

Interview with Fay Godwin
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On the making, with Ted Hughes, of *Remains of Elmet* (1979) and *Elmet* (1994)

In the summer of 2001 Fay Godwin's work will be shown in a major retrospective at the Barbican, from 27 July to 30 September. Although her first book *Land* (1985) made an immediate impact and the polemical *Our Forbidden Land* (1990) led the call for new legislation on access to open country, it is for her collaboration with Ted Hughes on *Remains of Elmet* (1979) that she will probably be most widely known. What is less widely known is that they worked together on a completely revised new edition of the Calder Valley project that was published by Faber under the significantly different title *Elmet* in 1994. Terry Gifford, Reader in Literature and Environment at Leeds University, talked to Fay Godwin about the nature of her collaboration with Ted Hughes.

TG: Do you prefer the duotone prints in the second edition?

FG: Oh yes, the printing is much better and the book is more elegantly designed. It's also a more peopled book.

TG: It's interesting you should say that because so is the text, isn't it, especially with new poems about family members?

FG: You're making it sound more planned than it was. I had taken those pictures for the first edition but I wasn't ready to put them in. Most of the pictures in *Elmet* were actually taken for *Remains of Elmet*. Ted would have liked more pictures of people in the first edition but I didn't feel ready to offer them to the project.

TG: So how did you collaborate on the project?

FG: Well, I didn't illustrate Ted's poems as many people think. In 1970 Ted had mentioned this area as an interesting one for me to photograph, so I went and took pictures. For six years nothing happened. Then he asked me if I was ready to do a book and I sent him some pictures. Then poems started to come back in response to pictures and I sent more pictures. The first book was made on the large oak table of David and Tina Pease's house in Todmorden [a house bought by the Peases from Billy Holt, the subject of Hughes's poem 'For Billy Holt']. We spread out the poems and photographs. I found some of the poems difficult, but Ted could see what the pictures were about plainly enough and many pairings were his choice.

The second edition we did on a big table at Faber. I didn't take new pictures for it, though there were a few more recent ones from a Bradford series. We had an alternative design for *Remains of Elmet* that was for a smaller size of book, like the second edition, but Ted wanted his poems printed large because he was afraid they would be swamped by the photographs. But the result was that *Remains of Elmet* wouldn't fit on the poetry shelves as well as it did on the photography shelves. Ironically, the second book, which is much more elegantly designed, giving more space around the pictures, and better printed because the technology had moved on, is unknown by the photographers. Its existence has been a well-kept secret. It is only now starting to sell somewhere.

TG: When I talked to Frank Pike, the editor at Faber and Faber, in 1981 he said, "We dealt with Fay Godwin over *Remains of Elmet* more than with Ted. Fay gave us instructions about what was to go where." More recently Keith Sagar has written in *The Laughter of Foxes* that in *Remains of Elmet* "the ordering of the poems is Fay

Godwin's, not Hughes's. It is, however, an ordering Hughes was willing to accept, and later recognised as better than his own two subsequent attempts to reorder the poems (in *Three Books* and *Elmet*)." Can we put the record straight on the matter of ordering the poems and photographs in the two editions?

FG: We did the sequencing together, though Ted was happy to follow my suggestions.

TG: One small thing I'm curious about is whether a TV aerial was cropped from the top of the photograph accompanying 'When Men Got To The Summit', although I know there is a TV aerial in the picture facing that page in *Remains of Elmet* which has been dropped from *Elmet*.

FG: I've not cropped any pictures and I dropped that picture with the TV aerial altogether. Designers never crop my pictures. Often I work with the designer Ken Garland, but I was very happy to work with Faber's Ron Costley on *Elmet*, which won the British Book Design and Production Award for 1994.

TG: You've mentioned in *The Epic Poise* that Ted wanted to drop a poem you liked so you offered another picture for it.

FG: Ted wanted to drop the poem 'Lumb Chimneys' from *Remains of Elmet* because he thought it seemed to be too much based on the photograph I had sent him.

TG: So that may have been the reason for the omission of a number of poems from the second edition?

FG: I don't think so. But I liked that poem and wanted him to keep it in, so I printed another photograph for it. But he dropped the poem anyway from the later edition, *Elmet*, and we used the picture with another poem. I believe he dropped the poem because he wanted others in, without making the book larger. He wrote to me saying that *Elmet*, this second book, was his definitive Calder Valley collection.

TG: I particularly like the picture of the little girl on the swing above the cramped houses and mills (*Elmet* p. 36).

FG: She was singing the Mary Hopkin pop song 'All kinds of everything' when I took that picture ... I love the picture of the feet up, with the nails in the heels (*Elmet* p. 30).

TG: You have said in *The Epic Poise* that Faber were reluctant to do the second edition.

FG: Ted kept asking Faber to do the second edition and they kept refusing. Their excuse was that when Scolar Press went down the origination material was lost. Finally, Ted was prepared to allow my literary agent, Giles Gordon, to offer the book to another publisher, though he did not want to leave Faber. In discussions to sort out completely different problems I had with Faber, they decided to publish the new edition of *Elmet*, to the standard of design and printing that I wanted, and Ted was happy to go along with that.

TG: Are you still working on landscape photography?

FG: I haven't done much landscape photography since 1991, the year I last carried a camera around the country. They are not designed for a woman, all that equipment. I've probably injured myself by carrying too much too far too often. The last job I travelled for was to Cumbria for *A Perfect Republic of Shepherds* (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 1997)

TG: You were surprised to hear that Ted had died?

FG: I wrote to Ted the summer before he died asking about his health. He answered all my other questions but that one. I'm saddened he didn't mention the cancer. He used to send me information about healers, diets, etc. Perhaps he believed that he could get through it and then it overwhelmed him quickly at the end.

Afterword: Fay Godwin has recently rediscovered a letter to her from Ted Hughes dated 4 July 1976 in which he indicates that it was the visit to Devon of his Uncle Walt that started Hughes thinking about writing an episodic autobiography anchored in the Calder Valley and particular family events. It is curious that this first idea for the book did not emerge — and then partially — until the second version of it, *Elmet*, although the spirit and history of the place that Hughes goes on to outline in the letter, is clearly also a major fascination for him that came to dominate the project that became *Remains of Elmet*. [TG]