



Laugharne as it was in 1770 – this view is still the same today

Laugharne and Under Milk Wood

Many great works of literature have an identifiable sense of place, **UNDER MILK WOOD** is one of them. It was written and set in Laugharne, with Dylan Thomas basing many of its characters on people he knew here; but he called the town **LLAREGGUB**, ie ‘Buggerall’ spelt backwards – and we’ve been enjoying the joke ever since.

Thomas first coined the place-name Llareggub in his short story **THE ORCHARDS**, published in T. S. Eliot’s magazine **THE CRITERION** in July 1936, but in using it again for **UNDER MILK WOOD** he gave his play a separate identity, as befits an act of creation, albeit one set within this specific townscape.

Other writers have done this. John Steinbeck set his most famous novels around his birthplace in the Salinas Valley, California. Gabriel Garcia Marquez based his in the imaginary town of Macondo, built around the town in Colombia where he was born. And let us not forget how Alexander Cordell and Iris Gower gave their novels a feeling of place and time.

Dylan Thomas was more artful, for he also marshalled the sounds and rhythms of words as he learned to apply them through his film and radio work, while imposing upon himself the most rigorous of structural disciplines.

Like the playwrights of ancient Greece, Thomas set UNDER MILK WOOD within the simplest framework, the hours of the day. The play has no plot. It begins with Silence, before the town wakes up; develops through the morning and afternoon, with the quickening rhythms of daylight hours, and slowly winds down as the day dies, ending again in Silence.

This is as technical in its way as the sonnet, the villanelle or the shaped forms of the 17th Century Metaphysical poets, which were other devices Thomas also mastered in poetry.

The play was unfinished. He delivered his manuscript to Douglas Cleverdon at the BBC shortly before leaving for America in October 1953, fully expecting to come back to Laugharne to write the final, evening sequence. This would have been set in Brown's Hotel, although he called it The Sailors Arms, and his notes survive for what would have followed. With his sudden death, Cleverdon decided UNDER MILK WOOD should stand as it was – and it has, ever since, being first broadcast on radio in February 1954, with Richard Burton as First Voice.

The LP recording was bought by over five million people – and is still on sale today, nearly fifty years later. The stage version was presented at the Edinburgh Festival, in London and New York, and the script has been published in book form in over eighty languages. UNDER MILK WOOD was produced for television and filmed for cinema with Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Peter O'Toole and Ryan Davies . . . and a very young David Jason as Nogood Boyo.

In 1988, The Beatles' recording producer, Sir George Martin, oversaw the all-star musical version, with Sir Anthony Hopkins as First Voice, and featuring Tom Jones, Elton John, Sir Geraint Evans, Freddie Jones, Sir Harry Secombe,

Sian Phillips, Bonnie Tyler, Mary Hopkin, Ray Smith, Rachel Thomas, Nerys Hughes, Ruth Madoc, Jonathan Pryce, Windsor Davies, Emrys James, Philip Madoc and Angharad Rees.

UNDER MILK WOOD is now part of the world's literature and has even been presented to an audience of Bedouin in the Sahara . . . and it all began here in Laugharne.

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Laugharne has developed traditions of its own alongside
UNDER MILK WOOD.

The Llaregyb Players, formed locally with the encouragement of Carmarthenshire Community Council, first presented UNDER MILK WOOD in 1958, less than five years after Dylan's death when his mother, Mrs Florence Thomas, was still living at The Boat House.

This was Laugharne's contribution to that year's Festival of Wales. The streets were bedecked with bunting, and a stage erected in a large marquee in the grounds of Dragon Park although most rehearsals were held in the old Memorial Hall. The show ran for five nights, from August 12th to 16th, with Gwynne D. Evans, producer, and Brin Davies designing the sets and lighting.

Programme notes were written by Keidrych Rhys, who used to live at Llanybri with his wife, Lynette Roberts. Both were poets and Keidrych also edited the pioneering literary magazine WALES. Dylan was best man at their wedding, wearing a suit borrowed from Vernon Watkins and Lynette carrying a bridal bouquet of wild flowers picked from the hedgerows.

Now, with his friend dead, Rhys wrote –

It is always a privilege to have known a writer of genius.

He recalled visiting Dylan and Caitlin in Laugharne from 1938 onwards and described Dylan's Carmarthenshire roots, adding

It is fitting that Carmarthen, as well as Edinburgh, honours Dylan . . . we Carmarthen folk pay overdue homage to a son of the county whose fame

is already world-wide and whose poems will live forever.

