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Reviews

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REVIEWS

Professor M. Wynn Thomas, *The History of Wales in Twelve Poems* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2021). 112pp. £8.99.

This attractive and engaging book will appeal to many types of readers. For those unfamiliar with Wales, it presents a concise and lively account of the nation's history, while also introducing the reader to important works of Welsh literature. Readers who are more acquainted with Welsh culture will enjoy reflecting on how aspects of history and literature are introduced and interwoven in the book. An added dimension is provided by the graceful lithograph illustrations, specially created by Welsh artist Ruth Jên Evans, which accompany the texts. As M. Wynn Thomas himself explains in the Preface, Wales remains largely invisible to the outside world and this book represents his attempt to 'make my Wales just a little easier to see'. Like J. M. Barrie's fairy Tinker Bell, the Welsh people have had to endure a 'conditional identity', dependent on those who are stubborn enough, despite the 'scoffing scepticism of the modern world', to believe in it. Our greatest tragedy, he concludes, would be 'to go unimagined' and it is for that reason that he acknowledges unequivocally that the book 'places the poets of Wales at the very forefront of Welsh history'.

Like most histories of Wales, the book, therefore, has within it a creative or imaginative dimension and is conceived of as much as an act of faith as a presentation of historical fact. Spanning almost a millennium and a half of literary production, it brings key moments of Welsh history to life by focussing on twelve poems, primarily selected, as the author is keen to stress, for their functional value, as an 'interesting way into' the Welsh past. Nine of the poems were originally written in Welsh (and English translations by the author himself, Tony Conran, Joseph P. Clancy, Glyn Jones and Elin ap Hywel are included here); the rest are presented in the English original.

From Aneirin's early 'Gododdin' poems, thought to be composed in the part of Britain that corresponds to the Scottish lowlands today, we are taken through medieval Wales in the company, among others, of Gruffydd ab yr Ynad Coch, grieving for Prince Llywelyn in the thirteenth century, and the brilliant 'roving poet', Dafydd ap Gwilym in the fourteenth. There is also an acknowledgment of the anonymous authors

of the early Welsh lullaby, 'Pais Dinogad', and the 'hen benillion' which testify to a centuries-old body of folk poetry. We approach early Welsh modernity by means of the unorthodox visions of Henry Vaughan's 'The World', are introduced to Welsh nonconformism through Ann Griffiths' impassioned hymns, and enter the ravages of the twentieth century hand in hand with the sombre Gwenallt and Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill', while Gillian Clarke's 'Blodeuwedd', recalling the tragic figure from the Mabinogi, initiates a foray into the part played by women in Welsh history.

Menna Elfyn's 'Siapiau o Gymru' ('The shapes she makes') brings us up to the present day and to M. Wynn Thomas's concluding words about the Wales we live in now. A word of warning though: this doesn't make for hopeful reading. Some of us, even on a bad day, might find it too pessimistic. Certainly, Wynn Thomas's condemnation of 'the young of today', for whom there is no such thing as 'a Welsh society to which they feel they owe any allegiance', seems entirely misplaced, going by the linguistic, cultural and political activism I see manifested by young Welsh people around me on a daily basis (including young Welsh poets!). But differences of opinion about the nation's trajectory – past, present and future – are part and parcel of the long and varied tale that is *Cymru am byth*. This book is a very welcome addition to that rich and longstanding dialogue (and where there's dialogue, there's hope). Thanks be to Professor Thomas for yet another invaluable contribution to Welsh culture, and for his continued dedication to its appreciation among audiences both at home and abroad.

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Kieron Smith (ed), Rhian Barfoot (ed), *New Theoretical Perspectives on Dylan Thomas: A writer of words, and nothing else?* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020). 192pp. £24.99.

Arising from an academic conference for the centenary celebrations of Dylan Thomas's birth, *New Theoretical Perspectives on Dylan Thomas* is the latest re-invigorating contribution to Dylan Thomas studies from the University of Wales Press. The collection, capably edited by Kieron Smith and Rhian Barfoot, comprises eight chapters that provide contemporary critical approaches to Thomas's 'complex literary

modality' (13), including his poetry, short fiction and screenwriting. *New Theoretical Perspectives* continues the modernisation of Thomas studies that has been gathering momentum over the last twenty years, with the intertwining of the man-and-myth and the work, which was so powerfully and damagingly effected by contemporary critics and then the Movement, further unpicked here through the various applications of critical theory (Derrida, psychoanalysis, and film theory, to name but three) to Thomas's texts.

