

Hwyl And Hiraeth: Richard Burton And Wales

Chris Williams

I shall start with two brief quotations from Richard Burton.¹ The first comes from an interview with Burton conducted by Kenneth Tynan in Rome in late 1966 and broadcast on the BBC in 1967. Tynan asked Burton whether there was ‘anything in the background of Wales, the cultural background, that has specifically influenced your acting?’ Burton replied:

We had no actors. No actors, you know, for about forty years. I suddenly realised why we’d never had any actors. It was because all the actors went into the pulpit, the greatest stage in the world. It dominated a village in the chapel. You stood hovering like a great bird of prey over the people in the village; you said, ‘I will tell you what is wrong with you, and let me examine your soul’. The greatest pulpit in the world. And suddenly that particular kind of belief went out. They were no longer stars, the great preachers of my childhood. They went out, and the first man in Wales to stop being a preacher and start becoming an actor was Emlyn Williams.

Tynan: Would it be true to say that the thing that drew you to the stage was rhetoric?

Burton: Oh yes, unquestionably. I think we have a word in Welsh, misused I believe by you lot, called *hwyl*; nobody can ever translate it. But it’s a kind of longing for something, a kind of idiotic, marvellous, ridiculous longing.²

The second quotation is from a diary entry made by Burton on 7 December 1968, whilst at the Chalet Ariel, Gstaad, the Swiss home he shared with Elizabeth Taylor:

I have a record on of ‘five thousand Welsh voices’ singing ‘Mae d’eisiau di bob awr’. Enough to drive you daft with nostalgia. I need you every hour. Oh yes boys.

This is the tenth time I’ve played it. The dead stand up in rows before my bloodshot eyes. Sod it all. Sod death. Sod age. Sod grief. Sod loneliness. ‘Gad i’m teimlo awel o Galfaria fryn’.

I’ve begun my paper with these two quotations because, admittedly in a rather confusing way, they introduce the two terms of my paper’s title – *hwyl* and

1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered as the David Berry Memorial Lecture to the Cyfrwng Media Wales conference held at the University of Glamorgan, Cardiff, June 2011.

2 ‘Richard Burton’, in *Acting in the Sixties*, ed. by Hal Burton (London: BBC, 1970), pp. 28-29.

hiraeth – and the issue with which the paper is concerned, that of Richard Burton’s relationship with Wales.

I’m sure that most of you will have realised that in the first quotation Burton makes an error. Asked by Tynan about rhetoric, he introduces the word *hwyl*. ‘Misused I believe by you lot’, he says, meaning by ‘you lot’, one presumes, the English. ‘No one can ever translate it’. Well it is true that *hwyl* defies exact translation, but it certainly doesn’t translate as Burton suggests, as a kind of longing. *Hwyl* is a kind of rhetoric, an oratorical, passionate fervour, initially associated closely with Non-conformist preaching, and more latterly and secularly with rousing speeches made by Welsh politicians and rugby captains. And occasionally Welsh historians.

What Burton means when he refers to longing, the subject of the second quotation, the diary entry, is *hiraeth*, a form of homesickness or nostalgia, a reverie for one’s roots, one’s inheritance. Listening to the recording of Welsh male choirs Burton is possessed, encompassed by *hiraeth*, a return to his family, his friends, his roots in the Afan valley and Port Talbot.

My argument in this paper is that Richard Burton’s relationship with Wales may be characterised by a duality, a split between a public *hwyl* and a private *hiraeth*. To explore this theme I shall draw extensively, although not exclusively, on Richard Burton’s diaries.³ Burton kept diaries that cover all or part of fifteen years of his life. They do not form a consecutive sequence. The first is a pocket diary given to the then Richard Walter Jenkins when he was fourteen, in November 1939, and kept until the end of 1940. The next, that of 1960, is little more than an incomplete appointments diary. In 1965, what may be termed the ‘diary years’ begin, with the first of a series of diaries running up to March 1972. The earlier ones are handwritten, the later typed. The first is in a bound volume, the others loose-leaved and kept together in folders or binders (binders full of women, or at least one woman, you might say). This sequence constitutes the central core of Burton’s writing. After 1972 there are fragments: one diary running for eight months in 1975, a more substantial diary covering the latter half of 1980, and one for the early spring of 1983. Taken together, from November 1939 to April 1983 there are approximately 390,000 words covering ninety-three months, spread over forty-four years.

