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A Dylan Thomas Companion

Life, Poetry and Prose

JOHN ACKERMAN

palgrave

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*To Barbara
and in memory of my mother*

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Preface

I remember hearing of Dylan Thomas's death on the early morning news on Tuesday, 10 November 1953. I was then studying English at King's College, London, and had a copy of the recently published *Collected Poems*, few, if any, I fully understood. I immersed myself in his verse and was fortunate in being able to research on him, writing a thesis on his life and work, the first, it seems, in a British university, and more importantly the first that investigated his Welsh background. I was fortunate, too, in receiving the help and friendship of Vernon Watkins, also in meeting Mrs Caitlin Thomas at the Boat House in the summer of 1956, and Dylan's mother there the following year. Vernon Watkins was then editing Dylan Thomas's letters to him, and I now recall with gratitude and delight those talks with Vernon, touching on the work of both poets. One afternoon, too, joined by Rollie McKenna, we visited and photographed Dylan's Swansea scenes. I treasure also memories of those first visits to Laugharne, and to Fern Hill, the Dylan Thomas industry then still in its infancy, that provided reliable glimpses into the poet's life and work there, in contrast to the legends fostered in the years immediately following his death, the legend and the life running together in the popular mind. This was, of course, before the publication of Caitlin Thomas's books, always deeply rewarding in their accounts of the poet. Swansea, some seventeen miles from Maesteg where I lived, was already familiar territory, as the nearest large shopping centre, scene of cricket matches and, with Gower, the place for day-trips to the beaches. Consequently my involvement with Dylan Thomas and his world, both personal and academic, has its roots in this time; though the present book subsumes and indeed supersedes my previous studies of the poet. The kaleidoscope of criticism constantly changes the pattern and picture. The still-growing popularity of Dylan Thomas both as poet and prose writer, the sustained academic interest in his work, and the astonishing spell the legend casts even today are matters that this book raises.

Apart from Stanford's *Dylan Thomas* (1954), still a helpful exposition of his work, there was little useful critical guidance in the mid-fifties as to the meaning of the poems, one American critic recommending classical astrology as the key, while Treece's book was unkindly, though not entirely unfairly, dismissed by Dylan's reported 'You cannot see the wood for the Treece'. Yet I was convinced that Dylan Thomas's poetry could be consistently interpreted and explicated, that the then-current view that his poetry was a kind of rhetoric that didn't yield to analysis, probably produced when drunk, was as much a falsification as the tales concerning the poet's life that then dominated, and still occasionally prejudice, discussion of the work. But here I must admit an interest. No doubt my view derived from an undergraduate's devotion to Dr Leavis's method of textual analysis, despite the fact that after an hour's lecture on modern poetry largely spent dismissing Auden's verse, the great man responded to the proselyte's anxious question as to how he rated Dylan Thomas with the curt 'Auden at least had talent!' Likewise, replying to a letter in 1954, he expressed surprise 'at the suggestion that Auden and Dylan Thomas could be grouped with Eliot & Yeats & major poets'. Despite these magisterial rebukes I was young enough to persist in my belief concerning Dylan Thomas! Nevertheless, academic and critical games of valuation and devaluation have increasingly seemed pointless beside the critic's proper task of understanding and illumination. In this respect, elucidation of the poetry still strikes me as the essential need of Dylan Thomas criticism. Accounts of the life are incidental to this, and are most worthwhile when they assist it.

As late as 1952, in reply to a query regarding the importance of Wales for him as a writer, Dylan Thomas humorously quipped, 'if I had been born and brought up in an igloo and lived on whales, not in it . . . it would have been extremely unlikely had I become a writer'. The late Professor William Armstrong crucially advised me in 1955 to research Dylan Thomas's work in relation to his Welsh background. Knowledge of the Welsh background is now regarded as essential in understanding Dylan Thomas's work, and Anglo-Welsh literature provides one of the literary contexts of Dylan Thomas's world. Meetings with Gwyn Jones and Keidrych Rhys, editors of the *Welsh Review* and *Wales*, and Glyn Jones, all three writers who knew Dylan, assisted my pioneering study of the Welsh background in *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Oxford

University Press, 1964). An invitation to prepare and write the Catalogue for the Welsh Arts Council Exhibition 'Welsh Dylan', held to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the poet's death, meant focusing on a visual introduction to the poet's life and work, and led to the later book *Welsh Dylan*.

It was recent doctoral research on the role of nature in Dylan Thomas's poetry that helped me to understand how his concept of nature determined both style and theme. Consequently the present book seeks to show, through analysis of the early manuscript verse, the emergence of Thomas's distinctive poetic voice in *18 Poems*, a crystallisation of themes and style evolved over four years. As with Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot, an original sensibility found expression on first publication. The following account of *18 Poems*, *Twenty-five Poems* and *The Map of Love* outlines the main themes in the early poetry and the movement towards greater clarity, again with the help of his letters and miscellaneous critical comment. Examination of *Deaths and Entrances* highlights Dylan Thomas as the first great civilian war poet, analyses his important childhood poems, and traces the lyrical pantheism of his later verse. Finally, discussion of the new poems in *Collected Poems*, together with the unfinished versions of 'In Country Heaven' and 'Elegy' now included in *Dylan Thomas: Collected Poems 1934–53*, explores the widening role of nature, with reference both to the natural life of land, sea and air that crowds the canvas of the final verse and the intensity of his pantheistic vision. The book demonstrates, too, how the last poems, like the contemporaneous *Under Milk Wood*, marked a threshold of new development and certainly not a diminution of inspiration.

The latter part of the book traces Thomas's growth as a prose writer, commenting on each of his works, and showing how throughout his life this was linked with his development as poet. His early experiences as an amateur actor, his wartime employment writing film scripts, his work for radio as broadcaster and writer, and his increasing fame as a reader, both of his own and others' work, cast their perspectives on his changing prose style. Attention is given to his various critical writings, as well as his letters. There is some quotation from work not previously available, such as his typescript summary of the projected 'Book of the Streets', manuscript versions of 'A Story', and some wartime comments on Chelsea that seem to me to be Dylan Thomas's. As well as discussing its themes, characters, style and structure, the

account of *Under Milk Wood* traces literary and biographical sources, some not before explored. The range of his prose, and its later new directions in film scenarios and radio broadcasts as well as in drama and the short story, suggest that a notable and popular twentieth-century prose writer, as well as a great poet, was lost as a result of his untimely death.

The account of Dylan Thomas's life with which the book opens offers a picture of the worlds in which he moved: initially Swansea and west Wales, then London and return journeys to Wales, including New Quay, and finally Laugharne and America. There are glimpses of Italy, Prague, Teheran and New York, seen through his eyes. Generally I have preferred his own descriptions of places and people: they are always vivid, and often amusing. I am especially indebted to Mrs Caitlin Thomas's books, and the biographies by Constantine Fitzgibbon, Daniel Jones, Gwen Watkins and Paul Ferris. Indispensable, too, is Ferris's magisterial edition of *The Collected Letters*, Ralph Maud's editions of *The Notebooks* and Walford Davies's *Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings*. They provide the poet's words. I was finally especially fortunate to receive *Dylan Thomas: Collected Poems 1934–53*, and to benefit from its definitive editing by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud.

Likewise, I have sought to let the poet speak, and where I have erred I hope it is still on his side of the truth.