Smith and Barfoot's introduction addresses head-on the disconnection between Thomas the 'writer of sophisticated, charged, infuriatingly complex verse' and the poles of his reception; on the one hand there is the sentimentality of his uncritical devotees, as shown by repeated use of the 'cloyingly familiar "Dylan"' in *Dylan Thomas: A Centenary Celebration*, while on the other hand, Thomas to his detractors was a 'scabrous, sinning malingerer' (3). The cause of both responses, according to Smith and Barfoot, is Thomas's 'complex relationship with language itself', as his 'linguistic and stylistic excess [resists] precis and paraphrase' (3). The Thomas of this introduction is a genre-shifting, border-dissolving writer, for whom the ironic '*nothing else*' of the book's sub-title, taken from Thomas's 'Poetic Manifesto', suggests a Derridean 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte'. If one meaning of this much-debated phrase is 'there is no outside the text', because everything is (con)text, this would align with Smith and Barfoot's perceptive description of Thomas as a 'polyamorous writer' whose 'heteroglossic' work took shape 'within and across multiple forms, genres, and media' (4).

The first chapter, 'Shibboleth: For Dylan Thomas', by Tomos Owen, dives straight into the alternately clear and opaque waters of Derridean thought, applying his 'enigma of the date' to Thomas's birthday poems: 'Especially when the October wind', 'Twenty-four years', 'Poem in October' and 'Poem on his Birthday'. For Derrida, the singularity of the date is challenged by its existence within a system that relies on repetition, recall, and forecast; for Owen, this provides a productive means of analysing this distinctive group of poems, such as the insightful discussion of the use of 'make' and 'let' in 'Especially when the October wind', with the 'dynamic tension' between the active and the passive powering the poem's narrative (22). It is clear to anyone who reads them that Thomas's birthday poems are both celebration and mourning, but this chapter's strength derives from the application of Derrida to offer a persuasive reading of how this is achieved; as Owen notes, 'for an

anniversary poetics to function, a poem must surrender its claims to authenticity of finality: it may be summoned by the date, and owe its existence to it, but it cannot be bound by it' (30). And this freedom leads to the better understanding of the bitter-sweet 'happy returns' contained in these poems (33).

Tony Brown discusses 'The "Strange" Wales of Dylan Thomas's Short Stories' in the second chapter. He identifies and illuminates the 'states of separateness and disorientation' that mark Thomas's early gothic-grotesque tales, which invariably feature an outsider, 'estranged from the security of home and community' (47). Brown links this, through Freud's Uncanny, with the defamiliarising effects of the Thomas family's move from Welsh-speaking West Wales to anglophone suburban Swansea. He also argues that while Thomas's notionally 'straightforward' *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* stories arose in no small part from the financial impetus to find a wider readership, the uncanny atmosphere of doubles and estrangement was not entirely eradicated. It can still be discerned in texts such as 'The Peaches' and, even if it is less overt, it is, for Brown, no less *unheimlich* due to the increased homeliness of the settings.

Similar stories are discussed by Andrew Webb but through a considered theoretical treatment of place in his chapter 'Modernity and the Rural-Urban Divide'. Webb describes Thomas's 'Tawe' (based on the Swansea Valley) as linguistically and physically straddling a border, one that brings together the 'hinterland/town and the Welsh/English languages into one space [...] not as two separate domains, but as a new space and time in which the provincial town is enriched by its environs' (70). This partly fictional and partly real place becomes a site of excess in almost every way, and it is through this, Webb argues, that Thomas's 'provincial autobiography' draws on the surrealism of everyday life to create imaginative modernist fiction.

Rhian Barfoot examines *Under Milk Wood* through psychoanalytic theories in the intriguingly titled chapter "'As long as he is all cucumber and hooves": Dylan Thomas's Comedy of the Unconscious'. Barfoot makes a convincing case for the similarities between Thomas's 'play for voices' and the Circe episode of *Ulysses*, not least of which is their shared receptiveness to a psychoanalytic approach. Barfoot effectively applies Freudian and post-Freudian (including Jungian and Lacanian) analysis to *Under Milk Wood*, rather than to the author himself, to bring into the light the shaded dreams and desires of the text and its

characters. As part of this, Kristeva's idea of the pre-Oedipal father is transposed onto the Reverend Eli Jenkins to illustrate his symbolic role as facilitator of Llareggub and radical other. Kristevan theory handled this way deserves a wider application across Thomas's oeuvre, to which Barfoot's chapter points the way.

Thomas's relationship to cinema is examined by John Goodby in "'Thrown back on the cutting floor": Dylan Thomas and Film'. As Goodby rightly notes, Thomas was of the first generation to grow up with film – 'the quintessentially new and most thoroughly Modernist art form of the twentieth century' (114) – and he argues that it not only appears in Thomas's work as subject and metaphorical vehicle but is also deployed for its 'psycho-sexual and social effects' (116). While the mingling of 'the reel' and 'the real' helped create the poetic spark in many of Thomas's poems, it also birthed some of the more difficult passages to explicate (see the influence of cinema on the imagery in 'Altarwise by owl-light' as a case in point). Goodby's chapter offers salutary assistance to the confused reader by positing an understanding of cinematic devices as key: 'the paratactical image-leaps by which the poems so often proceed are indebted to filmic techniques' (118). Goodby goes a step further to contend that 'in its continuous flows and disjunctions, [film] models [Thomas's] view of the universe as continuous change and simultaneity, or "process"' (119) – an argument which opens the field for further study on the relationship between Thomas's work and the moving image.