The diaries contain a very wide range of commentary on many subjects. In giving the inaugural Richard Burton Lecture at Swansea University in 2010 I focused particularly on Burton’s interest in and passion for scholarship, and on the *weltanschauung*, the world-view, that his reading of biography, history and politics generated. Wales was present in that exploration, but was not central to it. In speaking to the Cymmrodorion, I could hardly do anything other than address the question of Burton’s relationship with Wales. Now I’m not the first to consider this question – other scholars including David Berry, Geoffrey Macnab, Gethin

3 *The Richard Burton Diaries*, ed. by Chris Williams (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

Matthews and Peter Stead have done that in their own ways.⁴ What I hope will mark my treatment this evening out as distinctive, if not necessarily superior, is that it engages explicitly with Burton's own private writings on the subject.

David Berry, in his monumental *Wales and Cinema: The First Hundred Years*, comments that assessments of Richard Burton's 'contribution to cinema in Britain, or Wales [...] are problematic'.⁵ I endorse Berry's view, but I would extend it by suggesting that assessments of Burton's relationship with Wales and with Welsh culture are also deeply problematic. Berry concentrates, naturally enough, on Burton's 'Welsh' output – the films *The Last Days of Dolwyn* (1949) and *Under Milk Wood* (1972), and the documentaries *Borrowed Pasture* (1960) and *Dylan Thomas* (1962). If one was going beyond cinema to survey Burton's performative career in the round then one might add to this his stage performance *The Druid's Rest*, his radio work, including Emlyn Williams's *The Corn is Green* and *Night Must Fall*, Saunders Lewis's *Brad* and David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, in addition to the iconic radio production of *Under Milk Wood*. Burton released a number of LPs of poetry readings – Dylan Thomas featured heavily, but so did R. S. Thomas and poets who are sometimes claimed for Wales – Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves. Burton provided the narration for that most Welsh of war movies – *Zulu* – even if the historian in me cannot resist pointing out that the regiment that fought at Isandhlwana and Rorke's Drift was not titled the South Wales Borderers in 1879! Other narrations were given to a tourist board documentary, *Wales: Heritage of a Nation*, and a celebration of the centenary of the Welsh Rugby Union, *Touch of Glory*. There were television commentaries on Welsh public events – the Investiture of the Prince of Wales in 1969 and the marriage of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer in 1981; and Burton appeared in a fundraising concert for the community of Aberfan following the disaster of 1966.

Furthermore, Wales occasionally shines through in performances that ostensibly have nothing Welsh about them – for example, we catch Burton humming the eighteenth-century Welsh love song 'Bugeilio'r Gwenith Gwyn' to his ailing wife Mary when playing the American actor Edwin Booth in the 1955 film *Prince of Players*.⁶

Many other 'Welsh' projects did not come off: performing in Gwyn Thomas's *The Keep* or as Aneurin Bevan in a play also written by Thomas; producing the Dylan Thomas script *The Beach at Falesa*; or appearing on the television show *Ryan and Ronnie* with Ryan Davies and Ronnie Williams in 1973.

For me, the performative career, what was and what might have been, is certainly interesting, but it ought not to be the main focus of Burton's relationship with Wales. To make it such is to suffer from what I might term the 'dramatic fallacy': to suppose that somehow scenes from Burton's films, or plays, can be taken as a

4 David Berry, *Wales and Cinema: The First Hundred Years* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994); Geoffrey Macnab, 'Valley Boys', *Sight and Sound*, March 1994; Gethin Matthews, *Richard Burton: Seren Cymru* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2002); Peter Stead, *Richard Burton: So Much, So Little* (Bridgend: Seren, 1991); idem, *Acting Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), pp. 46-57.

5 Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, p. 268.

6 As Berry notes, the director of *Prince of Players* was Phillip Dunne, who wrote the screenplay for *How Green Was My Valley*. *Wales and Cinema*, p. 269.

commentary on that relationship. This ‘dramatic fallacy’ is a very common trap for commentators on Burton. One sees scenes from *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) used as a kind of *cinéma-vérité* take on the Burton/Taylor marriage; or Burton’s performance as the disillusioned spy Alec Leamas in *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold* (1965) speaking to Burton’s own disenchantment with idealism and his existential despair. I can understand why writers and filmmakers fall into this trap: but its heuristic principles seem to me to be barely defensible, its self-serving selectivity all too obvious. Access to Burton’s own writings allow us to escape from such inevitable limitations.

