

THOMAS, DYLAN MARLAIS (1914-1953), poet and prose writer

Name: Dylan Marlais Thomas
Date of birth: 1914
Date of death: 1953
Spouse: Caitlin Thomas (née Macnamara)
Child: Aeronwy Bryn Thomas
Child: Colm Garan Hart Thomas
Child: Llewelyn Edouard Thomas
Parent: Florence Hannah Thomas (née Williams)
Parent: David John Thomas
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet and prose writer
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Poetry
Author: Walford Davies

Dylan Thomas was born at 5, Cwmdonkin Drive in Swansea, on 27 October 1914. He was the son of David John Thomas (1876-1952) and his wife Florence Hannah (née Williams, 1882-1958), who came from rural Welsh-speaking families in north and south west Carmarthenshire respectively. The parents spoke Welsh to each other, but the father (a First Class Honours English graduate of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth) decided against raising Dylan and his older sister Nancy (1906-1953) to be Welsh-speakers, in the belief that English was the way to 'get on' in the world. He also paid for them to have elocution lessons, a middle-class fashion in Swansea at the time, designed to avoid even a Welsh accent. The loss of Welsh in a still considerably bilingual Swansea, especially in what could have been a naturally bilingual home, produced a creative tension in the poet. Explaining later to an English poet friend what he called his 'cut-glass' accent, Thomas added revealingly '...and I can't speak Welsh either!' After all, his father was the nephew of [William Thomas](#), the renowned radical preacher-poet [Gwilym Marles](#) (hence Dylan's middle name Marlais and that of his sister, Nancy Marles). A few weeks before Thomas's birth, his father served on a committee to welcome [Lord Howard de Walden](#)'s embryonic Welsh National Theatre to Swansea, when [de Walden](#)'s opera, *Dylan, Son of the Wave*, was being performed at Covent Garden: hence 'Dylan' - from one of the medieval Welsh tales, Y Mabinogi.

The father was Senior English master at Swansea Grammar School, which Thomas attended from 1925 to 1931. From 1929 Thomas was a precocious co-editor (then editor) of the *Swansea Grammar School Magazine*, having been a contributing mainstay from his first year. His immediate post-school prominence in Swansea's Little Theatre (1931-1934) also began at school - in its Reading Circle and Dramatic and Debating societies. It was Thomas's only period of formal education, followed by fifteen months as a junior reporter on the *South Wales Daily Post* in Swansea.

By then, his widening interest in English poetry - the father's positive influence this time - had borne fruit in four school-type exercise books (the kind with mathematical tables and 'Danger-Donts' on the back), now known as 'The Notebooks'. In these, between 1930 and 1934, he entered quickly-maturing poems (a fifth 'Red' Notebook was kept for short stories). The sixteen-year-old schoolboy sent some poems to Robert Graves, who blandly deemed them 'unexceptionable'. But their publication in London periodicals led quickly to his first volume *18 Poems* in December 1934. William Empson recalled that 'What hit the town of London was the child Dylan publishing [in October 1933] "The force that through the green fuse" as a prize poem in the *Sunday Referee*, and from that day he was a famous poet; I think the incident does some credit to the town, making it look less clumsy than you would think.'

Just before the publication of *18 Poems*, the twenty-year-old moved to London to share rooms with two Swansea friends, the artists Alfred Janes and [Mervyn Levy](#). They were two of many gifted Swansea friends who in the early 1930s used to meet in the Kardomah Café across the road from the *Evening Post* offices in Castle Street. Others were the poet Charles Fisher, the musician and teacher Tom Warner, the broadcaster [Wynford Vaughan-Thomas](#), the composer [Daniel Jones](#) and, later, the poet [Vernon Watkins](#). Up to 1938, London alternated with Swansea as Thomas's main base. Cosmopolitan artistic life in London was celebrating Surrealism and Picasso in art, 'Modernist' Eliot, Pound and Joyce in literature, and Stravinsky in music. But in a decade scarred by the Depression and fears of a second world war, what more directly challenged Thomas was the politically 'committed' poetry of the Auden circle. His own socialist politics were no different from Auden's, but he had the advantage of returning to the unusually rich store of the 1930-34 Notebooks - to poems that gave voice to an elemental, pre-political, often prenatal, view of experience. The Notebooks saved him from being absorbed by any particular 1930s poetic 'fashion'.

