

The Irish Times

An Irish Diary by Paul Clements

Dylan Thomas in Donegal – how the poet sought refuge from London’s “capital punishment” in moorland and hills

Thomas eventually tired of his rural retreat, disliking the solitude and fearing the dark

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, who died in New York 70 years ago at the height of his fame, was renowned for his verbal artistry and orotundity as well as his love of alcohol. Thomas grew up in Swansea where he lived for half his life, becoming known as “The Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive”.

Early inspiration came from the Welsh landscape and eccentric characters in pubs. The names of the bars, he said, were “music to my ears”, and he described Swansea as “a little Dublin”. Pubs were a refuge and warmth for Thomas, but also for eavesdropping, and while some friends regarded him as a social drinker, others thought he was a social climber.

On one occasion, speaking with Dutch courage to a group of students in Swansea, his first words were a classic bon mot: “I can’t manage a proper talk. I might just manage an improper one.” His other Welsh haunts included Brown’s Hotel in Laugharne, and New Quay. In his radio play, *Under Milk Wood*, he drew on his experiences of both places for the mythical seaside village “Llareggub” (spell it backwards for Thomas’s joke). While Wales fired his imagination, he enjoyed escaping from it to London for his “capital punishment”. However, the medical advice was to recuperate from his bibulous excesses and move to somewhere quiet.

In the summer of 1935 Thomas arrived in southwest Donegal spending six weeks in an isolated cottage at Glenlough, a coastal valley near Glencolmcille. Renowned as a place on the periphery of the periphery, the cottage could only be accessed by an arduous two-hour hike across moorland and hills.

Thomas was joined by his friend Geoffrey Grigson, a poet and editor, and together they shouted to the mountains: “We are the Dead, the Dead, the Dead”, the words echoing around the valley. After two weeks Grigson left while Thomas remained on his own. Although his poetic voice was still developing, his time in Glenlough provided rich material.

He composed new verse by candlelight in the peace of the cottage, writing six poems and a vampire story. One of his best known poems “I, in my intricate image” was influenced by Glenlough and is included in his second collection *Twenty-five Poems* (1936). He also worked on a ten-part sonnet sequence “Altarwise by owl-light”, and on a notebook, sold in 2014 for over £100,000.

Ironically, even though he was trying to overcome his alcohol addiction, Thomas found himself in the poitín-making capital of Donegal, where distillation was still carried on. Each week he set off on a trek to O’Donnell’s shop and porter bar in Meenaneary for supplies. Soon, though, he tired of his rural retreat, growing restless, disliking the solitude and fearing the dark.

The following year, in April 1936, he met his wife-to-be Caitlin Macnamara in the Wheatsheaf pub in London’s Fitzrovia. A dancer and artist’s model, she was brought up in an Irish family originally from Ennistymon in Clare, now living in Hampshire. Her father, Francis, was a minor Irish littérateur and a friend of the artist Augustus John who had painted Caitlin. It was love at first sight. Caitlin fell for Thomas’s “little-boy-lost demeanour” and they married, staying together – albeit tempestuously – for the remainder of his life.

In 1946 *Picture Post* magazine asked Thomas to write a feature about Puck Fair, but no account of it ever appeared. The poet was heavily imbibing again in what he called the “black cream-topped witches’ concoction”.

After Killorglin he went out to the Blasket Islands to write a screenplay based on Maurice O’Sullivan’s book *Twenty Years A-Growing*, but never completed it.

Some of Thomas’s work of meticulous craftsmanship is in the cultural mainstream. In particular, the villanelle, “Do not go gentle into that good night”, is noted for its repeated refrain. Over the decades a literary industry has grown up around him and in a heavily populated field of study it is impossible to deny there are too many books about him.

However, for the first time, the multilayered strands of his trips to Ireland are recounted in absorbing detail in Christy Gillespie’s book *The Road to Glenlough*.

Thomas had failed to settle bills with his hosts while in Donegal which led to some friends reconsidering their opinion of him. But 11 years after his stay, a woman – thought to be Caitlin – turned up in Glenlough to pay his outstanding debts.

The scale of the final days of his binge-drinking in New York may never be known. On November 9th, 1953, aged 39, he died in hospital of bronchopneumonia, aggravated by neglect of himself and a gruelling reading tour.

Since then his cult of personality has grown, although some legends associated with his bohemian lifestyle are apocryphal while others are exaggerated.

Thomas's fondness for the bottle did not prevent him admitting that he had a problem with alcohol. He once turned the spotlight on himself with a concise description: "One: I am a Welshman; two: I am a drunkard; three: I am a lover of the human race, especially of women."

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