Now I said a moment ago that Burton’s relationship with Wales was problematic. What, you might ask, was the problem? Wasn’t Burton the most famous and accomplished Welshman of his generation, the one Welshman with a worldwide reputation, recognized globally for his talents and for how he disposed of them? So much, after all, has passed into lore: One. Burton, we are often told, always had a clause in his film contracts giving him 1 March off so that he could celebrate St David’s Day (I have to say that in the contracts I’ve seen in the archives at Swansea no such clauses exist, but I’m happy to let that one go!). Two. Burton reportedly always wore an item of red clothing as a patriotic tribute. When challenged on this matter on the Dick Cavett Show recorded for American television in July 1980, he was able to take off his boots to show Cavett and the audience his red socks.⁷ Three. Burton is often quoted as having stated that he would have been happier winning a cap for Wales at rugby than playing Hamlet at the Old Vic, and we can turn to the pages of Bleddyn Williams’s 1956 memoir *Rugger, My Life* for the authoritative suggestion from Williams (a distant relative of mine, I’d like to observe in passing), that ‘Richard would have made as good a wing-forward as any we have produced in Wales’, had he not moved into the film industry.⁸

Four. Burton was deeply interested in Welsh literature and in Welsh writing in English. In addition to the aforementioned Thomases (Dylan, Edward, Gwyn and R. S.) and David Jones, Burton was enthusiastic about Alun Lewis, Emyr Humphreys, Gerald of Wales, the *Mabinogion*, Dafydd ap Gwilym and Arthur Machen. Five. There are many miscellaneous pieces of evidence which suggest a strong and unproblematic relationship between Burton and Wales: Burton’s ability to sing *Ar Hyd y Nos* in duet with Elizabeth Taylor, to speak, of course, his native language (even if he was a little shaky in Rome in 1966!), the naming of his Swiss home in Céligny Pays de Galles, his support for Harlech Television.

Victor Spinetti has suggested that Richard Burton ‘invented Welshness’ and there is no little truth in that comment.⁹ Spinetti as a Welsh-Italian from Cwm could comment with authority and insight, and there are many others (sometimes possessed of less authority and insight) who have provided echoing witness. Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford and Burton mentor Nevill Coghill referred to Burton’s ‘Welsh Glendowerish mystery’ and Burton biographer Melvyn

7 Richard Burton interviewed on the Dick Cavett Show (1980) <<http://youtu.be/4lnwYaKUbL8>> [accessed 11 July 2013], 2m 40s in.

8 Williams, *Rugger, My Life* (London: Stanley Paul, 1956), p. 37

9 Victor Spinetti, *Up Front* (London: Portico, 1988), p. 146.

Bragg called Burton ‘a great Welsh hero’ who ‘never lost his Welshness’.¹⁰ The American actor William Redfield, who appeared alongside Burton in *Hamlet* on Broadway in New York in 1964 wrote that ‘Richard Burton is Welsh, and do not ever call him English if you value your somatic well-being.’¹¹ *Time* magazine a year earlier had pointed out that:

He [Burton] is Welsh. In fact, he is so thoroughly, defensively, and patriotically Welsh that it costs him some loss of perspective. His gallery of great Welshmen includes Louis XIV, Christopher Columbus and Alexander the Great.¹²

This was tongue in cheek, but of course Burton was always looking for a good story about Wales to give him a distinctive cachet in Hollywood. Writing in his diary on 8 October 1966 he was tickled to find that there was a:

Report in the *Daily American* that the Welsh, under the King of Gwynedd discovered the USA two hundred years before Columbus. Can’t wait to show Elizabeth ... Some Welsh maniac has spent twenty years proving it and the results of his researches are to be published in a couple of weeks. I may make it a party piece.

