

Meditation

Our readings over the past couple of weeks have examined the idea of evil and good existing in the world in close proximity. This reminded me of an extraordinary poem by Edwin Muir, later set to music by Nicholas Maw: *One Foot in Eden*. Muir was born in the remote Orkney Islands of Scotland in 1887. At that time, the islands had been virtually untouched by the industrial revolution, and life there was more akin to mid-1700s Scotland. Moving to soot-infested Glasgow in 1901, Muir found “that a hundred and fifty years had been burned up in my two-days’ journey.” *One Foot in Eden* does not name specific locations, yet on some level it echoes the poet’s schismatic upbringing, one foot remaining in the seeming innocence of the Orkneys, and another in modern, and to Muir, hellish, industrial Glasgow. There is certainly a representation of a fall from innocence in phrases like: “Time’s handiworks by time are haunted/And nothing now can separate/The corn and tares compactly grown.” Yet in the second verse of the poem, glimmers of hope emerge: “But famished field and blackened tree/Bear flowers in Eden never known./Blossoms of grief and charity/Bloom in these darkened fields alone.” Muir believes that we can find meaning in noticing the blessings found closely twined to the ‘blackened trees’ of our imperfect world.

Muir’s poem was set to music in 1990 by the English composer Nicholas Maw. Maw, perhaps most famous for his wonderful Violin Concerto, spent the 2nd half of his career in the United States. He wrote *One Foot in Eden* in the idyllic setting of Annandale-on-Hudson while a professor at Bard College. There is an expressive dialogue between a quartet of soloists and the full choir. Maw’s sometimes-dissonant (and technically challenging) music beautifully amplifies the imagery in Muir’s text. I hope you enjoy these words and this music.

With all best wishes,

Tim Pyper
Director of Music

One Foot in Eden (Edwin Muir). Full text of poem:

<https://wordverseuniverse.wordpress.com/2017/11/12/one-foot-in-eden-muir/>

One Foot in Eden (Nicholas Maw)

<https://youtu.be/38YRwg7u9zc>

Hymn 388: O worship the King

<https://youtu.be/pE3SnYI30EA>

Hymn 686: Come thou fount of every blessing

<https://youtu.be/N5MvaH2XKo4>