Elsewhere in the programme, there was another tribute, headed –
A MESSAGE FROM DYLAN’S MOTHER

It gives me great pleasure to welcome to Laugharne in this Festival Year so many lovers of my son’s work.

Although I’m unable, through ill-health, to be present at all functions in connection with this presentation of **UNDER MILK WOOD**, I send all my blessings to all those responsible for this wonderful tribute to Dylan.

Florence H. Thomas

At the end of the five-night run, a party was planned in the marquee to celebrate the town’s first production of **UNDER MILK WOOD**. As the townspeople gathered, word came through that Dylan’s mother had just passed peacefully away at The Boat House . . . on our last night. The bearers at her funeral were all members of the **UNDER MILK WOOD** cast.

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Alderman Ralph Tucker, appeared in the first and also the second production in 1961, when he was Second Drowned and Mr Pritchard with his wife, Mary, joint Wardrobe Mistress with Gwyneth Evans.

For that 1961 production, T. H. Evans played the Rev. Eli Jenkins, which he performed in London at the New Theatre – and several still familiar faces made their stage debuts . . . Philip Pearce was Johnny Cristo, Dai John was Billy and Robert Blewitt and John Rawles alternated as Dicky.

Most early productions were presented in a tent within the grounds of The Glan-y-Môr – now the Seasons Holiday Park. One year, the tent was erected at Wooford Field, instead, and was blown down in a gale. Twice, the Llaregyb Players took their production to Holland, the first year to the Blumenthal

Open Theatre and the second to Llaren, Harlem and Amsterdam, at the invitation of Nelly Klucht, President of the Dylan Thomas Society in Holland.

Even in those days, UNDER MILK WOOD was part of Festival Week – which began with The Carnival Procession, Children’s Sports and Cricket Club Dance on the Saturday; choral evensong at St Martin’s Church on the Sunday followed by Community Singing (either at The Glan-y-Môr or The Congregational Chapel), with a Flower Show and Handicraft Competition, Young People’s Fancy Dress Dance (organised by the British Legion), Bingo (the Rugby Club) and a Dance at the end of the week (Women’s Institute).

Every year followed a familiar pattern, even in years when we did not stage a full production of UNDER MILK WOOD. In 1965, for instance, The Laregyb Players presented excerpts from the play – after a special showing of Welsh TV documentary films.

We note that ‘Brian Jenkins – The Baker’ was advertising bread fresh from the oven every day, saying it was “better than Mother’s” . . . Howard Lewis’s Betting Shop was providing “a full racing service . . . every racing day” . . . and The Mill Garage on The Grist was open until 9pm every night, selling petrol.

More recently, the tradition has been revised. In 2006, a re-formed local group, The Laugharne Players, presented Under Milk Wood on the town’s triennial festival in aid of the Cors Ffild and they have now begun plans to present other productions in the town.

The underlying idea for what became UNDER MILK WOOD first came to Thomas when he was still partially living in Swansea. He told his friend Bert Trick, the socialist grocer who encouraged him to think radically, that he wanted to attempt something similar to ULYSSES in which James Joyce also took the day-structure to compose his study of Dublin. (1)

Like many of Thomas’s ideas, it bubbled away for years. One of the most fascinating aspects of his work, for those who find joy in it, is being able to trace how Thomas went back over his poems and short stories again and again, trimming superfluous words as all writers learn to do, changing a word here, a line there, a comma to a semi-colon, or deleting whole paragraphs. (2)

Imagine, then, how this most subtle of minds turned his ambitious concept around and around within this structure of a single day as the idea progressed.

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Dylan and Caitlin moved here in 1937, shortly after their marriage, living first at Eros in Gosport Street, then a fisherman's cottage, and moving a few months later to Sea View, which they rented for ten shillings a week. They were befriended by Richard Hughes, author of *A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA*, who lived in some style at Castle House, dressing for dinner, maintaining a cellar of fine wines and entertaining his fellow officers of Laugharne Corporation to celebrate important occasions.

On 18th December 1939, Hughes and his wife Frances staged an entertainment at the Memorial Hall to raise funds for the Red Cross. Dylan appeared as The Tanner in a play by Ernest Goodwin, *THE DEVIL AMONG THE SKINS*, and Caitlin performed a dance routine. It was meant to be a tap dance. The evening was a noisy success, because her tap dance routine turned into a Can Can, complete with cartwheels and the splits, which soon had the men cheering and their wives looking away because Caitlin wore no underwear.