New Theoretical Perspectives also features M. Wynn Thomas on Thomas's comic voices, and James Keery on Kingsley Amis's opprobrium towards Thomas. The book concludes with Kieron Smith's balanced appraisal of the posthumous appropriation and deployment of Thomas as cultural and economic attraction, particularly in Wales. As the state-sponsored celebrations of 2014 gorged on Dylan Thomas as brand, the actual literary creativity that had propelled him to global fame was in danger of being overlooked, and Smith justly skewers the Welsh Government's objectives that focused on economic growth and Return on Investment. The objective to raise Thomas's profile as cultural icon in Wales seems superfluous when his status was already that of 'Wales's most famous and famously overdetermined cultural figure', and the idea that the celebrations for Thomas could be used to 'enhance community spirit' was nebulous and undefined (165). While Smith dryly notes that 'at the time of writing, the City and Council of Swansea

has not yet been renamed the City and Council of Dylan Thomas, the tangible and longer lasting benefits of 2014 are also evaluated, such as investment in the Dylan Thomas Centre, outreach literacy and creative writing programmes for, among others, refugees and schoolchildren (169). Invoking Adorno's work on culture and policy, Smith hopes for a future where the 'symbiotic relationship between cultural administration and narrowly economic considerations' are sufficiently destabilised to allow for more creative and spontaneous ways of engaging with a legacy such as Thomas's (174).

As acknowledged by Smith and Barfoot in the introduction, and as reflected by the overall make-up of the book's contributors, more work needs to be done to engage with Thomas's writing from feminist and queer perspectives; in addition to which, discussions of race and contributions from scholars of colour are also needed if Thomas studies are to effectively advance in an intersectional twenty-first century. However, as Thomas is a writer 'who speaks from and to the ambivalences, contradictions and complexities of social and personal experience', these challenges and opportunities can surely be embraced, and *New Theoretical Perspectives on Dylan Thomas* provides a welcome waypoint (14).

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Seventy Years of Struggle and Achievement, ed. Meena Upadhyaya, Kirsten Lavine, Chris Weedon (Swansea: Parthian, 2021). 222pp. £20.00.

Welsh publishing has, in recent years, focused more on the experiences of ethnic minorities within Wales from children's books such as Jessica Dunrod's *Your Hair is Your Crown* (2021)¹ to essay collections like *Welsh Plural* (2022).² The onus is on the Welsh people to reimagine a collective identity. This is crucial if this identity is to include the experiences and expertise of the many brilliant people who are proud to call more than one ethnicity theirs within a Welsh context. This collection, then, contributes perfectly to that reimagining.

Seventy Years of Struggle and Achievement (2021) contains forty essays about women who have had a remarkable impact on Welsh society, all shortlisted for, or winners of, an award given by the Ethnic Minority

Welsh Women Achievement Organisation (EMWWAA). Some women in the anthology describe their journeys as migrants travelling as far away as Thailand or Zimbabwe, while others were born and raised in Cardiff. This anthology offers a varied perspective on what it means to be Welsh for those who call it home. Their careers are also varied and diverse, ranging from priestesses to lawyers to geneticists. No two stories are the same. The theme that emerges from every essay is the importance of improving communities through inclusion and equity, and, by doing so, enhancing perceptions on identity for the next generation.

Uzo Iwobi, subject of the first essay in the collection, states that the ‘painful, racist incidents’ (p. 8) that she suffered soon after moving to Wales to be with her husband are what fuelled her drive not only to secure a better life for her family but also to improve conditions for anyone who found themselves in a similar situation. She says, ‘at some point, you either sink or swim, and I chose to “raise my gaze” in hope and swim’ (p. 9). In fact, many of the women share this same mindset. Shavanah Taj recalls several ‘heinous’ (p. 19) hate crimes that forced her family to move home when she was a child but affirms that these experiences kickstarted her own passion. Taj states that ‘such experiences meant that my personal journey into activism was almost inevitable’ (p. 19). However, these painful memories are hardly the focus of each essay. The anthology instead centres on each woman’s conviction and achievement. It is a refreshing take on minority ethnic stories, where instead of amplifying the trauma, the anthology chooses to celebrate ability, talent and compassion.

