

JOHN GOODBY (ed.). The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The New Centenary Edition. By dylan thomas.william christie. Dylan Thomas: A Literary Life.

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REVIEW

JOHN GOODBY (ed.). *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The New Centenary Edition*. By DYLAN THOMAS. Pp. lvi+ 440. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014. Cloth, £20.

WILLIAM CHRISTIE. *Dylan Thomas: A Literary Life*. Pp. xv+ 228 (Literary Lives). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Cloth, £55.

The year 2014 was deep in significant anniversaries, and amongst such commemorations of war and Shakespeare was the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Dylan Thomas's birth, which was marked by the year-long Dylan Thomas 100 Festival, and various other events and conferences worldwide. Some of these celebrations inevitably played on the popular apprehension of Thomas, a writer known, like Sylvia Plath, rather more for his life than his work. He died young (the mark of the true Romantic artist) and has an exaggerated reputation as a drinker and rogue. Now that the conspicuous anniversary celebrations are over there remains the more enduring legacy of the anniversary year, amongst which are many new scholarly publications related to Dylan Thomas's life and work. Of these, William Christie's *Dylan Thomas: A Literary Life* provides a short introduction to the poet and the poetry, whilst John Goodby's *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The New Centenary Edition* significantly remaps our understanding of Thomas's poetic canon, and of his place in the history and culture of twentieth-century poetry.

The first collected poems of Dylan Thomas came out in 1952, the year before the poet's untimely death in New York. This volume was a relatively simple assemblage of his five published collections of poems, with an added verse 'Prologue'. Daniel Jones, Thomas's good friend and the most prominent of mourners in the British Pathe' footage of Thomas's funeral, subsequently edited a significantly expanded collected poems, which was published for the first time in 1971. This edition included some hitherto uncollected poems, juvenilia, and poems from Thomas's early notebooks which had been edited by Ralph Maud and published for the first time in 1967. Jones's expansion of poetic material was accompanied by a radical editorial decision to publish the poems in chronological sequence (he writes, 'as far as I have been able to determine it'), rather than by original collection. The justifications for doing so are, according to Jones, that a better understanding of the relationships between the poems, and the development of the poet, should emerge. There are some notes appended to Jones's edition, and a brief introduction, but this was a labour of love for the work of a friend rather than a strictly scholarly edition. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud's much more scholarly edition of the collected poems (Dent, 1988) reverted to the structure of Thomas's own 'approved' collected poems of 1952, in organizing the poems by collection, partly on the understanding that the earlier notebook poems were available in a separate volume, and that many other of Jones's inclusions were unnecessary or downright harmful to the reputation of Thomas as a poet.

John Goodby's centenary edition of the collected poems follows Jones's chronological organization, but with decisions about order informed by scholarship unavailable to Jones. The problem of organization is one about which Goodby is refreshingly open: Davies and Maud reverted to presenting the poems according to their original collections for good reasons, but the benefits of chronological arrangement for Goodby's purposes outweigh the drawbacks. There are of course complications: even where writers keep careful records it can be difficult to establish a chronology of texts, and with his early notebooks aside, no one could accuse Thomas of being meticulous in keeping records. But there are more difficult questions beyond a simple ordering and dating of texts, not least because some poets work on poems over a very long period of time, or go back and revise an earlier unpublished poem into something very different. Thomas did both of these things, which gives the lie to the popular image of Thomas producing a kind of thought-light automatic Romantic outpouring of sound and emotion. Consider the case of 'Poem in October', which Daniel Jones places as a late Laugharne poem from the point of Thomas's thirtieth birthday in 1944, a poem published for the first time in early 1945 and collected in *Deaths and Entrances* (1946). The assumption that it dates from this point is a perfectly reasonable one, not least because its opening line seems to establish a precise moment in time:

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore

(*The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas*, p. 160).

Thomas finished the poem in the summer of 1944, during a stay at Blaencwm in Carmarthenshire: that is, in advance of the October birthday it describes. That he should write the poem pre-emptively says something about the artful rather than spontaneous nature of his approach to poetic composition, and something more generally about how poets approach time as the subject of their work, and the spirit in which we should take lyrical statements (not as literal truth). Thomas made it clear in a letter to Vernon Watkins that it is 'a Laugharne poem: the first place poem I've written', and Paul Ferris's footnote in his edition of Thomas's *The Collected Letters* indicates that a version of the poem predated Thomas's thirtieth birthday by some distance: 'Watkins said that the poem had been "contemplated" since 1941, and originally the first line read, "It was my twenty-seventh year to heaven"'. Vernon Watkins's dry joke here is a good one, and identifies an earlier provenance for the poem. As Daniel Jones before him, John Goodby also places this poem in the sequence of texts produced in the summer of 1944, but his invaluable explanatory note reveals some of the complexity behind this placing: 'A version of the poem was started during Thomas's Laugharne sojourn of 1938-40' (p. 385). Indeed Thomas's friend the poet Lynette Roberts suggests the poem was complete apart from the final line by 1939. Perhaps Thomas was saving it for the more resonantly rounded whole-number birthday, or perhaps he wanted the culture rhyme with the opening of *Le Testament*, the greatest poem by François Villon, another poet, drinker, and rogue: 'En l'an de mon trentiesme aage / Que toutes mes hontes j'eus beues' ['In the thirtieth year of my age / when I had swallowed up my shame'] (François Villon, *Selected Poems*, tr. Peter Dale (London: Penguin, 1978), pp. 40–41).

