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HISTORIC HOUSES: DYLAN THOMAS

The Poet's Boat House in Wales

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WHEN POET DYLAN THOMAS wasn't transfixing large audiences with his mellifluous voice, he found his refuge and inspiration in a rough and simple dwelling on the outskirts of a tiny Welsh fishing village. In London he made his BBC broadcasts that kept the British public clustered around their wirelesses; all over America he drew groupies to his readings, where they would flock both to see and hear him recite his intoxicating poetry and to try to glimpse the latest of his drunken escapades. But in the last years of his life he would often retire to a house that feels like a small boat moored at the water's edge.

The fittings inside were for the most part simple and direct—here or there a soft cushion or a piece of flowered porcelain—but generally the house supplied only rudimentary accommodations to life's everyday needs. Still, the windows opened to the brilliant light of the estuary just outside, and on the catwalk Thomas could breathe in the salty air. The Boat House, in Laugharne, on the south coast of Wales, is where one of the greatest poets of our century produced much of his best-known work.

BELOW: Photographs of the poet, his wife, Caitlin Macnamara, and their three children are displayed in the parlor. Thomas was forever plagued by financial worries, but he entertained friends often, at home and in local pubs. But for writing, which he did in the afternoon, he sought solitude—working in a shed nearby.



2000K. MARGO AMERSON/OLIVE

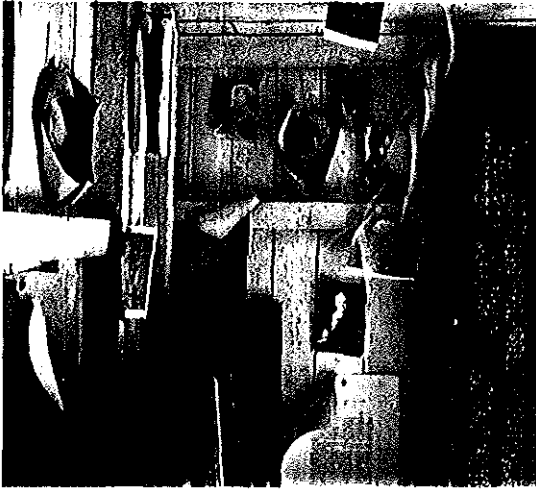
From 1949 until his death in 1953, Welsh-born poet Dylan Thomas lived in a secluded residence in Laugharne, a coastal village in South Wales. TOP: Thomas reading in his garden overlooking the Tâf Estuary. ABOVE: He lived in two other houses in Laugharne before moving to the Boat House, which was bought for him by his patron Margaret Taylor. The renovated house is today a museum.



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ABOVE: Thomas adorned his writing shed—his “water and tree room on the cliff”—with portraits of D. H. Lawrence, Walt Whitman, Yeats and Thomas Hardy. Set about 100 yards from the house, the converted garage has been re-created as it was in the poet's day.

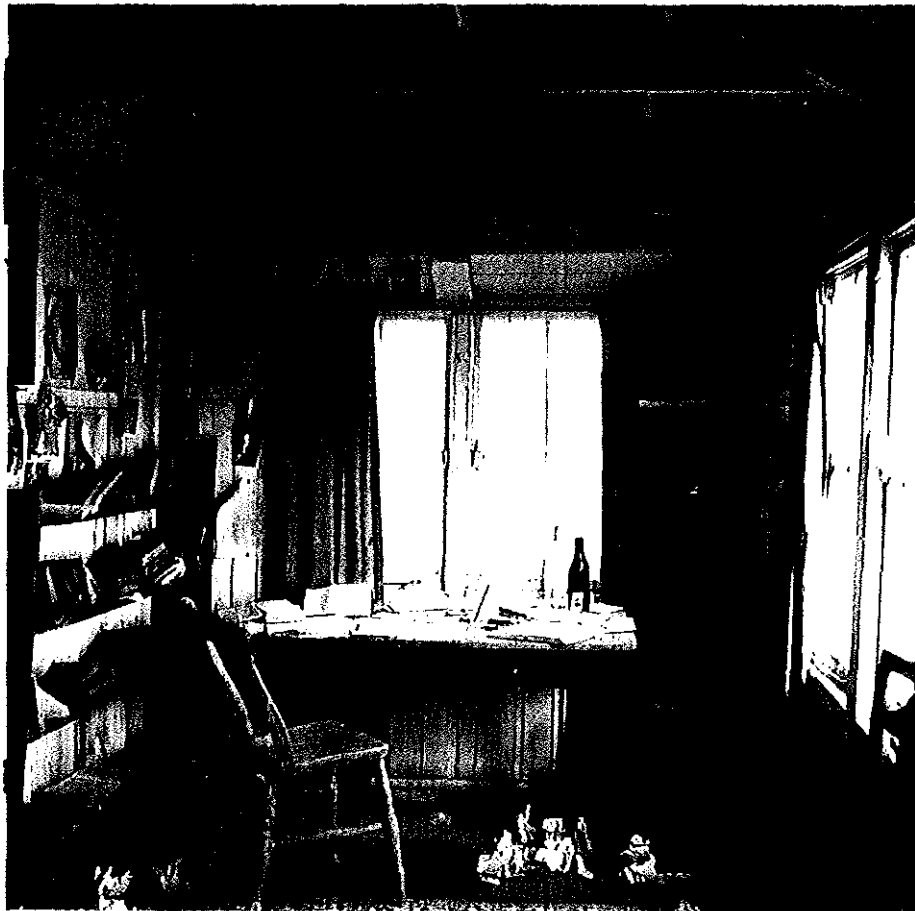
Thomas's was a life known for tragedy, but at the Boat House one feels its power and nobility as well.

