

Ways of Life - On Places, Painters and Poets by Andrew Motion.
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Andrew Motion is a literary renaissance man, far from constrained by the genre that propelled him to the post of Poet Laureate in 1999. In *Ways of Life*, Motion's range of interests is on display as well as his acuity and brilliance as a writer of prose.

Ways of Life is divided into four sections: Places, Painters, An Imaginary Life and Poets. The third of the four is in many ways the most unexpected as it takes the form of an imaginary biographical vignette of the extraordinarily prolific writer Edward Thomas, killed at the battles of Arras in 1917.

Each of the other three sections is replete with gems: in the first Places, in my subjective opinion, it is the diary of a trip Motion took with his father and step-mother to the Normandy Beaches for the 60th anniversary of D-Day in 2004. It is deeply evocative of the invasion itself, and beautifully juxtaposes the drama and violence of those days with the tranquillity and echoes of the present. In the second section, Painters, Motion writes, inter alia, about J M W Turner's three visits to Venice and the first half of the 1800s, and of how the former's style was perfectly matched to the latter's decaying magnificence. In the third section, the longest, Motion writes of the poets who rank as significant in his poetic pantheon: Donne, Christina Rossetti, Wilfred Owen and Sylvia Plath figure, but the essay that moved and delighted me the most was the one about John Clare and the beautiful work he produced in spite of the curse of the mental illness that ultimately destroyed his life.

Andrew Motion has a deservedly high reputation as a poet, but his powers of literary observation, and his quality as a literary critic, epitomised by the collection in *Ways of Life*, suggest that these other strings to his bow should not be underestimated.

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