

Celebration Poem  
for the Bicentennial of the East End Meetinghouse,  
now Falmouth's Synagogue

June, 1997

*Eric H. Edwards*

I  
How old is anything?  
this house, standing now  
for a double century  
embraces us, but it isn't  
two hundred years old.  
Just consider your fingernails,  
or the number of hairs on your head.  
How old are you?  
The trees grew  
taking up ancient dirt and rain,  
ancient air and time –  
then they were timbered, seasoned,  
planed and carried along,  
cut, drilled, nailed,  
painted, scraped and shingled  
over and over again.  
What we call a building  
was dedicated in 1797;  
that is, words were said  
fashioned out of ancient air  
by people who wanted to say them then;  
by people we would recognize  
as people, but so strange to us,  
in the way of their thinking almost unthinkable,  
all now unknowable, as we are to them...  
This would be a shock to them –  
a Synagogue? Where once  
the fierce web of text and tax and doctrine  
displayed for any passer by

why this place had a bell,  
was shingled plain and white-edged,  
had pews with doors  
and galleries for poor and black  
who took the stairs  
and sat until doomsday in the back.

## II

It is both pleasure and irony  
in this ancient, tinder-dry  
fragment of history  
to sit and breathe a new life  
whose every molecule participates  
equally in agelessness.



Early photograph of the East End Meeting House and carriage shed, from a glass plate negative.  
Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

The first lesson therefore is this:  
Never forget  
just who you are,  
how some part of the earth  
is locked in wood, some in stone  
and some in a flesh  
made to sing and celebrate  
with a bewildering variety of forms  
the light and spirit  
from seven candles to the morning star  
where Job himself in every cell felt  
humbled and thoroughly blessed.

## III

Out of the strange fire of this century,  
that left this building whole  
but printed numbers with consuming precision  
on the forearms of millions:  
out of the strange weather of this century  
that knocked the steeple right off the roof  
where heresy could not:  
the decline of certain families  
and the rise of others;  
an aurora of tolerance or indifference,  
of loss and new possibility –  
out of these things  
was this building delivered new to you.  
And from Prague by way of Nazi looting,  
and restorative Episcopalian gift,  
came the old words, the oceanic texts,  
anchor and buoy and current  
to this sea of life experience –  
The Torah, spiritual fire  
burning its way into the beating heart,  
taking this building into a flame  
that says *I will illuminate  
but destroy nothing.*

Here is the second lesson:  
do not destroy but shed light,  
give hope; take the given gift,  
reach back and touch those gone,  
reach forward and embrace time.  
How old is that?  
Only as old as any of us who care  
and love God, who cared  
and loved God, who will care  
and will love God.

## IV

We all say, 200 years,  
what a marvel!  
You could equally say  
200 years, how horrible!  
But what does the building say  
what does the Torah say  
what do the foundation stones  
say about themselves?  
They sing out of time  
and in the uses of time  
and the uses of life in time.

So do not think  
there is any time here today  
that has not come and gone away  
a hundred thousand times already;  
the time that opportunity of gift  
and giving affords us.  
Are you alive today?  
breathers of ancient air, eaters of ancient molecules,  
speakers of ancient words and sacred will –  
are you alive today?  
Then is the East End Meetinghouse  
living still.  
Here is the third lesson:  
you, and you, and you, and so on...