In the village of Laugharne—pronounced “larn”—Thomas once claimed “to be able to call several of the inhabitants, and a few of the herons, by their Christian names.” He was fascinated with herons, and at the Boat House he penned the poetry in which he referred to these “tilting whispering” birds, “ankling the scaly / Lowlands of the waves” while making “all the music.” There were, of course, the “gulled” birds as well, splendid “in a whack of wind,” and “the elegiac fisherbird . . . in the pebbly dab-filled shallow.” At the Boat House today, descendants of those same creatures live on in their rugged habitat, conjuring up the poet who transformed their sight and sound into such vivid words. Thomas's was a life known for tragedy—debauchery, uncertainty, an early and surprising death—but at the Boat House one feels its power and nobility as well.

Dylan Marlais Thomas was born in 1914 in Swansea, a large seaport city in South Wales. The name that to most sounds like “dillon” was and is pronounced “dull-in”; in this land where Welsh is still widely spoken and where English has a uniquely singsong tone, the locals may correct you, admonishing you to be true to the cadences so dear to the poet.

By the time Thomas was nineteen his poems were published regularly. His success was soon accompanied by the fury and scandal that would shadow it forever after. In 1934, when his poem “Light breaks where no sun shines” appeared in the *Listener*, a magazine owned by the BBC, readers objected strenuously to the phrase “a candle in the thighs.” It was, in fact, just one of its many thinly disguised sexual references. But the uproar did him no damage. That same year, Thomas's first book of poems was published. He also made his initial visit to Laugharne for Whitsun in May of 1934.

Two years later Thomas met Caitlin Macnamara, his future wife. Shortly thereafter, in the summer of 1936, he returned to Laugharne because he heard she was there. At the time Macnamara was staying in Laugharne Castle, the grandest residence in town, with the artist Augustus John, who was painting her portrait. After a pub crawl one night, John was so enraged by the young poet's apparent interest in Macnamara that he knocked Thomas to the ground. Thomas, however, was undaunted; in



ABOVE: Thomas worked productively at the Boat House, writing stories, seven of his major poems and much of his play *Under Milk Wood* there. His concentration was remarkable; it is said he wrote 120 drafts of the poem “Fern Hill” before he deemed it complete.

