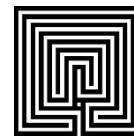


# My Father, W.H. Matthews

Zeta Eastes



*Originally published in Caerdroia 23 (1990), p.6-8*

William Henry Matthews was born in 1882. His father Thomas had been apprenticed to a printer in the City but longed for the country, so became a small dairy farmer at Ashford, Middlesex. So Will helped to milk the cows before dragging his two sisters and little brother to school at Staines. Their mother died young and the family moved to South London where he attended the City of Westminster Boys School. He met my mother, Ida Dean, on a duet stool (they were both good pianists) and they married in St. Alban's Abbey in 1910. During courtship he worked in the Central Telegraph Office and at the same time took a B.Sc. degree in Botany at Birkbeck College in the evenings.

Their married home was in Muswell Hill, where I was born in 1914, their only child. At the outbreak of the Great War he 'volunteered' at once and joined the Royal Engineers. I still have his little pocket diaries noting the trenches, the mud and the first tanks moving up to 'the line.' During lulls he would entertain the troops on harmoniums and broken-down pianos, playing for services on parade and seeking out any village church where he could retreat to play the organ, sometimes dropping off to sleep through exhaustion at the console.

I can just remember him coming home on leave, a khaki-clad figure with a haversack on his shoulder which contained a little present for me - a Sevres miniature tea service on a half-crown sized tea tray. He came back 'demobbed' in 1919 to a crowded small house shared with in-laws in Eastcote, Middlesex and took refuge in the Reading Room of the British Museum to research and write his *Mazes and Labyrinths* book, returning to work in London at the General Post Office.



*William Henry Matthews, 1882-1948*

*Photo taken while on service in WWI  
Labyrinthos Archive*

I have often wondered, alas too late, what made him interested in mazes, and cannot help thinking that, despite the dedication of the book in which he credits my “innocent prattlings” (aged 5), his soldier life in Northern France prompted the origins. On p. 61 he notes a fellow soldier’s interest in a labyrinth found among papers in the debris of ruins on the Arras Front. He was certainly stationed near Arras, Amiens, Abbeville, Albert and St. Omer during those wearisome years, and I think the seed must have been sown then; within two and a half years of returning from France he had researched, written, printed and published this book.

In those early post-war years holidays (once a year only) were lovely cycle tours. I travelled in a wicker basket on his handlebars, walking up hills and whizzing down, squirming with delight at the wind in my hair and Father whistling my favourite Grieg melodies. We would stop off for views, flowers and country churches and throughout the rest of his life his happiest times were spent on his bicycle (he never drove a car) making little pencil drawings of church architecture, an interest he passed on to me.

Best of all was a flat stretch of sand at the seaside of Sussex and Dorset when he would make mazes for his little daughter to run around, square, always different and multicursal, with a bunch of seaweed at the centre, he traced them with his walking stick (photos opposite). On route we visited the mazes at Hampton Court and on St. Catherine’s Hill, near Winchester. He would occasionally go off on his own, borrowing Mother’s ‘box brownie’ camera, putting his bike on the train to visit Saffron Walden or Hilton. But he never saw any of the foreign ones. I have had much pleasure since in checking up on Chartres, Bayeux, Poitiers, Lucca, Ravenna, etc. I do wish he could have seen them too.

‘Will’s book’ became a bit of a family joke - it didn't sell very well, despite the splendid reviews and many appreciative letters he received. At eighteen shillings it was rather expensive. It was published by Longmans, Green & Co. on November 9th, 1922. This was an exciting time of family achievement as we had also just found a pleasant house to buy at Ruislip. I was given my own inscribed copy. I liked tracing the maze figures, but the ‘reading’ was of course too heavy. Instead I kept my silver-paper collection in it (a popular ploy for second formers at that time). I am ashamed to say that I never read it until after he died, when I found myself standing in the dusty gloaming on one of Father’s mazes, beneath the chairs of the nave of Chartres Cathedral. That jogged my conscience and re-awakened my interest.