Laugharne has always been a bit like that. Well-planned events suddenly take on a life of their own, and so it was that night. Afterwards, Hughes invited people back to Castle House, where Frances laid on a spontaneous party in their kitchen.

As Dylan walked back along King Street, he was still excited. "There's so much talent in this town," he said. "There's nowhere else like it. What the town really needs is a play all about itself in which the people can be themselves." How do we know he said that? Because Richard Hughes described the evening, (3) and another person who appeared on stage that night, Lenny Hughes of Island House, his clog dance totally overshadowed by Caitlin's Can Can, walked back with them. (4)

In the kitchen, Dylan developed the idea further. Laugharne was unique, he said. It had its own sense of being. Later he was to call it *THE TOWN THAT WAS MAD*, developing the idea of a play about Laugharne in which a Government Inspector, sent down from London to assess its people's sanity,

ends up recommending that the town be sealed off from the rest of the world by barbed wire lest others be infected by its crazy notions of love and equality.

Dylan discussed this over a period of more than ten years. He outlined the plot to the poet, playwright and novelist T. Rowland Hughes at the BBC studios in Swansea, early in the War. (5)

Later, he worked some of his ideas into the radio documentary **QUITE EARLY ONE MORNING**, written at New Quay in 1944, and employed similar verbal devices in **RETURN JOURNEY**, written at South Leigh, Oxford and recorded in 1947 for the **MY TOWN** radio documentary series, with Philip Burton as his producer.

Burton urged him to write something on a larger scale, (6) and so **THE TOWN THAT WAS MAD** slowly evolved into **UNDER MILK WOOD**. Meanwhile, Burton became Chief Instructor at the BBC Staff Training School, and handed the project over to Douglas Cleverdon, a BBC staff producer. (7)

It may seem strange now that so much time and thought went into one BBC radio production, but one has to remember that this was before television, during the years immediately after the War when radio was Britain's main form of home entertainment and 20,000,000 people tuned in every night, choosing carefully what they wanted to hear, either by reading **RADIO TIMES** or the programme details in the Press.

Laurence Gilliam, Head of the BBC Features Department, brought together a remarkable group of people – including **GEORGE ORWELL**, **JOHN ARLOTT**, **REGGIE SMITH**, **ROY CAMPBELL** and **BERT RODGERS** – to provide a nightly choice which embraced drama, music of every kind, comedy and experimental work like **UNDER MILK WOOD** or David Jones' **IN PARENTHESIS**. (8)

These were creative artists, working in the relatively new medium of Sound, and Dylan Thomas was part of all this as it began to evolve. Cleverdon became the godfather to **UNDER MILK WOOD** (9), helping Thomas financially, inviting Dylan and Caitlin to his home in Islington to read him the piece as it progressed, and travelling down to Laugharne for a few days to encourage the project.

Cleverdon came here, either towards the end of 1950 or early in 1951 (the dates are unclear), and ended up with a sore head, having drunk too much at Brown's Hotel . . . but in its own peculiar way, UNDER MILK WOOD was evolving.

One afternoon, watching a cricket match in Swansea (Dylan followed both cricket and rugby closely), Dylan told Vernon Watkins (10) that he would like the play to have a trial scene in which the town's sins could be assessed by a jury, no doubt inspired by another aspect of Laugharne's daily life, the fact that our affairs are largely decided by the Corporation Jury, chosen annually at Big Court Night, which meets on alternate Mondays throughout the year, with a great deal of laughter.

Later his Jury concept was dropped, and by October 1951, Dylan settled on the shape of UNDER MILK WOOD as we know it now. We can pinpoint the date clearly for that October Dylan realised there might be cash to be made from UNDER MILK WOOD, even in its unfinished state.

He sent the first 43 pages to Princess Marguerite Caetani, an international socialite who lived in Rome, editing and producing her own highly original and still not bettered literary magazine BOTTEGHE OSCURE.

Dylan invited her to print UNDER MILK WOOD, in its unfinished form, describing it as LLAREGGUB: A PIECE FOR RADIO PERHAPS, which she did in Issue IX. (11)

The letter was written from The Boat House and was clever, one of those he kept on writing, begging for money, much to Caitlin's annoyance, even when their financial worries were fairly well behind them and he was spending relatively large sums on clothes, expensive dentistry, belonging to London clubs, going to the theatre, night clubs and good restaurants and paying for the private education of his children.