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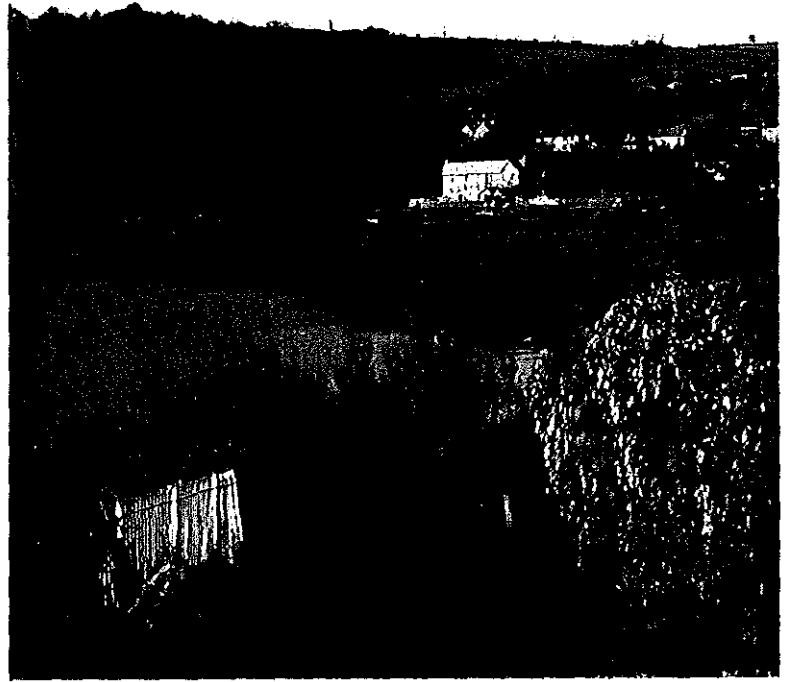
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July of the following year he bought two imitation-silver wedding rings in Penzance, and they were married in the registrar's office there.

In 1938 the couple moved to Laugharne. The small working-class town, whose principal industry was the harvesting of cockles, suited them in its beauty and its remoteness. There was a simple main street of eighteenth-century buildings with pubs, a hotel and a few shops. The Thomases rented a fisherman's cottage and later moved to a house called Sea View.

From that point on they traveled a great deal, but they returned periodically to Laugharne, even after they had given up Sea View because they could no longer afford to keep it. During the war the couple were in and out of London and moved from place to place. The poet was published extensively in Great Britain and the United States, and his voice became a regular feature on BBC radio. In 1948 Margaret Taylor, wife of the Oxford historian A. J. P. Taylor, purchased the Boat House for him. Mrs. Taylor believed in Thomas's genius so completely that she sold property in order to come up with the twenty-five hundred pounds needed—even though her husband wrote the young poet to say that her degree of devotion was destroying their marriage. Whatever the sacrifice, Margaret Taylor also arranged for water and electricity to be hooked up to the Boat House. Thomas wrote her his profuse thanks, calling the house "a fresh beginning"



ABOVE: The path from the Boat House to Laugharne winds along the cliff above the coast; in 1963 it was named Dylan's Walk. In the distance rises Sir John's Hill, which appears in *Under Milk Wood*.

BELOW: Laugharne, which Thomas once described as "this timeless, mild, beguiling island of a town," inspired *Under Milk Wood*, his account of life in a Welsh village. A clock tower crowns the town hall.



"I can never do justice . . . to the miles and miles and miles of mud and grey sand, to the un-nerving silence of the fisherwomen, & the mean-souled cries of the gulls & the herons," wrote Thomas of Laugharne. LEFT: The view south from the path to the Boat House.

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and telling her, "You have given me a life." The poet, who had admired and wanted the structure ever since his childhood, when he used to take a ferry that docked nearby, moved there in 1949, with Caitlin expecting their third child.

The house had originally been used for boat building and repairs. Tucked into a sandstone cliff at the edge of the Tâf Estuary, it was built early in the nineteenth century, although the precise date is uncertain. It is reached by a flight of steps leading down the side of the cliff. The Boat House had gone through several incarnations—as a private residence in the 1850s, then as a house for two fishermen and their families, and, at the start of this century, as a modest holiday cottage. By the time Dylan and Caitlin Thomas moved in, its rooms were much as they are today. A small parlor occupies the main floor; the kitchen and dining room, or tea room, are on the floor below, where boats were once repaired; and several modest bedrooms, now used as exhibition space, are on the top floor.

The architecture was simple: thick, whitewashed walls, wood trim for the windows, and a plain wood entrance door. The woodwork is now painted a powder blue on the exterior and a deep red inside. The furniture that Dylan and Caitlin put on the old, bare floorboards was comfortable—a Welsh dresser displaying Staffordshire porcelain in the tea room, and most likely armchairs covered with worn velvet and faded antimacassars and a Victorian sofa in the parlor.

Now that the Boat House is open as a heritage center and serves as a pilgrimage for Dylan Thomas's many fans, the top floor features display cabinets and a video about the poet. But some of the other rooms still offer a sense of how things were during Thomas's lifetime. From the windows in the parlor one can see the wide bay, the distant hills near Swansea, the fields on the other side of the estuary, miles of sandy stretches and,

closer by, the profile of the town of Laugharne. The kitchen provides such basic domestic comforts as a ceramic sink (the one Dylan and Caitlin used) where cold water runs from the tap. Elsewhere, an old telephone and radio represent links to the world beyond.