Such a choice is key in the age of trauma porn: writer Chanté Joseph says in an essay for *Vogue* about Black joy that ‘it is an act of resistance to revel in the joy that [white supremacists] have spent much of history trying to take away from us’.³ As a Black mixed-race person myself, this statement certainly hits home, which is why essays that celebrate a holistic identity like those in *Seventy Years of Struggle and Achievement* are so important to me and, by extension, a new generation of Welsh people. It is certainly disheartening to be made out to be nothing but a soundbite on the horrors of racism, which is why I feel that we need more collections like *Seventy Years* to be published in Wales: rather than sensationalising pain, Wales needs affirming storytelling which brings communities closer together.

The collection also sets out to celebrate each subject’s Welshness by highlighting the changes each has made in their community. Rocio

Cifuentes recounts in 'Enacting Positive Change' that 'Welsh identity is more ethnically fluid than English or British and potentially more inclusive' (p. 127). I think that the EMWWAA and the collection itself are proof of this but the essays also show how 'Wales was home for us and a place where we felt secure' (p. 132), as Madhvi Dalal writes in her essay 'Life Flow'. For each woman in this collection, Wales was a place to settle and achieve.

Christina Roy writes in 'Positive Educational Exchange' that making her home in Wales allowed her to 'feel that I belong to both cultures of West and East' (p. 139). This has resulted in a project that she describes in conjunction with Cathays Heritage Library in Cardiff, where 'parents shared stories of their cultures [...] and how they moved from their own countries and sustained these practices while also adapting Welsh culture, amalgamating both' (p. 140). Roy's description of this work clearly shows that 'my aim is to sustain both cultures' (p. 139). She concludes by emphasising that 'every woman can be a homemaker, but they should all showcase their own skills in order to make their mark in the world' (p. 140). I think that part of this collection's importance lies in breaking stereotypes of immigrants, which is shown by the diversity of each story but also by the insight that these stories provide into the experience of coming to Wales as an immigrant: 'communication is so important', writes Wai Fong Lee in 'Shining a Light on Culture'. She goes on to say, 'If you communicate with other people, they treat you as the same kind of human being' (p. 142).

Although these stories are a refreshingly true to life read when it comes to experiences of racism, I did find it discomfiting reading when each woman described the shocking amounts of work that it took for each to achieve success. Indu Deglurkar, a consultant cardiothoracic surgeon, states in her essay 'Promises from the Heart' that being ethnic and female in a foreign country is a triple challenge and a potentially insurmountable barrier (p. 86). Julie Morgan and Jane Hutt call the women 'worthy role models for their communities' in their foreword, adding that their list of achievements is 'impressive'.

While it is impressive what these women have managed to achieve while facing hardship, I was astonished by the sheer level of work they had to undergo in order to earn these achievements, with many juggling multiple jobs with childcare, and even while facing language barriers. I believe that these stories clearly reflect the commonly-held belief that ethnic minorities must work twice as hard to gain success and respect

in their careers. However, as Indu says at the close of her essay, ‘nothing worthwhile is ever easy to achieve’ and the most important part of achieving is having a support network: ‘the people around you are vital for your mental health and happiness [...] support from family and friends is very crucial’ (p. 88).

This collection provides a valuable resource of inspiration and ideation geared towards women who want to succeed. Meena Upadhyaya, founder of EMWWAA, writes in her own essay that she wishes she had had a BAME role model earlier in her life. Upadhyaya says, ‘such women were in short supply’ (p. 67). However, it is clear that EMWWAA and EMWWH (its healthcare branch) continuously celebrates inspiring role models in many fields. The essays make a point of highlighting the alienation many newcomers feel after moving to the country: ‘I left Kenya because I thought life was much better here, and it’s not ... the social life is really bad,’ writes Wanjiku Ngotho-Mbugua (p. 148). Progress is frustratingly slow but what inspired me while reading this collection was how many of the women forged ahead to make organisations and charities of their own. The women of this collection highlight how important it is to change what needs changing in Wales without waiting on the system to change it for you. I did note that there was a lack of LGBTQIA+ voices in this collection and I feel that these stories would have provided a valuable insight into how other forms of marginalisation can tie into the racism that many of the book’s subjects have experienced.

Lastly, Versha Sood states in ‘Developing Care’, ‘look at the results that you produce, which will guide you in what more you can do’ (p. 214). I am hopeful that books like this will play a part in changing Welsh identity as we see it, by welcoming not only inclusion but also innovation.

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Notes

- 1 Jessica Dunrod, *My Hair is My Crown* (Cardiff: SheCan.co.uk, 2021).
- 2 *Welsh Plural: Essays on the Future of Wales*, ed. Darren Chetty, Grug Muse, Hanan Issa, Iestyn Tyne (London: Penguin Random House, 2022).
- 3 Chanté Joseph, July 2020, ‘What Black Joy Means – And Why It’s More Important Than Ever’, *Vogue: Arts and Lifestyle* (online), available from: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/what-is-black-joy>.

