Son (Biafra Poems)* and other unpublished poems written in Israel during the Six-Day War. But wherever he travels he carries in his soul images of the English countryside and memories of home and family, as can be seen in his selected poems 1950-1975, *In These Places, At These Times* (Bramber Press). At heart he is nostalgic, a romantic, half-ashamed to admit it in these days of brutally televised 'man's inhumanity to man'. Yet he still promotes his hopes for a more peaceful, humane world.

The multi-talented aspect of Peter's personality and writing could not possibly ignore the comic side of life. His light verse, especially his popular conversation piece, *Tea-Time Recital* (composed for Joyce Grenfell), *Ladies' Gossip Column* (written for Hermione Baddeley), his comic account of the industrial unrest of the 1950's, *A Sent-to Coventry Carol* (when even the Body goes on strike and refuses to eat) and many other comic gems of non-sense, including the playful *House Mouse*, the amiable snake in *Something at the Foot of the Bed!*, the brave little bird in *The Ballad of the Little Cock Wren*, the rumbustious rhinoceros in *A Social Menace*, all to be found in Peter's *Complete Comic and Curious Verse* (Bramber Press).

On his return to England from six years of teaching English in Italy, Peter Thorogood was appointed Lecturer in English Literature at the British Council in London. Realising that he would be expected to have a special subject of study, he by chance discovered a set of the complete works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet and caricaturist, Thomas Hood. Though Peter did not realise the importance of this fortuitous find at the time, he has spent the ensuing years on an in-depth study of Hood's life and work and is today Britain's foremost authority on the subject. His popular book, *Thomas Hood: Poems Comic and Serious* (Bramber Press) has reached its third reprint and promises to remain in circulation for some time to come.

At this time, he found himself wandering one Sunday morning through the alleys of the Borough Market in Southwark. It was there that he had spent some time on leaving school working with his father in the family business of selling the farm produce. Quietly musing on the old days he began to remember the people and places he had known — the highways and byways south of London Bridge, the shops and restaurants, the farmers and traders, the porters and their families, the customers and clients of a thriving market lying under the railway arches close by the Cathedral. Nearly forty years later, in 2005, his semi-autobiographical novel, *South of the River* was published, with additional reminiscences on the genesis of the book.



In 1966-7, Peter Thorogood was appointed to *The Listener*, as freelance critic for 'The Spoken Word' — weekly comments on the then Home Service and Radio Three programmes. The Sixties was a period of great political, social

and artistic change, and to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2006-7, he has reprinted his writings in praise of the BBC talks with his well-received illustrated volume, *Could I Hear That Again, Please?* (Bramber Press). Forthcoming publications include in 2008 *Phoenix of Drury Lane*, an entertaining account of the history of the Theatre Royal and the events surrounding the sensational burning down of the Theatre in 1809, and *Thomas Hood and 'The Progress of Cant': A Masterpiece of Caricature*, a fascinating account and description of events and personalities in 1825.

Howard Sergeant once wrote of Peter Thorogood's 'sheer manipulation of distinct techniques' and a *Survey of Modern English Poetry* described him as 'an accomplished poet with excellent lyrical qualities'. As for his comic verses, Sir Harold Acton wrote of his 'rollicking humour and visual delight.' Actress Susan Jameson considers the public reading of his poetry 'sometimes challenging, sometimes sliding easily off the tongue. His words reach out to touch an audience. Whether it is the smooth sequence of sounds in his romantic verse, the quirky surprises in the lines of comedy, or the simplicity in a stark reminder of man's endless folly, his writing makes my job as a performer a delight.' Finally, author Simon Brett believes Peter Thorogood's work 'demonstrates an instinct for clear and powerful prose, whether fiction or non-fiction. His poetry ranges from engagingly comic and curious verse to poems which do not flinch from the serious issues of life, like war and bereavement. In spite of his versatility, his writing presents an individual voice, a prism through which his readers see the world in a different perspective to the one they might expect.'