For Thomas, the Boat House was a true retreat. Except for the rare sounds of sailors getting into their boats or villagers collecting cockles, there is nothing but the screaming of gulls or the splashing of herons dipping into the water. For his writing, Thomas had a retreat from his retreat. The poet's "work shed"—a simple rectangular structure measuring about six by ten feet—had been built as a garage for one of the families that used the Boat House as a summer cottage. It was furnished with little more than a rough wood table and a straight-backed chair. What mattered to Thomas was that he had a room of his own—made all the better by its single window looking out to the sea. Although someone broke in dur-

However salubrious the setting, life at the Boat House was stormy.

ing the poet's funeral and robbed the place of all the important papers there, the atmosphere has been impressively re-created. Faded, sun-bleached reproductions by Bronzino, Botticelli, Modigliani, Rouault and Picasso curl from thumbtacks on the wall, much as they would have in Thomas's lifetime, as do photographs of James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence and W. H. Auden. The table is covered with pages of typescript and handwritten texts, the floor with strewn and crumpled paper.

However salubrious the setting, life at the Boat House was stormy. There

were descriptions of a drunk Caitlin grabbing a drunker Dylan by the hair and banging his head on the floor. The poet often traveled on tours and attracted large audiences; recordings of him reading his own work were sold throughout Britain and America; he published prodigiously; and he was so popular that after his *Collected Poems* came out in hardcover in Great Britain in 1952, within two years it had sold thirty thousand copies. But if to some of his followers he led an ideally romantic, dissolute, creative existence, to others it was disastrously problem-ridden. When, in 1951, the Royal Literary Fund awarded a three-hundred-pound grant to Thomas, always desperately in need of money, it probably did no harm that his application was supported by Harold Nicolson, Lord David Cecil and, of all people, the poet's former rival Augustus John. In his letter of recommendation Nicolson said, "He is a very heavy drinker. . . . I gather that his wife is almost equally unreliable. On the other hand, he is one of our best poets."

In Laugharne, where Thomas regularly occupied the pubs until early in the morning and then staggered home at about three, townspeople would peer through their windows, watching him trip along the way and relieve himself under the cherry trees. But if observers were shocked, most were charmed as well. During his life and afterward he had devoted followers, among them Bob Dylan, the former Robert Zimmerman who renamed himself after the poet, and the Beatles, who put his photograph on the sleeve of their *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album.

A firsthand account captures both the seediness and the majesty of Thomas's presence. Lance Sieveking, who worked for the BBC, encountered the poet at a party in Wales.

Occasionally he cast a baleful glare at the clean white flannel trousers I happened to be wearing, and then looked round as if in the hope of finding a pail

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of garbage or a pot of tar he could throw over them. He was a stoutish young man, with round, slightly protruding eyes, and a mass of tangled brown curls. His nails were black, and his bare feet dirty. He wore very old corduroy trousers, the flies of which gaped open. His dirty grey shirt was torn. He didn't look as if he had washed for a long time. . . . [Yet] his personality . . . shone with a sort of endearing bravado. He talked well, and his laugh was infectious. His voice had an astonishingly compelling quality and range.

Early in 1953 Thomas began to appear on television, which was then in its pioneering days. He presented his play *Under Milk Wood* for the first time, and went on several well-attended reading tours in the United States. That May he went to Boston to discuss writing the libretto for a Stravinsky opera. Stravinsky found Thomas to be besotted and fretful but said he nonetheless loved him at first sight. The composer was one of the poet's many champions; Dame Edith Sitwell, who claimed she had "never known anyone with a more holy and childlike innocence of mind," was another. By the time Thomas died, not yet forty, while staying at the Chelsea Hotel in New York during his 1953 trip to the United States, he was a man whose reputation had gone well beyond a Welsh fishing town.

It is, of course, one of the reasons the Boat House is still intact. Ironically, the place that the poet himself could not afford for twenty-five hundred pounds has been restored at a cost of a hundred times that amount. In 1989 engineers supported by local and national funding worked to stabilize the cliff and reroute the entrance paths so that the public might continue to see the place where an indigent poet, now the object of enormous national pride, once lived. If some compromises were made in the process, Dylan Thomas's "sea-shaken house on a breakneck of rocks" remains a monument to the sanctuary he found in Laugharne. □
