

Unveiling of Blue Plaque to Dylan Thomas at South Leigh

M. Wynn Thomas

Mehefin 7/ June 7, 2025

A quarter of a century ago, I was a guest at the prestigious University of Pekin in Beijing. I had been invited there to lecture on the work of the great American poet Walt Whitman. At the lavish meal that had been prepared in my honour I sat next to an elderly female academic who was fluent in English. 'Where do you come from?' she asked. 'From Wales' I replied and was astonished to be rewarded with a warm nod of approval. She had, it seemed, spent a year at Bangor University. 'So where in Wales?' she next enquired. 'From Swansea' I said, and this time was rewarded with a beaming smile. Next thing I knew she started

'Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs,
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green.'

It was clear she knew 'Fern Hill' off by heart, and thereby hung her very moving tale.

Forty years earlier, she had been deprived of all her possessions, including her precious books, and sent to labour alongside the peasants in the countryside. This was Mao's notorious Cultural Revolution. One of the things that had sustained her throughout that grim ordeal, she explained, was the poetry she loved, and no poem had been more precious to her than 'Fern Hill.' I was deeply moved – and chastened. Having grown up around Swansea, I had long been accustomed to view Dylan Thomas with a condescension laced with deep mistrust, as he had become a stick with which the anglophone Welsh loved to belabour products of the Welsh language and its culture like myself.

There is no doubt of Thomas's worldwide appeal, nor of the depth of attachment felt to his work by peoples of so many different cultures. At the last count it was estimated his work had been translated into more than forty languages, including Korean, Japanese and Chinese. He has become poet laureate of the world. And he must surely be far and away the most blueplauqued of all Welsh writers! Martin Spurrier will be talking later about his links with South Leigh. So let me begin at the beginning and pay very brief attention to the cultural milieu by which he was moulded. Because widely though he travelled – and he visited Iran as well as the USA – his core creative self never really felt at home anywhere outside Wales, and even then never too far from his beloved Swansea.

It's worth pausing over his name because there are important clues to be discovered there. Dylan – well, that's the name of a bit-part character in the *Mabinogion*, meaning son of the sea-wave. It's a reminder that both his parents were native Welsh speakers and that Dylan was the first boy in his family not to speak the language. That means he was the product of a profoundly influential shift in Welsh culture, and that, it seems to me, has a direct bearing both on his manner of writing and on his self-presentation. After all, he uses

the English language as if he were inventing it, and not inheriting it. And in one sense that was true. Just listen to his great paean of praise to the glory of English words: 'so many blinding bright lights breaking across the just-awaking wits and splashing all over the pages in a million bits and pieces all of which were words, words, words, and each of which was alive forever in its own delight and glory and oddity and light'.

There's a lot to be said about that phoney accent of his, the synthetic product of elocution lessons, carefully honed through a period of local acting in preparation for travel abroad in English company – at home he easily reverted to his Swansea accent. So, then, 'Dylan.' That is the only way I can pronounce it and preserve my self-respect as a Welsh-speaker. But then he has come to be known as 'Dillon', hasn't he – which makes him sound like a bookshop in my ears. And even his own mother was afraid he'd be called 'Dull-un' at school and be mocked mercilessly in consequence. The point is this: the different pronunciations of his name seem to presage his ambiguous cultural positioning. As he himself ruefully remarked, in England he was regarded as Welsh, in Wales there were some who regarded him as English. No wonder he proved wondrously – and in the end catastrophically – adept at adopting a different persona for every occasion. His close friend, Daniel Jones, was to sadly conclude, after his passing, that Dylan had become bewildered and lost, baffled by his own myth. By the end, he had no idea who he was. Cultural pliability can come at great tragic cost.

Then there's 'Marlais', his second name. That was given him in honour of his famous great-uncle, Gwilym Marlais Thomas. In the second half of the Victorian era he had become a prominent figure in West Wales, and had been considered both a rebel and a hero. A rebel because he was a Unitarian, who disbelieved in the divinity of Christ, to the outrage of Nonconformist Wales. Dylan was to inherit his radical humanism – a humanism fed in Gwilym Marlais' case, by his love of the writings of such leading American thinkers of his day as Ralph Waldo Emerson. There is for me a suggestive symmetry between Gwilym's love of the United States and that of his distant nephew. But Gwilym was also a hero, because he played a prominent role in attacking the landlords who had turned so many of their tenants off their farms because they'd dared to cast their vote in favour of the Liberal party. Dylan's Communist friend Bert Trick was to insist that Dylan had strong left-wing leanings throughout his life, and intriguing research has revealed that, during his tours of the States, he deliberately set out to contact communist sympathisers at the very time when public opinion in that country was preparing the way for the notorious McCarthy era.

So much for his name, but let me briefly reflect on his umbilical relationship as a creative writer with Swansea. His father had read Shakespeare to him in his cradle. In his teens he invented a whole host of characters with his friend Dan Jones: 'Miguel Y. Bradshaw, Waldo Carpet, Xmas Pulpit, Paul America, Winter Vaux.' They were zany enough to have featured in the Goon Show decades later. And then there were their comic rhymes:

'A drummer is a man we know who had to do with drums,
 But I've not met a plumber yet who had to do with plums.
 A cheerful man who sells you hats would be a cheerful hatter.
 But is a serious man who sells you mats a serious matter.'

Before he was out of his teens he had written many of his best poems. Yes, he was every inch a Swansea poet. And the greatest disaster Thomas faced in his whole career as a poet was the destruction of his beloved Swansea town in 1941, when a three-night blitz razed the town centre to the ground. In his short radio play 'Return Journey' he composed a deeply moving elegy to the irreplaceable town that had been both cradle and nurse of his talent. Returning 'home' in the deep snow of mid-winter he embarks on what turns out to be a futile search for his young self. The result is a series of emotional encounters, including a particularly revealing one with a barmaid. He asks her whether she can remember 'a bombastic adolescent provincial Bohemian with a thick-knotted artist's tie made out of his sister's scarf.' To which she deflatingly replies: There's words: what d'you want to find *him* for. I wouldn't touch him with a barge-pole.'

'There's words.' By then, Thomas had begun to fear that just as a snowman is a man fashioned out of snow so he might be no more than a man fashioned out of words. Early in his career he had worried he might be just a freak user of words rather than a poet. Towards the end of his life, he plaintively asked 'Where have the old words got me?'

Well, they've taken him pretty far, haven't they. His works could not be more widely travelled. Included in W. H. Auden's great elegy for W. B. Yeats are the lines 'Now he is scattered among a hundred cities / And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections.' Perhaps of no poet of recent times is that more true than of Dylan Thomas. When Kennedy was assassinated, Alastair Cooke wrote 'We may pray on our knees. But when we get up from them we cry with the poet "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light."' When ex-President Jimmy Carter visited Swansea in 1995 it was partly so that he could visit Thomas's home in Cwmdonkin Drive. When Alan Ginsberg came to Swansea in the same year, he went off-piste to visit Dylan Thomas's simple grave in Laugharne. Arriving there towards sunset, he embarrassed his driver by sinking to his knees and chanting the great Jewish funeral lament, the Kaddish. When Hillary Clinton addressed an audience at Swansea University in 2018 she asked to hear a poem by Dylan Thomas recited, because he was her husband Bill's favourite poet.

The unveiling here today in South Leigh of this memorial plaque testifies to your own special relationship with Thomas. You have a Dylan Thomas all of your own. And all I've tried to do, in my brief address, is to share a little of my own Dylan Thomas with you – the Dylan Thomas of Wales; the Dylan Thomas of Swansea. Thank you for the opportunity of doing so.