Dylan said he had to leave Laugharne the next week, which was not true. (12) He said The Boat House had been sold, which was not true. (13) He said he had debts of £100, which may well have been true . . . and he said if he couldn't pay those debts he wouldn't be able to work, which was also not true, because he managed to work well, even when short of money, or if Caitlin was in a bad temper.

The letter did the trick. The princess sent him £100.

Yes, Dylan Thomas may have been a bit of a knave when it came to handling money. But there are worse sins than that.

Dylan Thomas was also a fibber and, as he said on another occasion, “a very happy sort of bird who didn’t care very much”.

He enjoyed life, and that’s no sin either. But because he wrote that letter to the princess it is firmly established that UNDER MILK WOOD is set in Laugharne and its characters are based on the people of Laugharne.

Thomas told the princess that this was

A PLAY, AN IMPRESSION FOR VOICES, AN ENTERTAINMENT
OUT OF THE DARKNESS, OF THE TOWN I LIVE IN.

And he said that by writing simply, warmly and comically with lots of movement and varieties of moods (and these were the words he used) –

YOU COME TO KNOW THE TOWN AS AN INHABITANT OF IT.

He goes on to say Mr Edwards, the draper, lives up street and Miss Price, the seamstress, lives down street – and we all know what that means in Laugharne, where Up Street Dogs and Down Street Cats kept themselves well apart, and we see the joke in the fact that the lovers never met.

We see the comedy, too, in Cherry Owen, whose wife felt she was living with two men – ONE SOBER BY DAY, AND THE OTHER DRUNK AT NIGHT, for that happens, too, and we all know wives who still love their husbands, sober or tiddly.

And we can picture Mr Pugh, the schoolmaster, who would love to poison his wife but never will; Dai Bread, the baker with two wives, and Polly Garter, who, as Thomas told the princess, “has many illegitimate babies because she loves babies but does not want only one man’s.”

Everyone in Laugharne knows who Polly Garter was, and even now people will say, “It wasn’t right, him talking about my auntie like that . . .” But he was

right, and it was affectionate, because what Thomas was noting was that in this town having babies is not a sin; we all love babies.

And then there's Captain Cat, the blind old sea captain, based on Johnny Holloway, the blind old sea captain, who entertained Dylan with his stories of life at sea – and was still shinning up trees feeling for apples in his 80's; Organ Morgan, a joke at the expense of E. V. Williams, a much respected former Portreeve, and the delightful Rev. Eli Jenkins, inspired by the Rev. S. B. Williams, Vicar of Laugharne and also Portreeve when Dylan and Caitlin first moved here in 1938. S.B. was charmingly eccentric and would step out of the Vicarage every morning with his watch in his hand to make sure it was in time with the Town Hall clock.

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Without going into phonetics too deeply, his play was based on speech patterns he heard every day in Brown's Hotel.

Within this structure, without a plot, he wove a tapestry of spoken sounds, cleverly employing light variations in accent and phrasing, to define his characters, using a framework so deceptively simple, and yet as tight as a band of steel.

But whereas Joyce used the one-day structure to describe Dublin in narrative form, developing his characters through seamless dialogue and taking roughly nine hundred pages to do it, Thomas attempted something much, much, harder, reducing this play without a plot to sounds and simple words used in everyday speech.

It is all so deceptive, so skilful in its artistry, that we quickly get lost in the characters and the comedy of their lives, without noticing that Lord Cut Glass represents Time and that there are three pivotal characters – First Voice, which was Dylan Thomas himself observing the town; the Rev. Eli Jenkins, the poet preacher who, as Thomas told the princess, “never judges nor condemns but explains and makes strangely simple and simply strange” . . . and often overlooked, Mary Ann Sailors, the eighty year old mother of the town, who has seen it all before, treasures every day, and proclaims at the pivotal moment

IT IS SPRING IN LLAREGGUB IN THE SUN OF MY OLD AGE
AND THIS IS THE CHOSEN LAND

Can you imagine how long it took him to get that right, to convey in words we use every day, how much this town and the values by which we live meant to him?

This is subtle stuff for what Dylan Thomas is saying is that in our egalitarian town, where one burgess is as good as another, and thank God that we are, our children live freely, and love and laughter, humour and bawdiness run through our lives as they did through Chaucer's Canterbury.

We all tell funny stories. And we know people tell funny stories about us. That's the way we are. That's why we call each other Rubber Legs, Dai Survivor, Dai Bananas, Dai the Milk, Kenny Cabbage, Dai Gosh or The Chairman – and Dylan captured all of that in UNDER MILK WOOD.