Two 1930s volumes followed quickly - *Twenty-five Poems* (1936) and *The Map of Love* (1939), the latter accompanied by seven short stories. Alternation between literary/media life in London and more productive periods back home in Wales set a lifetime's pattern. An important correspondence from 1935 with his Swansea friend the poet [Vernon Watkins](#) strengthened a creative anchorage in Wales. He always stressed that poetry is primarily a matter of craft - that a poet works 'out of words'

(creating meaning), not 'towards words' (to create atmosphere) - suggesting again something instinctually Welsh in his poetic temperament. As Mallarmé said, 'poetry is not written with ideas but with words'. Throughout the 1930s, Thomas's fame grew steadily, increased by his numerous book reviews of modern writers in leading London periodicals. A major London editor described him as 'a swell reviewer'.

In April 1936, in London, he met Caitlin Macnamara (1913-1994). Of Irish Protestant gentry descent, Caitlin was brought up in Hampshire and of decidedly bohemian energies, encouraged under the influence of [Augustus John](#). They were married in Penzance in July 1937. In May 1938 they moved for the first time to live in Laugharne, Carmarthenshire, the village now most closely associated with Thomas, and a profound influence on his later work. That year, he was awarded the Blumenthal Poetry Prize of *Poetry* (Chicago), for whose special 'English Number' W. H. Auden and Michael Roberts had chosen 'We lying by seasand' - Thomas's first American publication. In Laugharne in 1938 he started writing his greatest prose work, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940), which he used to call 'stories towards a Provincial Autobiography'. Though only quasi realistic, these moved away from the surrealist/ mythic flavour of his earlier stories, and also from [Caradoc Evans](#)'s harsh satiric view of Wales. From 1938, an autobiographical emphasis continued. The last story in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* marked the point at which the teenage Thomas left Swansea for London. An attempt at a sequel in the form of a sub-Dickensian novel, *Adventures in the Skin Trade* (1955), about his early life in London, was abandoned. But from 1944, a subtler autobiographical vein emerged, in poems (and lyrical prose pieces) that set the poet in recognizable Welsh landscapes.

From 1941 (the year in which he sold his Notebooks) to the end of the war, Thomas had been writing filmscripts for Strand Films, and later for Gryphon Films, under the monopolising aegis of the Ministry of Information. A good example of his success in marrying literary effects to the technical (often propaganda) requirements of wartime film is *The Doctor and the Devils* (1966). At the same time, he was also writing radio scripts and features and taking part in talks and readings for B.B.C. Radio. His natural strengths on radio - wide knowledge, quick inventiveness and a memorable voice - made him a household name. An outstanding radio work, second only to the posthumously broadcast *Under Milk Wood*, is 'Return Journey' (1947), in which Thomas retraces his vanished youth through a vanished, war-demolished Swansea. In the meantime, wartime had slowed down the writing of poems, yet major elegies such as 'There was a saviour', 'Deaths and Entrances', 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid' and 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' are among the finest poems to emerge from that war.

Towards the war's end, Wales again became his home. At Llan-gain and New Quay in 1944-45 a new phase of poetic creativity occurred. Along with the 1938-40 period in Laugharne, it was the most productive since the incomparably prolific period of the 1930-1934 Notebooks in Swansea. Thomas's greatest single poetry volume, *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) increased the attention of America. But as a husband, and father of Llewelyn Edouard (1939-2000) and Aeronwy Bryn (1943-2009), his hope was to earn a living at home in Wales. The wartime work for film and radio had helped in that respect, but had also meant his living within easy reach of London. Between 1946 and 1949, the family lived in or near Oxford, with visits to Ireland, Italy and Prague. But wherever he was, Thomas never stopped working on poems started at home in Wales. It was in Rapallo and Florence that he completed the Welsh-landscaped poem 'In Country Sleep'.

His solo visit to Prague was as guest of the government, to attend the founding of the Czech Writers' Union. Though perfectly at ease meeting Czech writers and mixing with the Czech people, he disliked the stiffness of bureaucratic Soviet proceedings and interviews. His real grit was shown when he complained about the painful literal-mindedness of the official translator he'd been assigned. He had quickly sensed - another bilingual gulf - that important nuances were being lost between the translator's two languages. But in order to make a serious point comically - one of his still underrated talents as a writer - he climbed onto the Charles Bridge, melodramatically embraced one of its famous statues, and threatened to jump into the Charles River if this particular Official Translator were not replaced.