There are many such chronological cruxes: was 'The hunchback in the park' (first published in 1941) effectively 'as good as finished at the first try' in 1932, as Davies and Maud are on record as saying, or is the 1941 text a poem in its own right, revising the earlier version, as Goodby's edition explains it? Davies and Maud's arrangement by collection rather than chronology does not make these very interesting problems go away; it just pushes them further out of sight. Goodby's excellent and detailed notes throughout not only help with many points of obscurity of interpretation and reference, they also inform this important debate around the complex questions of genesis and chronological location that his organizational arrangement encourages.

William Christie's concise book very clearly states its indebtedness to the various excellent existing full-length biographies of Thomas, and those by Fitzgibbon, Ferris, James A. Davies, and Lycett in particular. As such this book is not presenting much in the way of original biographical research, although its readings of certain of the poems are occasionally enlightening and thought-provoking, in spite of what often seems to be an equivocal view of Thomas as a poetic craftsman. Writing of the potential influence of the traditions of poetry written in Welsh on Thomas's poetry, Christie asserts: 'what is clear is that, outside a Welsh poetic tradition, Thomas's devotion to the metrical and prosodic craft of poetry must seem obsessive, gratuitous' (p. 9). This is not at all clear, at least to me, and there's nothing here in the way of specific example to try to justify the assertion. Thomas, the man, is also held in occasional disregard. Consider, for instance, this parenthetical opprobrium: '(The poet's careless pilfering and begging and sexual depredations can still seem shocking, with all the changes in moral standards.)' (p. 13). It is difficult to work out whether Thomas or the contemporary world is the main focus of the moralizing here, but either way it does not especially illuminate either the life or the work.

There are one or two moments where facts rather than opinion are somewhat questionable: the ascribing of a poem by James Mackereth ('La Danseuse') to the young Dylan Thomas would not be such a problem were the poem not then quoted in its entirety as an example of the precocious poet responding to Swinburne, Shelley, and Yeats. The analysis at times nods towards developments in the field of Welsh writing in English, but Christie's observation that 'Laugharne, like Thomas, represented a comparably paradoxical blend of England and Wales' (p. 174) reveals some fairly significant blind spots in matters of Welsh identity, language, and culture.

The 'Introduction' and other editorial apparatus to John Goodby's centenary edition provides its own concise account of Thomas's life, career, poetry, and reputation, and does so from the perspective of a deeply informed and scholarly enthusiast. His tracing of a period of transformation in Thomas's writing akin to Keats's *annus mirabilis* is stylish and convincing, and he conveys a real sense of the poet's development as a writer, engaging with the interrelations of style, form, subject, and their evolution. Goodby reflects on Thomas in popular culture, on his mixed and changing fortunes in terms of critical reputation, on his relationship to the Auden generation, and his engagement with British and European surrealism (Thomas attended the 1936 International Surrealism Exhibition in London 'with a tray asking visitors whether they would like a cup of boiled string, "Weak or strong?"' (p.

xxxii)), before suggesting a parallel with Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* in some of Thomas's more surrealist-inflected writing. Goodby reveals Thomas the metaphysical poet, writing poems that Thomas claimed were written 'in praise of God by a man who doesn't believe in God' (p. xxviii), but at the same time driven by other kinds of paradox. Thomas's vision of process poetry responds, *inter alia*, to developments in popular science and is conscious of its existence after Freud and D.H. Lawrence. Goodby explores process in terms of its relentless interconnection of sex, life, and death: the 'womb and tomb coordinates of process' (p. xxxvii), but sees Thomas drawing on a wide field of reference for the terms of his associated poetic imagery and theme: from William Blake to the 1930s horror movies which had so preoccupied the young Thomas in the Swansea picture houses. Such preoccupations gave him a ready-made language to write about the Second World War, when it came, and to become haunted by the threat of nuclear holocaust after the war, with a last and unrealised plan to write an opera libretto for Igor Stravinsky. Set, as Goodby informs us, 'after a nuclear war, it would have featured a boy and a girl who would, like Adam and Eve, begin all over again the task of inventing language and naming the world around them' (p. xxxix).

This is not a 'complete poems', but much more of the variety of Thomas's poetry is captured in Goodby's edition than has been manifest in one place before. It aims to be 'more comprehensive and more varied' (p. xli) through the inclusion of verse from film scripts, from *Under Milk Wood*, and with examples of the different registers of his poetry, so that what is probably Thomas's most famous poem, 'Do not go gentle into that good night', is followed by the previously unpublished 'Song', which imagines the opening of the perfect pub: 'There were no set hours / There were no decrees / And nobody shouted / Time gentleman Please' (p. 195). Time was called on Thomas far too early, but the anniversary celebrations and Goodby's excellent edition have gone a long way to re-establishing the importance of the significant body of work Thomas achieved in his short life.

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