

## THOMAS, RONALD STUART (1913 - 2000), poet and clergyman

**Name:** Ronald Stuart Thomas  
**Date of birth:** 1913  
**Date of death:** 2000  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** poet and clergyman  
**Area of activity:** Poetry; Religion  
**Author:** M. Wynn Thomas

R. S. Thomas was born in Cardiff on 29 March 1913, the only son of Thomas Herbert Thomas (died 1965), a Cardiganshire sea-captain, and his wife Margaret (née Davies). Baptised plain Ronald Thomas, he added the classy 'Stuart' in early adulthood. His father's physical courage and early-onset deafness, and his mother's smothering affection were to be repeatedly blamed throughout his adult life for what he saw as the shortcomings in his own nature (such as lack of physical courage and supposed inability to love) with which he periodically wrestled in his poetry.

He was raised, however, from the age of five in Holyhead, Anglesey, solaced by the sea, and wandering the surrounding countryside that nurtured his solitary nature. It was with north Wales that he continued to identify strongly throughout a lifetime of service as a Welsh Anglican cleric that took him first over to Chirk (1937-40), Hanmer and Tallarn Green (1940-42) and Manafon (1942-54), all on the Welsh border, before circling back via Eglwys-fach (1954-67), just north of Aberystwyth, to Aberdaron (1967-78), on the furthest tip of the Llŷn peninsula he described as a bough suspended between sea and sky.

Having completed an undistinguished degree in Classics at the then University College of North Wales, Bangor, a period that saw him produce some weak and 'sugary' sub-Georgian lyrics and skulk on the wing for the rugby team, he proceeded to St Michael's College, Llandaff, Cardiff, for training (never completed) prior to ordination in the newly disestablished Church in Wales. A loyal but turbulent priest, he uncompromisingly deplored his Church's persistent anglocentricity, its embrace of English establishment values (instanced by its militarism during the Second World War, to which he was strongly opposed), and its 'colonial' treatment of Welsh, the indigenous language in which the originally monoglot English Thomas had become fluent while at Manafon. Deeply regretting his inability to compose poetry in what was in truth an 'acquired' language which he nevertheless persisted in regarding as his true tongue, he came to feel that his affinity for English had been paradoxically and perversely enriched by his resentful, agonistic relationship to it. As for his chronically uneasy relationship with the Christian God it was to result, during the second half of his writing career, in many of his greatest poems.

Although some early, conventional, poems of his began to appear in such periodicals as *The Dublin Magazine* and *Wales* from the late 1930s onwards, the first inkling of a significant originality came with the appearance from Keidrych Rhys's private Druid Press of *The Stones of the Field* in 1946. It is a collection particularly memorable for the debut appearance of Iago Prytherch, the gaunt, inexhaustibly enigmatic figure of a silent and stoical upland farmer from 'the bald Welsh hills' who was over the next quarter century and through some half-dozen volumes to conveniently enable Thomas to trace the Gordian knot of his own angst. The Prytherch poems provided compelling evidence of the power of the early R. S. Thomas to recreate the human and physical landscape of rural, upland Wales in the very image of his own obsessions. For the viscerally anti-modern and anti-urban poet, his creation seemed to embody 'the land's patience and a tree's/ Knotted endurance.' Iago, endlessly mutating to reflect his creator's kaleidoscopic moods and concerns, was by turns bestially mute and eloquent in the alternative green language of nature. The poetry was content with articulating his inalienable mysteriousness; it did not offer to solve his mystery. An obsession is, after all, by definition, inexhaustible, and these early poems testified to the simultaneous potency and impotence of language, a theme that later acquired crucial significance when Thomas began his wrestlings with the *Deus Absconditus*.

This intermittently gross Iago, who gobbled into the fire, was the most unlikely spirit of place, the grotesque yet sensitive *genius loci* of the border uplands immediately west of Manafon, and he brought Thomas the fastidious, mollycoddled bourgeois to his senses by so brutally embodying the entwined beauty and horror of the post-Darwinian natural order. Sensitising Thomas to the powerful exposure of 'peasant' life in Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (1942) (the early Thomas had been besotted with the 'Celticism' of western Ireland and Highland Scotland) this rude awakening thus facilitated a step-change in his poetry that also owed something to his educative relationship with his first wife, Mildred (Elsi) Eldridge - they married in 1940 - who, a prize-winner at the Royal College of Art, was already a highly sophisticated and respected artist at a time when Thomas was only an obscure vicar. Theirs was a contented, if inscrutable, relationship that lasted until her death in 1991 and produced one son, Gwydion (1945-2016), whose ignorance of Welsh and education at a prestigious English public school was just one instance of the many puzzling inconsistencies that riddled Thomas's practice throughout his controversial life. A recurrent trait was his rather snobbish attraction to the distinctively English social markers he otherwise professed to despise. In 1964 he anomalously elected to accept the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry. But then, Thomas subscribed wholeheartedly to the Yeatsian maxim that it is 'out of our quarrel with ourselves that we make poetry.'

