

THOMAS, EDWARD'EDDIE' (1925 - 1997), champion boxer and an outstanding boxing trainer and a public figure in the life of Merthyr Tydfil

Name: Edward Thomas

Date of birth: 1925

Date of death: 1997

Gender: Male

Occupation: champion boxer and an outstanding boxing trainer and a public figure in the life of Merthyr Tydfil

Area of activity: Sports and Leisure Pursuits

Author: D. Ben Rees

Eddie Thomas was born 27 July 1925, in a terraced house 11 Upper Colliers Row, Heolgerrig to Urias Thomas (1896-1959), a coalminer, and his wife Mary (née Miles, 1902-1982), though some obituaries note, wrongly, 1926 as the year of his birth. Both families had strong Welsh connections, and the family of Urias Thomas lived in one of the cottages of Rhyd-y-car which are now in St Fagans Museum of Welsh Life. There were had six sons, Idris, Evan John, Edward, Urias (Hugh), Ronald and Cyril. Five of the sons became involved in boxing, and each one worked for periods in the mining industry.

Eddie was educated at Heolgerrig Primary School, one of the most Welsh-speaking areas in the borough, and in his childhood he was well known as a sportsman, football and boxing enthusiast as well as a member of Cyfarthfa Anglican church choir. He left school to work with his father and his two brothers in the colliery, and he was involved in the mining industry for the rest of his life. He learnt his craft as a boxer in the Merthyr Amateur Boxing Club under the trainer, Ephraim Hamer. By 1946 Eddie Thomas was the Amateur Boxing Association's lightweight champion. He was a member of the British team against France and the United States of America. He soon turned professional under the guidance of Sam Burns but he still worked his shifts as a miner.

Thomas made a name for himself as one of Britain's exceptionally gifted boxers. 1948 was an important year for him. He fought eight contests and won seven. Thomas won the Welsh welterweight championship against Jack Phillips in London on 31 May and then defended the title on 21 September against Gwyn Williams. The following year he fought six contests and won every one. The contest which gave him a great deal of publicity was in Liverpool against Stan Hawthorn when he won in three rounds. On 7 February 1949 he fought against Billy Graham, an American from New York, and one of the best boxers in the world as a welter weight. This contest took place at Harringey arena, London. The left hand of Thomas gained him points throughout the contest, and at the end of the tenth round his supporters from his hometown and the valleys were jubilant at his victory. Then on 6 September 1949, he had another victory over Ernie Roderick of Liverpool in a 12-round contest and on 15 November 1949 he outpointed Henry Hall in Harringey arena to become Wales's first British welterweight champion for 34 years. He organised a Charity Concert, after arriving home for the people of Merthyr, with the proceeds going to assist the blind and the elderly. It was the first of many concerts that he arranged for charity.

His faithful followers, around fifteen thousand of them, were overjoyed with his victories and they would sing like a choir the Welsh national anthem after his victories while he would himself sing Bless this house, bringing tears to many an eye. Thomas defended the title against a Welshman, Cliff Curvis in 1950. Then he travelled to South Africa to fight the welterweight champion of that country, Pat Patrick in Johannesburg for the British Empire championship. It was an open air event and the rain poured all night. It was extremely difficult for both men but Eddie Thomas was on top form. In the thirteenth round he knocked out the South African to take the title. Less than a month later, on 19 February in the Market Hall, Carmarthen, he fought a tough Italian Michel Palermo for the European title, and was successful in outpointing the holder of the European title.

But the best times were over. He broke his hand and it was an effort to meet the welterweight limit imposed by the British Boxing Board. He lost on 13 June 1951 his European title on points to the Frenchman, Charles Humez, and four months later, on 16 October he surrendered his British, and Empire titles to Wally Thom of Birkenhead over 15 rounds. He should have won this contest but he lost as he was much too laid back. It denied him receiving the Lonsdale Belt which proved a disappointment to him. But he had a splendid record, winning 40 fights, 2 draws and 6 losses, a total of 48 fights between 1947 and 1954.

He retired from the ring but he enlarged his mining interests and began to train boxers and manage them in his gymnasium in Penydarren. Under his guidance, he had outstanding success that was never matched in Glamorganshire, the heartland of Welsh boxing. He managed a youth of Merthyr who idolised him, Howard Winstone, to the vacant world featherweight title. He also trained the Scotsman Ken Buchanan who won the world light weight championship in 1970. He almost achieved the same result with the Welshman from Gorseinon, Colin Jones, who won the British and European titles and almost won the world title in 1983. The contest was a draw with Milton McCrory. He therefore trained 4 British champions, 3 European champions and 2 world champions, remarkable testimony to his skills in the world of boxing.

The Aberfan tragedy in October 1966 was an experience that stayed with him for the rest of his life. I remember him well with his equipment and the miners from Merthyr Vale on the morning of the tragedy trying to rescue the children of Pantglas. We found a large number of them to be carried to Bethania chapel. Eddie Thomas was a staunch supporter of the Parents of Aberfan after he was elected an Independent Councillor for Dowlais on the Merthyr Council in 1984. That year he received the MBE for service to sport and charity and then in 1992 he was given the Honorary Freedom of the Borough joining Harold Wilson, Howard Winstone and Desmond Tutu. He was invited to be Mayor in 1994, and his second wife, Kay (who was also a Councillor) became the Mayoress. Thomas was the President of Merthyr Town Football Club as well as Georgetown Boys' Club as well as the Adult Training Centre. He also served as a member of the Welsh Board of BBC Governors, and of the Pension Board of the National Coal Board, South Wales Division. Eddie Thomas was known as a gentleman, a generous ambassador for his home town.

He was married twice; a son Edward and daughter Lynne were born from the first marriage to Mwynwen Penry, and from his second marriage, Rhysian, Geraint and Delyth brought joy to the home. Eddie Thomas died at his home in Merthyr from cancer on 2 June 1997. The sculptor Peter Nicholas made a life-size statue, of bronze and stone, of him, in 1998 which was placed in Bethesda Gardens in the heart of Merthyr. Today Merthyr has three statues to boxers, one to Howard Winstone, another to Johnny Owen, two men who idolised Eddie Thomas.

Author

D. Ben Rees

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