Occasional claims were made that remind one today of the Welsh media’s desperate search for a Welsh angle in every global news story: writing for *Look* magazine in 1969 Burton reminded its readers that William Shakespeare was taught by a Welshman, Thomas Jenkins, at Stratford Grammar School (despite his name, Jenkins was a Londoner) and, even less plausibly, that Stratford-upon-Avon is near the Welsh border (it’s seventy miles from it).¹³ And in a joint interview for CBS’s *60 Minutes* with Elizabeth Taylor conducted by their friend Charles Collingwood in 1970 Burton claimed, albeit with a wicked grin, that Jesus Christ was ‘unquestionably Welsh’.¹⁴

I suggest that Richard Burton was a quintessential performer of Wales and Welshness, not so much in his acting career, but in his daily life. He acted out his self-appointed role of characteristic Welshman, custodian of the tall-tale telling legacy of Dylan Thomas, controversial interpreter of the meaning of the life and career of Stanley Baker, a gargantuan consumer of alcohol thus proving his parity with his mining ancestors (the director Mike Nichols who worked with Burton on *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* said that he had a ‘Welsh pride’ in being able to do a performance of a play ‘completely sloshed’), all of this reminding America, reminding England, that he, and the people from whom he came, were different.¹⁵

10 Coghill and Bragg, interviewed in *In From The Cold? The World of Richard Burton*, dir. by Tony Palmer (Tony Palmer Films, 1989).

11 Redfield, *Letters from an Actor* (New York: Viking, 1967), p. 43.

12 26 April 1963.

13 Burton, ‘Who cares about Wales? I care’, *Look*, 24 June 1969, p. 77.

14 Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton interviewed on *60 Minutes* (1970) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPJEoqH73Qg>> [accessed 11 July 2013], 4m 20s in.

15 Nichols, interviewed in *In From The Cold?*

Only once did Burton go into print full square on this topic, and that was in the aforementioned article for *Look* magazine, occasioned by the coming together in 1969 of both the Investiture (to which Burton had been invited, although in the end he did not attend) and an upsurge in headline-catching Welsh nationalist activity, centred on the activities of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, Mudiad Amddiffyn Cymru and the Free Wales Army. The article was titled ‘Who Cares About Wales? I Care’. Written at Burton and Taylor’s home in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, it’s a curious mixture of perceptive insights, factual errors and sentimentality. In it Burton sticks up resolutely for the rights of the Welsh language (advocating Welsh-medium education in schools) while at the same time denouncing militant extremism, dismissing devolution as irrelevant, and celebrating the English language as ‘perfect [...] for the most breathtaking body of poetry ever presented to civilization’.¹⁶ But whatever its contradictions and confusions, Burton is clearly, proudly, Welsh:

Well, what’s to do? I don’t know. But I *do* know that, tiny a nation as we are, and being no better and no worse than other nations, I do know that we are different and that we want to remain so. We don’t want to have that hot rush of blood to the head when someone mistakes us for English, or think that we are one of England’s quainter counties. We want to be uniquely ourselves and we want to keep our unique language.¹⁷

No doubt that Burton was sincere in writing this. Yet what strikes me, given Burton’s reputation as a ‘professional Welshman’, as someone who stressed his Welsh identity at virtually every public opportunity, is that in reading his diaries I have been surprised to find only relatively sparse serious commentary on his home country. References of any weight to Wales in the diaries are few and far between and Burton showed little interest in the state of politics in Wales or in the rise of Welsh nationalism in its different forms. He mocked the antics of the Welsh nationalist militants as a ‘shambling, drivel-mouthed, sideways-moving, sly-boots [...] North Welsh imitation’ of the Irish.¹⁸ Not that he thought much of the political mainstream. Receiving a letter in 1971 from George Thomas (1909-97), the Port Talbot-born Labour MP for Cardiff West and former Secretary of State for Wales, he asked:

Why do we send such obvious mediocrities to the Commons when there are such brilliant chaps on every street corner at home? I suppose we are all so bloody lazy that we let the dull and insignificant – like Lord Llew Heycock for Christ’s sake – who are prepared to go to

16 Burton, ‘Who cares about Wales?’, p. 76.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

18 Diary, 26 April 1969. In another entry (3 November 1971) he noted that he wouldn’t object to Welsh extremists ‘blowing up installations though I think it pretty childish but if they hurt anybody except themselves I would be red fury’.

party meetings in vestries and half-empty halls, do the job for us.¹⁹

Somewhat improbably, on 19 May 1970 Burton speculated as to whether his forthcoming CBE was an attempt by Prime Minister Harold Wilson to ‘placate the Welsh Nationalist Movement’ with the June General Election in mind. Burton was a patriot, but not a nationalist. His horizons – geographically and philosophically – were too broad for that. But nor was he a Communist. ‘Even as a child in the valleys’, he wrote in 1968, ‘I knew there was something not quite right about Communism’.²⁰ If one tries to pigeonhole Burton’s politics in relation to Wales then you would have to say that his was a rather weary socialism.