Back in Wales in May 1949, he moved (thanks to the financial generosity of Margaret Taylor, wife of the Oxford historian A. J. P. Taylor) to live in the now iconic Boat House in Laugharne. It was the village in which he had long hoped to settle: he had already rented a house for his parents there, and it was there that his third child Colm Garan Hart (1949-2012) was born. In early 1951 he undertook a five-week visit to Iran to write a filmscript for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. But the inspiration for his own writing was now Laugharne. He acknowledged it as the 'setting of a radio play I am writing' - that is, *Under Milk Wood*. Inspired by a short wartime radio essay about New Quay in 1944, it developed its full form as a radio play via the larger dramatis personae provided by Laugharne, and in the different, nuclear, atmosphere of the Cold War.

Thomas's work had been widely published in America from as early as 1939. His first American tour in February-June 1950 was followed by three more in 1952 and 1953. During the second tour in 1952, his last individual poetry volume *In Country Sleep* was published - in America only. This completed the five volumes that then made up his *Collected Poems 1934-1952* (1952). His prefatory 'Note' to that important volume said that these were 'most of the poems I have written, and all, up to the present year, that I wish to preserve'. The volume represented barely a quarter of the poems he'd written, but his point was that these were the ones he wanted his reputation to rest on. It's a point that deserves respect. He knew where to draw a line, not only this side of juvenilia but between poetry and mere verse. In the 1930-1934 Notebooks, he had unerringly recognized those items that were potentially fine poems. He chose these for his first four volumes. These volumes then, along with the poems in *In Country Sleep*, comprised his *Collected Poems 1934-1952* (1952), confirming that volume's

authorial integrity. It won the Foyle's Poetry Prize, to international acclaim.

But an untidy life, and naivety in the matter of money, meant that not even four profitable American visits made things easier back home in Wales. Yet even then, it was in New York in May 1953, and then in November that year (a matter of days before his death), that he completed *Under Milk Wood*, and gave the definitive performance as narrator in its first public readings. At the same time, the Opera Workshop of Boston University invited him to write a libretto for a new Stravinsky opera - at the suggestion of Stravinsky himself. But on his arrival for the last tour Thomas was clearly tired and ill, the result of an increasing tendency towards heavy drinking. The huge inter-state programme of engagements for all four American tours was itself unnaturally heavy, and the culpability of those who had professional responsibility for his welfare (primarily his agent for the tours, John Malcolm Brinnin) went even further. Thomas's death aged only 39 was by no means inevitable. It was precipitated by the prescription of morphine sulphate by a maverick American doctor. Even for final pain, the correct dose would have been one-sixth of a grain. Thomas's discomfort was treated with three times that amount. It exacerbated breathing difficulties, depriving his brain of oxygen.

Dylan Thomas died in the Catholic St Vincent's Charity Hospital in New York City on 9 November 1953. He was buried at St Martin's Church in Laugharne on 24 November 1953. On St David's Day 1982 a memorial stone was unveiled at Westminster Abbey, set between those to Byron and George Eliot.

Author

Professor Walford Davies

Sources

(Chronological within sections):

Personal information:

Personal research - including conversations and correspondence with Vernon Watkins, Glyn Jones, Aneurin Talfan Davies, William Empson, Paul Ferris, Aeronwy Thomas, John Malcolm Brinnin and Llewelyn Thomas

The three main bibliographies:

J. Alexander Rolph, *Dylan Thomas a bibliography* (London 1956)

Ralph Maud, *Dylan Thomas in Print: A Bibliographical History, with an updating appendix by Walford Davies* (London 1972)

John Goodby, *Dylan Thomas*, [Oxford Bibliographies Online](#)

The three main biographies:

Constantine FitzGibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (London 1965)

Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography* (London 1999)

Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London 2003)

Other works of biographical interest:

John Malcolm Brinnin, *Dylan Thomas in America: An Intimate Journal* (London 1956)

Caitlin Thomas, *Leftover Life to Kill* (London 1957)

Dylan Thomas, ed. Vernon Watkins, *Letters to Vernon Watkins* (London 1957)

Andrew Sinclair, *Dylan Thomas: Poet of His People* (London 1975)

Daniel Jones, *My Friend Dylan Thomas* (London 1977)

Gwen Watkins, *Portrait of a Friend* (Llandysul 1983)

