

Exhibition Reviews



Dylan Thomas: Man and Myth. DYLAN THOMAS CENTRE, SWANSEA, WALES, UNITED KINGDOM. Permanent exhibit.

Dylan Thomas (1914–1953) is one of the twentieth century’s most popular and oft-quoted poets. Well known throughout the English-speaking world, he is revered as a national hero at home in Wales, particularly in the anglicized south. The *Man and Myth* exhibit, which has been mounted permanently at the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea since 2001, explores the life and work of the writer, while intentionally and overtly casting him as a key player in the formation of Welsh national identity. The exhibit uses portions of the extensive archival collection to highlight how Thomas’s poems reflect a long and glorious literary and musical past that separates the Welsh from the English “other.”

The Dylan Thomas collection is held by two institutions: the Swansea Central Library, which holds the majority of the published records, such as books, articles, pamphlets, and audio recordings; and the Dylan Thomas Centre, which houses Thomas’s early writings, portraits, photographs, sketches, posters, translations, and early editions. Once a derelict building in the Swansea marina, the Dylan Thomas Centre was repurposed to host the UK Year of Literature and Writing and opened to the public on St. David’s Day in 1995. It originally housed a limited Dylan Thomas exhibit, but organizers determined in the late 1990s that a more substantial display was required to adequately represent the importance of Thomas to the city and to the South Wales people. The current permanent exhibit displays about one-third of the Dylan Thomas Centre’s collection, including early writings, photographs, sketches, and audio recordings, while the remainder is accessible to researchers and the public in the reading room located on site.

The title of the exhibit suggests that Thomas has been endowed with mythical status – that he has become a symbol, not just a revered poet. In the case of the *Man and Myth* exhibit, Dylan Thomas and his work have been made to stand for the “idea” of the nation, that Wales has a long and glorious past

steeped in rich linguistic, literary, and musical tradition. Thomas's use of the English language with Welsh expressions and sentence structure, combined with his adoption of the Welsh literary tradition and the lyrical and rhythmic elements of his poetry, recall the glorious culture that has defined the nation over the centuries. By using Thomas as a symbolic vehicle, the exhibit reflects and reinforces Welsh identity.

Defining their identity against what Linda Colley calls an alien "them," the Welsh people have established a grand historical narrative, which bypasses their English conquerors and links them to a glorious Celtic heritage.¹ A strong modern culture, defined by language, literature, and music, has emerged in response to the lack of nation-state status and the resulting fear of cultural domination. Dylan Thomas drew on this rich literary and musical culture and imbued his poetry and prose with lyrical Welsh qualities.

It is important to make a distinction between Welsh identity in the north and south, as there is a cultural divide where the major motorways stop and the mountains of North Wales begin. Commonly referred to as "Welsh Wales," the north remains largely Welsh-speaking in contrast to the more anglicized south. Much of Welsh cultural identity is based on maintenance of an ancient language, and as such it would seem that there should be an Anglo-Welsh identity crisis. However, from the mid-1920s, writers in the south reminded the nation that "the dragon has two tongues."²

The South Wales people have been forced to forge an anglicized Welsh identity, and many contend that Dylan Thomas's poetry, though composed in English, is distinctly Welsh in character.³ Thomas's work owes a debt to Welsh literary traditions, and therefore the language in which it is composed does not detract from its importance in the definition of Welsh culture. Rather, the poetry and Thomas himself have succeeded in bridging the gap between the north and south, and have become two of the most important markers of Welsh national identity in the twentieth century. By presenting the life and work of Dylan Thomas, the *Man and Myth* exhibit is a tangible reflection of this cultural development.

Almost immediately upon entering the Dylan Thomas Centre, the visitor encounters a large glass panel displaying text over a stylized sketch of Thomas's face. The caption reads, "If I had been born and brought up in an igloo and lived on whales, not in it ... it would have been extremely unlikely ... I [would have] become a writer." Immediately, the visitor is alerted to the fact

1 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 6.

2 The dragon, depicted on the Welsh flag, is commonly used as a reference to the country itself. Geraint H. Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 269.

3 Linden Peach, *Ancestral Lines: Culture & Identity in the Work of Six Contemporary Poets* (Bridgend: Seren, 1992), 27.

that Dylan Thomas is intricately linked with Wales and attributes his success as a writer to his home. The opening text panel calls attention to the general theme of the exhibit, that Dylan Thomas and Wales are synonymous, almost interchangeable. This is reinforced throughout the exhibit and serves to define Thomas as a symbol of national identity.

The exhibit is designed to be inviting, inclusive, and experiential, perhaps to its detriment for those hoping to be presented with Thomas's original manuscripts. The space is relatively small but is utilized effectively, so visitors are able to explore as they like. There are interactive elements, namely a magnetic poetry board and several listening posts where one can experience the musical qualities of Dylan's work, read by the poet himself. The majority of displays are large text panels in a variety of colours, each highlighting an aspect of Thomas's life. In lit glass cases, with the English text separated from the Welsh, are examples of Thomas's work and photographs of the region where he lived. The glass cases are small, typically housing one, sometimes two, photographs or manuscript poems.

What is surprising about an exhibit so focused on the work of a poet is how the manuscripts and photographs act only as peripheral support. The exhibit has been carefully constructed to explore the duality of its title rather than simply present the archival collection to be examined and interpreted by visitors. The exhibit successfully weaves the tale of a man who has become a symbol of Welsh culture itself. Highly entertaining, informative, and participatory, it is an invaluable addition to the Swansea cultural centre. However, for those wishing to explore the work of Dylan Thomas, or feel the modest excitement that archivists and historians experience in the presence of original manuscripts, the exhibit falls slightly short of the mark. Visitors hoping to engage with the historical manuscripts will have to be content with the research room.

The presentation speaks to the inherent methodological differences between archives and museums. While museological exhibits are designed to inform and educate through the development of a central cohesive narrative, archival exhibits highlight the importance of the documents themselves. *Man and Myth*, despite its literary subject matter and the archival manuscripts featured, is more of a museological exhibit than an archival one. Ultimately, it is much more about the creation of a symbolic myth than the work of a man.

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