


Ted Hughes

Terry Gifford

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Terry Gifford is a pioneering ecocritic and Ted Hughes scholar. He is co-author (with Neil Roberts) of *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (1981) and author of *Reconnecting With John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice* (2006). He is Visiting Professor at the University of Chichester, UK, and Profesor Honorario at the Universidad de Alicante, Spain.

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Ted Hughes

Terry Gifford

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**In memory of three pioneering American Hughes
scholars and friends:**

**Fred Rue Jacobs, Len Scigaj and Diane Middlebrook
and for newborn Lewis Edwards**

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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.

Diane Middlebrook was one of a number of scholars who more recently came to the works of Hughes via those of Sylvia Plath. This was a significant development at Joanny Moulin's 2000 conference in Lyon where Diane gave a glimpse of her theory of the self-construction of the Ted Hughes biography in his works. Diane kindly organised my Hughes files at my house in Derbyshire, England, while going through them in preparation for her book, before we went to see *Alcestis* at Dean Clough in Halifax with Neil Roberts – a memorable and moving event for all of us. Diane brought fresh perspectives to our conferences and a gracious wit to what had been, for too long, mainly male conversations on the work of Hughes.

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.

My parents, Edna and Dennis Gifford, will be pleased to see that I've been gainfully occupied during my retirement. This book benefits from their cuttings service.

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The publisher and author would like to thank, for permission to reprint material under copyright, Faber and Faber and the estate of Ted Hughes.

Terry Gifford
Sella, Alicante, 2008

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.