Fame arrived unexpectedly in 1955 (two years after Dylan Thomas's death) when *Song at the Year's Turning*, his second collection and the first to be published by a 'mainstream' press, was singled out for praise on the influential BBC radio programme *The Critics*. He also received the Royal Society of Literature's Heinemann Award. The process of stereotyping him as a rural, typically 'retiring', 'English' poet-parson had already been begun by John Betjeman in his generous foreword to that volume. English critics were long to find it difficult to shed this distorting image, oddly coexisting though it did with their anathematising of him as a fiery 'Welsh extremist', a grimly threatening cultural ogre. And Thomas himself was fully aware of the theatricality of his public image and the provocative effect of his more outrageous statements. Larkin's 'Arse Thomas' was but one English gibe among many. But he was also afflicted by psychological torments, increasingly characterised in his later years as 'furies'.

He could certainly be a forthright, outraged critic of his neighbours. Appropriation of large tracts of Welsh land for military use; the drowning of Welsh valleys to provide English cities with water; what he regarded as the craven Welsh adoration of foreign royalty, culminating in the 1969 investiture of Charles as Prince of Wales; purchase of houses by 'settlers', or by 'incomers' as cheap 'second homes'; these and other practices he regarded as continuing evidence of the culturally malign process of colonial subjection and cumulative annexation that had been set in train by the Tudors (a reading of Welsh history he inherited from his great cultural hero, Saunders Lewis). But he

reserved his darkest censure for his compatriots, the anglophone Welsh, concentrated in the south, whom he dismissively viewed as the spawn of a debased, alien industrial culture. Lacing the half-dozen or so collections he published from the early 1950s through to the late 1960s were searing political indictments, despairing elegies, and cultural jeremiads, often more notable for their raw anguish and unmediated anger than for their poetic poise. It was a period when mad Wales hurt him into song. He excoriated his 'people' for 'quarrelling for crumbs/ Under the table' and for 'gnawing the bones/ Of a dead culture'.

The publication of *H'm* (1972), a volume partly inspired by Ted Hughes's *Crow* (1970), saw Thomas unveil the major preoccupation that was to sustain him for the rest of his life and to result in a great body of religious poetry. Recently settled at Aberdaron, despairing of both culture and politics, returning to the comforting vastness of ocean, awed by the vaulting sky-scape of a peninsula composed of ancient rocks and crossed by legendary pilgrim paths marking it as sacred space destined to become a 'laboratory of the spirit', he began to send out his distinctive verse probes into inner space. The omnipresence of a God who remained tantalisingly absent; the haunting otherness ('the sea's eye/-ball is cold') of a natural world glorious and murderous by turn; the irreducible mysteriousness of a relativistic, post-Einsteinian universe; the necessity and futility of prayer: these and like themes gave rise, over some half-dozen volumes, to a quietly intense experimental poetry of incomparable spiritual consequence. Pun, irony and ambiguity perfectly encapsulated the double-think of a faith that nevertheless remained stubbornly persistent. He generated lapidary epigrams, Borgean fantasies, scientific tropes, meditative exercises, a modern *Mass for Hard Times* (1992), and a spiritual *Counterpoint* (1990), in an attempt to develop, with the assistance of a post-modern theology informed by an eirenic sympathy with some of the world's great non-Christian faiths, a subtle new religious vocabulary that would be truly answerable to the scientific outlook, and that was empowered to speak to the dis-enchanted and largely post-Christian sensibility of the modern Western world.

Disheartened by culture and politics, disillusioned with his Church, disavowing its revised *Book of Common Prayer*, and at loggerheads with his bishop, Thomas left the ministry in 1978, angrily declaring himself in a letter to his friend Raymond Garlick a 'retired Christian'. He took refuge, reluctantly at first, in Sarn y Plas/ Sarn Rhiw, a small Jacobean cottage quarried out of local boulders and overlooking the treacherous waters of Porth Neigwl. Initially depressed and disorientated, he gradually found new bearings through his evolving poetry and for almost two decades was to sense in Sarn y Plas, where he and his wife lived in forbidding monastic simplicity, the presence of hidden witnesses, companionable but exacting ghosts whose 'Thin, boneless presences' flitted through his room.