However, the clearest expression of Burton’s feelings about Wales and its history come not through any semi-philosophical musings on what it meant to be Welsh or where Wales was heading politically, but rather in negative comments about the English. Burton had a profound sense of his rootedness in the mining and heavy industrial communities of South Wales, and referred to the ‘South Welsh’ with pride. On more than one occasion he praised the ‘mining class’ of the ‘South Welsh’ (a connection to his family), and termed the miners the ‘aristocrats’ of the working class.²¹ His childhood ambition, he confessed to Dick Cavett, had been to become a miner like his father and older brothers.

Burton sensed an affinity with the Scots, but not with the Irish, whom he despised. He had no problem with the English of ‘the taciturn midlands and north country’, but the English establishment aroused his anger most vividly.²² Reading a biography of Lord Palmerston in 1971 he noted that the statesman was:

[t]he kind of English [sic: Palmerston had Irish roots and his peerage was an Irish one] that causes me bright fury and arouses all my usually sleeping hatred of the English. And now poor bastards they are worse than ever, their two or three centuries of arrogance as a right having turned into pathos. They flared up for a year or two as a result of Churchill and the war but the post-war debacles killed them stone dead. How I enjoyed Suez and the fools they made of themselves. [...] I watch their every humiliation with great pleasure though I don’t much like reading other people writing about them as I am now.²³

Burton’s ‘hatred’ of the English was a class hatred, a deep resentment of, bitterness against those in power, and particularly against the Conservatives who, it could be argued, had done so much to damage Burton’s South Wales in the years of his childhood and adolescence. This came through powerfully as Burton awaited the results of the 1970 General Election:

19 Diary, 15 July 1971. Llew Heycock: Baron Heycock of Taibach (b.1905, d.1990).

20 Diary, 4 December 1968.

21 *Richard Burton: My Time Again*, BBC, 19 August 1965; *Kane’s Classics*, BBC, 9 April 1998.

22 Diary, 3 November 1971.

23 Diary, 20 September 1971.

My hatred of Tories is unabated by long-term membership of the rich class, and I hope they howl in the wilderness another five years. [...] No legislation they might enact [...] could ever make up for their intolerable air of superiority over us lot in the years and years gone by. I hope they grovel for evermore.²⁴

It is in the context of Richard Burton's profound sense of his rooted South Wales class background that one must understand his notorious 1974 comments about Winston Churchill. These were aired in two articles, 'To Play Churchill Is to Hate Him', published in the *New York Times* on 24 November, and 'The Shock of His Presence Was Like a Blow Under the Heart', published in *TV Guide*, the American equivalent of the *Radio Times* the day before, and republished in *New York* magazine for January 1975. These pieces were occasioned by Burton's playing of Churchill in a ninety-minute British-American co-production for television variously titled *Walk With Destiny* (in the US) and *The Gathering Storm* (in the UK).²⁵

Burton had been reading both Churchill's own words and biographies of Churchill and of the Churchill family for some years.²⁶ Burton had met Churchill in the 1950s, and in 1960 and 1961 he had read from Churchill's memoirs in a documentary series for ABC, later broadcast on the BBC, *The Valiant Years*, which covered Churchill's wartime leadership.²⁷ He owned a Jacob Epstein bust of Churchill, which at one point had adorned the yacht *Kalizma*, had been asked by the Churchill family to play the 'old man' on screen and, for some reason which is not entirely clear, had given a colour television set to Clementine Churchill just weeks before writing the articles in question.²⁸

The screen portrayal in *Walk With Destiny* was a triumph, but Burton found himself at the centre of his own gathering storm as his articles met with outrage and anger on both sides of the Atlantic. In preparing himself to play one of 'the scatological, dispossessed younger sons of the aristocracy', as he termed Churchill, he had come face to face with some of the more exotic aspects of the man's personality.²⁹ I think that Burton was keen to make it clear, in print, that he disassociated himself from Churchill as a historical figure, whose essence he was thought to have captured so well on screen. He characterised him as:

24 Diary, 19 May 1970. On 19 June he referred to the Tories (victorious in the General Election) as 'smug bastards'.

25 *Walk with Destiny*, dir. by Herbert Wise; Richard Burton, Robert Hardy, Ian Bannen, Patrick Stewart, Brook Williams, and Angharad Rees (NBC, 1974); *Gathering Storm* (UK: BBC, 1974).

