

WATKINS, VERNON PHILLIPS (1906 - 1967), poet

Name: Vernon Phillips Watkins
Date of birth: 1906
Date of death: 1967
Spouse: Gwendoline Mary Watkins (née Davies)
Parent: Sarah Watkins (née Phillips)
Parent: William Watkins
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet
Area of activity: Poetry
Author: Roland Glyn Mathias

Born 27 June 1906, at Maesteg, Glamorganshire, only son and second child of William Watkins (a native of Taff's Well), manager of Lloyd's Bank, and Sarah Watkins (née Phillips) of Sarnau, Carmarthenshire. Before Vernon was six the family had moved to Bridgend, to Llanelli and finally to Swansea. The boy entered Swansea Grammar School, but after one year was dispatched to prep. school at Tyttenhanger Lodge, Seaford, Sussex, and from there to Repton School, Derbyshire. Always, from a very early age, devoted to the English Romantic poets (for his Welsh-speaking parents had taught him no Welsh), he made of his last eighteen months at Repton a heroic golden age, and entry to Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he read French and German, proved a disappointing experience. Despite a successful examination, he went down after one year, irritated by the rigorously academic approach to literature, which he felt would be death to him as a poet, and proposed to his father, without prior notice, that he should travel in Italy for a year. William Watkins, whose resources had been strained by his son's residence at Cambridge, put him into Lloyd's Bank, Butetown, Cardiff, as a junior clerk. Two years later, in 1927, Vernon, overcome by 'grief' at the loss of the idyll of Repton and unable to adjust to the unliturgical dullness of the adult world, had a nervous breakdown whose climax was a return visit to Repton. Six months in a nursing home at Derby were followed by transfer to the St. Helens (Swansea) branch of Lloyd's Bank, so that he could live at home (which was then 'Redcliffe', Caswell Bay, and later 'Heatherslade' on Pennard Cliffs). The spiritual convalescence was to last a dozen years and the poetry which emerged (after visits to Germany in the early 1930s) was made from the 'grief'. It was devoted, dialectically, to 'the conquest of time', by which the poet meant, first, that nobody need be forgotten whom poetry could keep immortal, and, second (as a Neo-Platonic and a more fully Christian view developed, successively from his earlier Romantic paganism), that all are immortal because all are 'justified' and that the present moment must be seen as the microcosm of all moments, past and future.

Vernon Watkins went on to become one of the very few metaphysical poets of the twentieth century and probably the most distinguished. Overshadowed in his lifetime by his meteoric friend **Dylan Thomas** whose letters he published in *Letters to Vernon Watkins* (1957), he was at one with him only in his belief in the primacy of poetry. But not even when **Dylan** failed to turn up as best man on the occasion of his wedding in London in 1944 (to Gwendoline Mary Davies, of Harborne, Birmingham, a colleague of his in the Intelligence Service) would Vernon break the friendship. He had developed an obstinacy of belief (in poets, for example, as 'good') that in personal relationships made of him a kind of unorthodox saint.

Vernon Watkins's volumes of poetry, exclusive of American editions and selections, were: *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* (1941), *The Lamp and the Veil* (1945), *The Lady with the Unicorn* (1948), *The North Sea* (translations from Heine) (1951), *The Death Bell* (1954), *Cypress and Acacia* (1959), *Affinities* (1962) and *Fidelities* (published posthumously in 1968). *Uncollected Poems* (1969) and *The Breaking of the Wave* (1979) were put together from the vast mass of material the poet's demanding eye had left unpublished, and two new selections, *I That Was Born in Wales* (1976) and *Unity of the Stream* (1978), were made from the printed oeuvre.

Apart from war service (1941-46) in the R.A.F. Police and in Intelligence, Vernon Watkins lived all his adult life in Gower (after marriage at 'The Garth' on Pennard Cliffs), 'the oldest cashier', as he was fond of claiming, in the banking service. The recipient of many literary prizes, he was awarded a D.Litt. by the University of Wales in 1966 and became a Gulbenkian Scholar at University College, Swansea. He died 8 October 1967 while playing tennis soon after his arrival in Seattle, U.S.A., for his second period (this time a year) as Visiting Professor of Poetry at the University of Washington. *The Times*, in reporting his death, revealed that his name was one of five or six under consideration for the Poet Laureateship.

Author

Roland Glyn Mathias

Sources

Roland Mathias, *Vernon Watkins* (1974)

Gwen Watkins, *Poet of the Elegiac Muse* (Swansea 1973)

Dora Park, *Vernon Watkins and the Spring of Vision* (Swansea 1977)

Further Reading

Richard Ramsbotham, *An Exact Mystery: The poetic life of Vernon Watkins* (The Choir Press 2020)

Swansea Council: [Vernon Watkins](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Vernon Watkins](#)

Works

Vernon Watkins, *Selected poems* (Norfolk 1948)

Richard Ramsbotham, *Vernon Watkins: New selected poems* (Manchester 2006)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Vernon Watkins Manuscripts](#)

VIAF: [41861756](#)

Wikidata: [Q325437](#)

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