

VAUGHAN-THOMAS, LEWIS JOHN WYNFORD (1908-1987), broadcaster, author and public figure

Name: Lewis John Wynford Vaughan-thomas

Date of birth: 1908

Date of death: 1987

Gender: Male

Occupation: broadcaster, author and public figure

Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Performing Arts

Author: D. Ben Rees

Wynford Vaughan-Thomas was born on the 15 August 1908 at 9 Calvert Terrace, Swansea, the second of the three sons of the well-known musician **Dr David Vaughan-Thomas** and his wife Morfydd Lewis. He attended Swansea Grammar School where the father of **Dylan Thomas** taught him and where the poet was a student. Wynford and **Dylan** became close friends, and later he was appointed the literary executor of the poet's estate. He won a scholarship to read Modern History at Exeter College, Oxford and obtained a second class honours degree in 1930.

As it was a period of depression, he found it difficult to make a living. This was the time he added Vaughan to his name and became Vaughan-Thomas. He became a curator in the department of manuscripts and records at the National Library of Wales in 1933, and in 1934 he became area officer of the South Wales Council of Social Services. In 1937 he joined the outside broadcast department of the BBC office at Cardiff, an ideal post for him as he was not expected to use a script.

At the beginning of the Second World War he was transferred as a home-front reporter to the BBC in London, and in 1942 after covering the blitz, he became a war correspondent. Soon he became well known, as he was the first BBC reporter to fly in a Lancaster bomber on a night raid on Berlin in 1943. He described in detail the whole of the action and gave the listeners at home an idea of the dangers faced by the pilots of the RAF. Later, similar graphic descriptions and details of the situation characterised his reports from Italy on the Anzio beachhead (he wrote a volume on the conflict published in 1961) and the liberation of Rome. He broadcast from Burgundy and he was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French authorities in 1945. He captured the atmosphere of this in his last volume *How I liberated Burgundy: and other Vinous Adventures* (1985). He was also one of the first to visit Belsen concentration camp after its liberation.

He became a leading commentator in the period after the War under the auspices of the BBC on the travels of the royal family to South Africa in 1947, to the Commonwealth in 1954 and on the occasion of the Independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, to the Middle East in 1956, and all over Europe and the African Continent in the years between 1956 and 1964.

He was an eloquent speaker, possessing vast emotional energy and a strong personality. He welcomed the opportunity of travelling from one country to another as one can see from his autobiography, *Trust to Talk* (1980). He and Richard Dimbleby were regarded as two of the most professional of all the BBC correspondents. It was fitting therefore that he was invited to give the television commentary at the memorial service to Richard Dimbleby in Westminster Abbey in 1965.

Vaughan-Thomas left the BBC in 1967 and became one of the founders of the television channel, Harlech Television, to serve Wales and the West Country. Vaughan-Thomas became the first director of the programmes for Harlech Television (HTV) in Cardiff and three years later he was promoted to be executive director of HTV. He became a well known TV personality in the 1970s and 1980s. His career reached its climax when the channel produced a series of programmes on the history of Wales under the title, *When was Wales?* which invited an academic historian of great talent, Professor Gwyn Alf Williams and Vaughan-Thomas to discuss and argue on the history of the Welsh people from two different standpoints. Vaughan-Thomas defended the traditional, liberal approach to the saga, while Dr Gwyn A. Williams present the Marxist angle. History became alive in the company of these two authors and the series in 1985 became a source of constant discussion.

Wynford Vaughan-Thomas took pride in the history of Wales and defended the Welsh landscape in its beauty. He prepared a volume in co-operation with Alun Llewellyn, *The Shell Guide to Wales* (1969) as well as a presentation to an area he knew well as a child and adolescent, *Portrait of Gower*, (1967). We can see his interest in Wales and its princes and the gentry in *Wynford Vaughan-Thomas' Wales* (1981), *Princes of Wales* (1982), *The Countryside Companion* (1983) and *Wales: A History* (1985). This is an important body of popular historical literature. He was also the author of *Madly in all Directions* (1967) and *Dalgety* (1984). He continued to broadcast on radio and travelled on every opportunity to London to meet his friends from the days of the BBC and would regale them with his risqué limericks, his anecdotes and his infectious humour.

In Wales he was very willing to accept responsibilities in the organisations which he regarded as important. He was a director of the Welsh National Opera, Chairman of the Council for Preservation of Rural Wales and Governor of the British Film Institute from 1977 to 1980.

He was honoured for his contribution. As he spoke Welsh he was invited as a member (white robe) of the Gorsedd of Bards in the National Eisteddfod of Wales held in Haverfordwest in 1972, in his adopted county. After marrying in 1946 Charlotte daughter of John Rowlands, an important civil servant, they settled in Fishguard where their son, David Vaughan-Thomas, a film director, was born. Vaughan-Thomas was made an OBE in 1974, MA (honorary) of the Open University in 1982, CBE in 1986. He died at Pentowr, his home in Fishguard on 4 February 1987. His valuable collection of papers and scripts were left to the National Library of Wales.

A memorial to remember him in the shape of a toposcope was built near Moel Fadian, three kilometres from Aberhosan as the location gave an excellent view of the landscape towards the mountains of Gwynedd. A celebration of his life, led by his son, Emyr Daniel, and others, was held on Friday, 27 November 2009 in his adopted town of Fishguard.

Author

D. Ben Rees

Sources

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The Independent, 6 February 1987

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

personal research and knowledge

Further Reading

Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, *How I liberated Burgundy: and other vinous adventures* (London 1985)

Wynford Vaughan-Thomas (1908-1987), From Warfare to Welfare website, viewed 30 May 2019

Wikipedia Article: [Wynford Vaughan-Thomas](#)

Sound and Film

HTV: *The Dragon has Two Tongues*, 1985

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Wynford Vaughan-Thomas Papers](#)

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