26 Including Randolph S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill, Volume One: Youth 1874-1900* (London: Minerva, 1966); A. L. Rowse's *The Early Churchills* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969); idem., *The Later Churchills* (London: Macmillan, 1958); Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911-1918*, 6 vols (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd, 1923-31).

27 *The Valiant Years*, dir. by Anthony Bushell and John Schlesinger (ABC, 1960-61).

28 Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University, RWB 1/2/2/6, Letter from Clementine Churchill to Richard Burton, 2 October 1974.

29 *New York*, 8. 3 (20 January 1975), p. 7.

short, obese, vigorous, pugnacious, something of a vulgarian, power-mad (and for a time at least almost insane with power), afraid of nothing either physically or morally.³⁰

Burton disparaged Churchill's 'barren' intellect, his 'superficial' education, his 'slow and ponderous' wit. He questioned his sanity, quoted Aneurin Bevan's description of him as a 'petrified adolescent', and accused him of genocide in respect of the bombing of Dresden. He even ranked Churchill alongside Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Lenin, Hitler and Stalin.

Burton was aiming to shock, to stun his audience with his phrases, and yet at the same time to concede some grudging respect for him, to express some puzzlement in his own mind, as to what to make of Churchill. Burton admired Churchill's capacity to drink (he wrote that '[h]is last service to the "free" world he served so well might well have been to leave us his liver to wonder at'), he considered him 'one of the greatest orators of his time', 'a great natural force', and praised his steadfastness in resisting Hitler in 1940. And he admitted that when he had met Churchill in person, he had been awed, 'frightened [...] almost to silence'. '[T]he shock of his presence was like a blow under the heart. I cannot pretend otherwise, though my class and his hate each other to seething point'. In a subsequent interview Burton was to reflect further on this class hatred: Churchill, he claimed, had been the great oppressor of the South Wales miners during the (Cambrian Combine) strike of 1910-11, and (inaccurately) blamed him for the deaths of 'nineteen miners or thereabout' at that time (the death toll was one, or seven if we add in the deaths associated with the Llanelli railway strike of 1911).³¹

Burton won more accolades when writing about Welsh rugby rather than about Welsh industrial history. In 1970 he contributed an article with a Welsh title, 'Le ma'r blydi film star 'ma' (where's this bloody film star?), to *Touchdown*, an anthology celebrating the centenary of the Rugby Football Union.³² It's a good read, republished in *The Observer* as 'The Last Time I Played Rugby', and is convincing, true to life, in a kind of Alun Richards-esque way.³³ He followed that up two years later with a contribution to *The Barry John Book of Rugby*. That article featured the great Aberavon and Wales winger of the 1930s Arthur Bassett, Burton writing that: 'Einstein proved that the shortest distance between two points is a curve. Bassett believed him'.³⁴

The most profound engagement with Wales comes not in Richard Burton's adult diaries or in his occasional articles on Welsh subjects, but rather in the diary that he kept as Richard Walter Jenkins. This was a small, pocket diary given to him as a present for his fourteenth birthday in November 1939. A diary for 1940, he nonetheless began making entries in early December and kept the diary

30 Ibid., p. 6.

31 *Sunday Mirror*, 14 March 1976.

32 Richard Burton, 'Le ma'r blydi film star 'ma'', in *Touchdown: And Other Moves in the Game*, ed. by Geoffrey Nicholson, Cliff Morgan, and David Frost (London: Rugby Football Union, 1970), pp. 84-87.

33 *The Observer*, 4 October 1970.

34 Richard Burton, 'The Immortal Dive of P. C. Mog', in *The Barry John Book of Rugby* (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1972), pp. 117-20 (p. 120).

consistently for the whole of the next year – there are only three dates on which no entry is made. Almost all entries would appear to have been made on the day or on the following day. They were written first in pencil, and then overwritten in pen, usually in small, cramped handwriting that occasionally present problems of legibility. They constitute a remarkably un-self-conscious commentary on the cultural and social world of the future Richard Burton, well before he could have had any inkling of what awaited him in life.