Sarn y Plas came to function like the Thoor Ballylee of his hero W. B. Yeats; it was the numinous axial centre of his late, great period of spiritual search. He was fascinated by the curious porousness of its massive dolomite walls, noting that the cottage seemed 'a sounding-box in which the sea's moods made themselves felt.' He turned to prose as well as poetry to record his experiences there, producing *Blwyddyn yn Llŷn* (1990), a journal tracking the course of a year, and the remarkable essay in autobiography *Neb* (1985), written entirely in the third person to convey both Thomas's sense of being a permanent stranger, 'lost in his own breath', lacking all recognizable markers of identity, and of being an undistinguished peregrine soul of no great eternal consequence. *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988), one of his greatest and most puzzling volumes, was a hybrid text on the same self-exploratory themes, mixing succinct condensed prose with minimalist poetry - here Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* was an influence. Relieved of priestly duties and obligations he became ever more forthright in his public comments and more willing to lend practical support to the issues - such as the environment, Welsh-language culture, the heritage of Ynys Enlli (Bardsey) and the Llŷn peninsula, wild life, and anti-nuclear protests - he had long passionately supported.

However, when his wife died in 1991 self-sufficiency gave way to a loneliness that was assuaged only by his marriage in 1996 to Elisabeth Agnes (Betty) Vernon (born 1916), a wealthy widow who was Canadian by birth and whom he had known since she had been his parishioner at Eglwys-fach. The perfect antithesis of the shy and retiring Eldridge, she was a colourful personality, sociable, voluble, opinionated, capricious and strong-minded. Blissfully happy for a period following marriage, a fulfilled Thomas himself underwent a late renaissance of personality. His rebarbative character (that had always included a vein of sly, dry humour) began to mellow as, at his wife's promptings, he began to mix readily and travel widely. But in the process he lost much of that compulsion to write that had sustained him for most of his life. Sarn y Plas abandoned, the couple settled first in Anglesey, a stone's throw from Thomas's childhood haunts, and then in Pentre'r Felin near Cricieth, where he eventually passed away on 25 September 2000 at the age of 87, having opted for cremation rather than burial - his ashes were buried close to the door of St John's Church, Porthmadog - and having refused to endorse any memorial or monument. Nevertheless a solemn memorial event was held at Westminster Abbey, Gillian Clarke and Seamus Heaney being among the readers.

*No Truce with the Furies* (1995) was the last collection to be published during Thomas's lifetime, although two others (*Residues* [2002] and *Too Brave to Dream* [2016]) appeared posthumously, along with his *Uncollected Poems* (2013). Serving as a powerful final digest of his major preoccupations, *No Truce* also featured several other recurrent, if less prominent, concerns and practices. These included his complex, highly charged relations with his father, mother, son and first wife (to whom he dedicated several moving poems of late devotion), his periodic exploration of the relationship of word to visual image, and a penchant for satire that had been freely exercised, for example, not only at the expense of Wales but at the expense of those of his parishioners, during his Eglwys-fach period, who were well-heeled English incomers or lavishly bemedalled military personnel.

If **Dylan Thomas**, the garrulous and bibulous South Wales 'boyo', was the dominant Welsh anglophone poet of the first half of the twentieth century, then it was the notoriously reticent North Walian R. S. Thomas, in many ways his polar opposite, who towered (and glowered) forbiddingly over the second half. One of the very greatest of Welsh poets, R. S. Thomas may well also have been one of the most important religious poets of the twentieth-century. Accordingly, nomination of him by the Welsh Academy in 1996 for the Nobel Prize for Literature was, though predictably unsuccessful, a late honour fully commensurate with his major achievements, and fitting recognition of his undoubted stature on the world scene.

## Author

**M. Wynn Thomas**

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M. Wynn Thomas, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive* (Cardiff 2013)

Justin Wintle, *Furious Interiors: Wales, R. S. Thomas, and God* (London 1996)

Personal acquaintance

## Further reading

Jason Walford Davies, *R.S. Thomas: letters to Raymond Garlick 1951-1999* (Llandysul 2009)

Wikipedia Article: [R. S. Thomas](#)

## Images

Kyffin Williams, [R S Thomas](#)

## Additional Links

NLW Archives: [NLW MS 22430C: R. S. Thomas letters](#)

NLW Archives: [NLW MS 23699E: R. S. Thomas poems](#)

NLW Archives: [NLW MS 20006C: Poetry by R. S. Thomas](#)

NLW Archives: [William Condry Papers: Letters: R.S. Thomas and Mildred Elsie Eldridge](#)

NLW Archives: [NLW ex 3014: Letters from R. S. Thomas to Dr Raymond Stephens, 1963-2000](#)

Bangor University: [R.S. Thomas Study Centre](#)

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**Published date:** 2020-06-26

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APA Citation



Thomas, M. W., (2020). THOMAS, RONALD STUART (1913 - 2000), poet and clergyman. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 9 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s12-THOM-STU-1913>



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