Caitlin thought it all too gentle. When she inscribed a copy of UNDER MILK WOOD for me after we had worked together on her memoirs she wrote, "It's a bit whimsy for me – but I know you love it."

But it wasn't whimsical to him.

And it isn't for us.

And there are some wintry nights when we walk up from The Grist to The Laques, and see the full moon shining down through the rookery in Dickie the Milk's Wood that we wouldn't want to be anywhere else at all.

Are we all a bit too sentimental?

Well, yes – perhaps. But that's no sin, either. And we know what Dylan Thomas was trying to say – and, in my view, said it.

Some don't believe us, of course. There's a lady from Ferryside who remembers Dylan stepping off the train from Swansea for a drink at The White Lion Hotel and she's convinced her uncle was Captain Cat.

And there's a chap who thinks that because QUITE EARLY ONE

MORNING was written in New Quay, it must have been the inspiration for UNDER MILK WOOD . . . and there are others to be found in Mumbles, Llandeilo, Llansteffan and the old smuggling villages along the Gower coast who all have a similar sense of ownership.

This often happens when a writer creates his own locale, but, to be honest, we don't care very much what anyone says for, as Dylan himself said when writing about this town (and you can see the full text on pp. 55–57), others

ARE ONLY ENVIOUS. THEY ENVY LAUGHARNE ITS MINDING OF ITS OWN STRANGE BUSINESS; ITS SANE DISREGARD FOR HASTE; ITS GENEROUS ACCEPTANCE OF THE FOLLIES OF OTHERS, HAVING SO MANY RIPE AND PIPING OF ITS OWN; ITS INSULAR, FEATHERBED AIR; ITS PHILOSOPHY OF, "IT WILL ALL BE THE SAME IN A HUNDRED YEARS' TIME."

George Tremlett,
Laugharne,

NOTES

1. Some biographers suggest Thomas discussed the idea with Trick in Swansea in 1932 or 1933. This seems unlikely because *Ulysses* was not published in Britain until 1936. Dylan first began staying in Laugharne in May 1934; but may well have known the town much earlier for his aunt and uncle farmed Pentowin on the other side of the river from The Boat House. The one-man operated ferry used to travel to and fro between both banks.
2. This can be studied best with the help of *Dylan Thomas: A Bibliography* by J. Alexander Rolph (J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1956).
3. Quoted in *The Life of Dylan Thomas* by Constantine Fitzgibbon (Dent, 1965). My wording has been amended slightly to accord with Lenny Hughes' recollection.
4. Personal conversation with Lenny Hughes.
5. T. Rowland Hughes wrote to Thomas on 1st November 1939 suggesting he try his hand at Verse Features, ie "long dramatic programmes in verse". (*The Growth of Milk Wood* by Douglas Cleverdon, Dent, 1969).
6. *Quite Early One Morning* was first broadcast on 14th December 1944 and *Return Journey* in June 1947. Burton described suggesting something on a more ambitious scale in the Dylan Thomas Memorial Issue of ADAM (1954), and says Thomas outlined his plans for what was then still being called *The Town That Was Mad, Mad Town* or *The Village of The Mad* over lunch at The Cafe Royal in 1947.
7. Cleverdon suggests that nothing much was written until Thomas moved into "his little hut near The Boat House, (where) he was able to settle down and write most of the first half of the script" *The Growth of Milk Wood*, p. 16). Thomas moved to The Boat House in May 1949.
8. Cleverdon directed two versions of *In Parenthesis* in 1946 and 1948. Dylan Thomas appeared in both with Richard Burton. *In Parenthesis* is widely recognised as the only other major work to have emerged from those radio years; but it lacks the universal appeal of *Under Milk Wood*.
9. Cleverdon describes all this in *The Growth of Milk Wood*.
10. *Portrait of A Friend* by Gwen Watkins (Gomer Press, 1983) and also *The Growth of Milk Wood*.
11. *Botteghe Oscure*, Quaderno IX, was published May 1952.
12. Thomas was often untruthful when begging for money. Unfortunately, his other biographies have tended to rely on what he wrote in his letters without checking all the facts.
13. Margaret Taylor owned The Boat House and also bought herself a holiday cottage in Water Street. She used to stay there with her children, and did not sell The Boat House until after Thomas died – when it was bought by the Trustees of The Dylan Thomas Estate.