The diary is a fascinating document from a number of viewpoints. It sheds light on the complicated and sometimes troubled domestic relationship in which Richard found himself, particularly the tensions with his brother-in-law Elfed, in whose house he had been living since the age of two. It offers up, in passing, a schoolboy's experience of wartime: German bombing raids on Swansea and Port Talbot, aerial combat involving Spitfires, the blackout, barrage balloons, air raid shelters, older brothers being called up, the battle of Narvik, the Fall of France and the 'miracle' of Dunkirk. And yet how this all fitted into the daily routine. So, on 10 May Richard noted:

Holland, Luxembourg and Belgium invaded by Adolph and his crazy gang. They are being held. I think this is Germany's great and first mistake. Played tennis with Dai [his brother]. He won.

It is also a reminder of the harshness of working-class life. The very first entry recorded the premature death of Richard's sister-in-law Cassie, the woman who, in raising him after their mother's death, had done for Richard's younger brother Graham what sister Cissie had done for Richard.³⁵ A live character who regularly appeared was Elfed's brother-in-law Ben who had been confined to a wheelchair following an underground accident, and who was a crack *Monopoly* player.

From the point of view of understanding Richard's Welsh world the diary is rich in raw material. Richard was attending Noddfa Welsh Congregational chapel on Commercial Road in Taibach almost every Sunday, often for more than one service, and for Sunday school and chapel eisteddfodau as well. In December 1940, shortly before the diary ends, he was received into chapel membership and could take communion for the first time. He regularly commented on whether the sermons of the veteran and charismatic minister Dr J. Caerau Rees were successful or not. He looked forward to the arrival of visiting preachers, sometimes getting their autograph. His sister stopped him from going to chapel on one Sunday because until he got his new suit (anticipated the following week) he was not considered respectable enough in his old togs.

Richard went to the cinema almost as often as to chapel. I have counted forty-two visits in the diary, usually to the Picturedrome or *Cach* (Shithouse) which was the local flea pit, but sometimes to the more expensive Regent in Taibach, or to the Palace, Plaza or the Majestic ('Wales's latest luxury cinema') in the centre of Port Talbot.³⁶ He was an eclectic sampler of cinematic treats: *Shipyard Sally* with Gracie Fields, *Q Planes* with Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson, *The*

35 Diary, 10 December 1939.

36 For the description of the Majestic see *Port Talbot Guardian*, 1 April 1938.

Oklahoma Kid with James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, *The Flying Deuces* with Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, *I Am The Law*, with Edward G. Robinson. Sometimes these visits, as with the one on 12 September, were surreptitious: 'I went to the Cach and did not tell Sis'. But the following day, Friday 13 September, he was in trouble:

This morning the milkboy told Sis that he had seen me in the Cach eating chocolates etc but I denied it and she believed me – at least I think so – although it was no crime. We had [Philip] Burton today – very interesting talk on Essays.

The other great leisure activity recorded in the pages of the diary is sport, or rather sports and pastimes. Richard was evidently intensely competitive. The playing of the aforementioned *Monopoly* occupied many evenings. Then there were darts, billiards, putting in the park, swimming in the town baths on Forge Road, playing post-ball (rather like basketball), tennis, cricket, association football, a variety of track and field athletics and especially, always, rugby union. The point about the potential Richard had to play rugby to a high standard is substantiated by those in whose company he is to be found. These include future Wales internationals such as Alun Thomas and Gerwyn Williams, others such as Brinley Phillips, Trevor George and Stan Walters who enjoyed successful first-class club careers and others still, such as Freddie Williams, the two-time World Speedway Champion in the 1950s, who achieved in different sports.

The competitive streak was carried over into two other areas of life. One gets the sense from the diary that at age fourteen Richard began to take his schooling very seriously – that he sensed that academic achievement might, for him, be possible and might lead somewhere. On 29 April he wrote: 'I am determined to work hard in school this term'. On 25 July: 'Had my report this morning and it was very good compared with last term's report. I realized an average of 56.5'. On 3 September:

I am going to try hard in school this year. We are having continued air raids. Skewen oil works is still burning and there is a black pall of smoke over the sky. There are now 42 barrage balloons within sight.