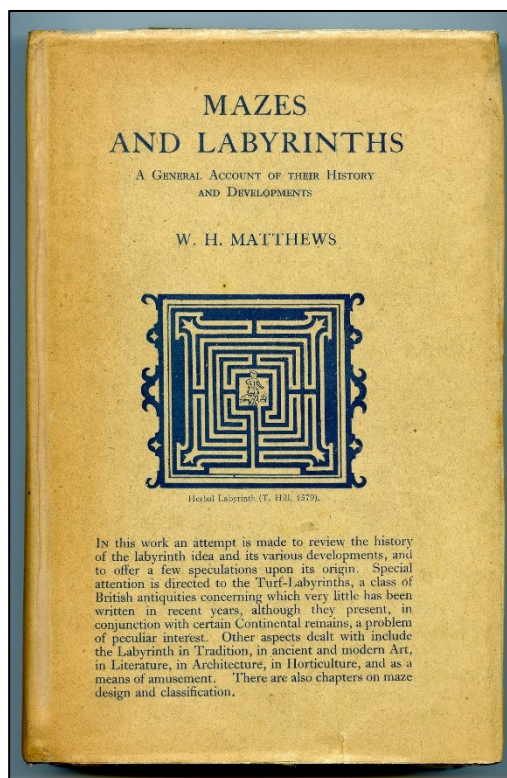
***Mazes and Labyrinths – A General Account of their History and Development. Original edition and cover, Labyrinthos Archive***



Fig. 141. Sea-Side Sand Maze. [Photo: W.H.M.]



Fig. 142. Sea-Side Sand Maze. [Photo: W.H.M.]



Before the book was published he was transferred to the Standards Dept. of the Board of Trade, working in a room overlooking the Jewel Tower in Westminster, in which were kept the standard pound and yard in the Strong Room. Later he worked in the Textile Division in a room overlooking Birdcage Walk. Typically determined to learn the subject thoroughly, he became a member of the Textile Institute. During the Second World War he worked in his Whitehall office by day and roof-watched for incendiary bombs by night. In this stress his health began to fail. He retired to the Chiltern Hills, and died in 1948 from hypertension, soon after playing the organ for his third grandchild's christening.

He was a life-long musician - a choirboy, accompanist and an excellent sight reader. For relaxation at home in the evenings of my school days, he hammered away at Bach's 1481, but enjoyed also Brahms, Chopin, Grieg and Schumann. He seemed to play the organ for Sunday Services wherever he lived, and said "Give us a blow" in many a wayside church, much to my embarrassment and fear that he would be caught in the act. A keen folk-dancer, he was an early member of the English Folk Dance Society (a family involvement - "Zeta could dance before she could walk"). A nature lover and cyclist, his B.Sc. speciality had been mosses and liverworts, but he thrilled to a bee orchid or mushroom. The smell of new-mown hay or farmyard dung would send him into raptures ("Fill your lungs") doubtless reflecting childhood memories. He loved to take me to the South Kensington Museums.

He was an avid reader, his diaries frequently recording books, even on his wedding day and The Armistice. He admired Milton, requesting his complete works for a retirement present, with various dictionaries. He wrote wordy poetry and a long uncompleted novel. He planned a second edition of *Mazes and Labyrinths* and I still have a box full of further material, but he became discouraged.

How pleased and surprised he and my mother would have been at the present day revival of interest in mazes and labyrinths, how sorry I am that in the high-headedness of youth I didn't learn more from him.

Zeta Eastes, Wiltshire, England; February 1990

#### **Editor's Footnote:**

### **Zeta Eastes : 1914-2000**

For many years a keen reader of *Caerdroia*, Zeta was our guest of honour at the Caerdroia sponsored "Labyrinth '91" conference held in Saffron Walden, Essex, on July 13, 1991. Keen readers of the labyrinth literature may have seen her mentioned - possibly without realising it - on the dedication page of W.H. Matthews' classic 1922 book *Mazes and Labyrinths*. Born in 1914, Zeta was the daughter of W.H. Matthews and was justifiably proud of her father's achievement and current status as a pioneer of maze and labyrinth research. Over the years she visited many of the locations mentioned in her father's book and was always keen to share her notes and photographs with the new generation of enthusiasts that developed following the republication of the book in 1970. Zeta's biography of her father, published in *Caerdroia* 23 in 1990, finally provided a much needed insight into his life. A long term supporter of *Caerdroia*, I remember with warm fondness her lengthy telephone calls that always followed the arrival of a new edition. In later years her failing eyesight meant a delay between arrival and the telephone ringing, while she rounded up various friends and family members to read the articles to her. I will miss her calls and the direct link that she provided to the early days of our study, which she followed with such great enthusiasm.

Jeff Seward, Thundersley, England; October 2000

*The text and illustrations in this reprint are © Labyrinthos/Zeta Eastes & Jeff Seward 2017 as appropriate. Personal copies are permitted, but permission must be sought for any commercial reproduction - www.labyrinthos.net*