Caitlin Thomas, with George Tremlett, *Caitlin: A Warring Absence* (London 1986)

John Ackerman, *A Dylan Thomas Companion: Life, Poetry and Prose* (Basingstoke 1991)

John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke 1991)

George Tremlett, *Dylan Thomas: In the Mercy of His Means* (London 1991)

Paul Ferris, *Caitlin: The Life of Caitlin Thomas* (London 1993)

Walford Davies, ysgrif, 'Bright Fields, Loud Hills and the Glimpsed Good Place: R. S. Thomas and *Dylan Thomas*' yn M. Wynn Thomas (ed.), *The Page's Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighty* (Bridgend 1993)

Caitlin Thomas, *Double Drink Story: My Life With Dylan Thomas* (1997)

John Ackerman, *Welsh Dylan: Dylan Thomas's Life, Writing and His Wales* (Bridgend 1998)

- James A. Davies, *A Reference Companion to Dylan Thomas* (Westport Connecticut 1998)
- Dylan Thomas*, gol. Paul Ferris, *Collected Letters* (London 2000)
- David N. Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: A Farm, Two Mansions and a Bungalow* (Bridgend 2000)
- Heather Holt, *Dylan Thomas the Actor* (Swansea 2003)
- Colin Edwards, ed. David N. Thomas, *Dylan Remembered: Interviews by Colin Edwards* (Bridgend 2003, 2004)
- David N. Thomas, *Fatal Neglect: Who Killed Dylan Thomas?* (Bridgend 2008)
- Aeronwy Thomas, *My Father's Places: A Portrait of Childhood by Dylan Thomas' Daughter* (London 2009)
- M. Wynn Thomas, chapter on *Dylan Thomas* in *In the Shadow of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales* (Cardiff 2010)
- Hilly Janes, *The Three Lives of Dylan Thomas* (London 2014)
- James A. Davies, *Dylan Thomas's Swansea, Gower and Laugharne* (Cardiff 2014)
- Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas* (Cardiff 2014)
- Kate Crockett, *Mwy na Bardd* (2014)

Editions of the texts with material of biographical interest:

- Walford Davies (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings* (London 1971)
- Daniel Jones (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: The Poems* (London 1971)
- Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (goln), *Collected Poems 1934-53* (London 1988)
- Ralph Maud (ed.), *The Notebook Poems 1930-1934* (London 1990)
- Ralph Maud, *Dylan Thomas: The Broadcasts* (London 1991)
- John Ackerman (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: The Filmscripts* (London 1995)
- Walford Davies (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: Selected Poems* (London 2000)
- Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas: Selected Poems* (London 2014)
- Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas: Collected Stories* (London 2014)
- Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (eds), *Dylan Thomas: Under Milk Wood* (London 2014)
- John Goodby (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* (London 2014)

Images

Of photographic-biographical interest:

- Bill Read, *The Days of Dylan Thomas* (London 1964)
- Welsh Arts Council, *Welsh Dylan* (Cardiff 1973)
- Rollie McKenna, *Portrait of Dylan: A Photographer's Memoir* (Maryland 1982)
- Hilary Laurie, *Dylan Thomas's Wales* (London 1999)

Further Reading

The main library holdings of *Dylan Thomas* material:

- The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin
- The New York Public Library ('The Berg Collection')
- The State University of New York, Buffalo
- the universities of Harvard, Indiana and Ohio
- The University of Victoria, Canada
- The British Library
- The National Library of Wales
- Gareth Farmer, 'Loving Language with *Dylan Thomas*', *Poetry Wales*, Vol.49, no.4, Spring 2014, pp.11-16
- [NLW MS 23949E: Map of Llareggub](#)
- Wikipedia Article: [Dylan Thomas](#)

Sound and Film

Archif ITV Cymru/Wales Archive: [Dylan Thomas - Fern Hill](#)

BBC: [Funeral of a Poet: Dylan Thomas's Funeral - Newsreel](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Dylan Thomas Trust Manuscripts](#)

VIAF: [73860698](#)

Wikidata: [Q191023](#)

Published date: 2014-10-24

Article Copyright: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/> 

The Dictionary of Welsh Biography is provided by The National Library of Wales and the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. It is free to use and does not receive grant support. A donation would help us maintain and improve the site so that we can continue to acknowledge Welsh men and women who have made notable contributions to life in Wales and beyond.

Find out more on our [sponsorship page](#).

[Donate](#)