There is nothing in the diary that reinforces his occasional later claim that he wanted only to be a miner. Day after day he recorded his progress in homework, in examinations, the slow elevation of his grade averages, his struggles with Welsh and physics, his more rapid advances in English, history, mathematics and chemistry. On 18 November:

Played football in the Gym. Only 5 of us there. Did a lot of swotting tonight. I should get a fairly good result at Terminals especially in Chem[istry]. I am still worried about Welsh. I am afraid Geog[raphy] is not going to be a great help.

On 15 September: ‘Determined to work hard at school and break all records by passing matric 1st time. Very few [form] V boys have ever done it’. He was already an avid reader — ‘I am reading on average about three books in two days’, he wrote on 23 October 1940 — but only occasionally did he record the titles. One such on 16 January: ‘Stayed in tonight and started to read *Martin Chuzzlewit* written by Dickens’. The books came from school, were borrowed from friends and family, and were loaned from the Carnegie Library on Commercial Road in Taibach.

Richard’s competitive, determined streak was also identifiable in what one might call grafting, hobbling, a search for casual income. This was achieved through fetching dung for sale as manure for gardens and allotments, collecting newspapers for wrapping fish and chips, gathering blackberries to make jam, doing odd jobs or running errands for family members and neighbours, helping out on an occasional basis at the Taibach and Port Talbot Co-Op, tramping the streets singing Christmas Carols. For example, on 2 August he wrote:

Went up the Colliery to fetch Elfed’s pay. He gave me 6d and Verdun gave me a 1/-. As soon as I came home I had a haircut in Sandie’s [Sanderson’s, the barbers]. Later on I had 6d off Dad James. Went to *Cach* to see *Arsenal St[adium Mystery]*.

Richard recorded how much money he earned, how much he spent on his clothes (he built up a collection of forty ties). The diary provides a bold reminder that subsistence was important, immediate, vital to the quality of life.

What emerges very strongly from his schoolboy diary is Richard’s intense competitiveness, his brash self-confidence, his rootedness within a full sense of community. And there was his ambition. This entry from Saturday 1 June 1940, combines so much of the spirit of this fourteen-year-old boy:

Did all my errands as usual and changed my library book in the [after]noon. Went to the Regent [cinema] and I saw a picture called [*The*] *Four Feathers*. Showed what family tradition can do to a man. This man was sent four white feathers. But he proved them wrong.

Richard’s world was geographically delimited: bounded by Swansea, Neath, Pontrhydyfen, Llantwit Major, Aberdare, Mountain Ash, Maesteg, Ogmore Vale, Bridgend, Ogmore by Sea, Pontycymer, Pyle, Skewen, Tonyrefail. Institutionally it was circumscribed also: the chapel, the school, the Co-Op, the YMCA on Station Road, Port Talbot. Yet it was also a full world, a whole world, full of potential and rewards. There is a vibrancy about it. We know from sources other than Richard’s schoolboy diary that important people came to speak in the library and the chapels at this time: the poet Huw Menai, the veteran socialist Minnie Pallister, Labour Party luminary Harold Laski, miner-writer B. L. Coombes, miners’ leader and MP James Griffiths.³⁷ And there was a sense in which Port Talbot felt itself fully

37 *Port Talbot Guardian*, 31 December 1937 (Huw Menai); 12, 19 August 1938 (Minnie Pallister); 23 June 1939 (B. L. Coombes); 12 January 1940, 3 October 1941 (Harold Laski); 23 October 1942 (James Griffiths).

relevant, central to what was happening in the world. In 1943 the *Port Talbot Guardian* suggested that it should be made the capital of Wales:

The Cardiff-Swansea controversy is, I think, tedious. As far as the predominant South is concerned, Port Talbot, with half the population of Wales within a thirty-miles' radius, has as good a title as anywhere.³⁸

Richard's world was a world full of family members, friends and fellow school pupils, teachers, and authority figures. Those Richard admired most appeared to be a few of the teachers (including Philip Burton) and those who had sporting credentials. Drama was present: Richard recorded preparing for his part as Mr Vanhatten in a school production of George Bernard Shaw's *The Apple Cart*, the latest in a series of productions of Shaw's plays put on by Burton at the secondary school, but it was not yet a major theme in his life. The realization that his talent and his determination would take Richard in that direction had still to arrive.

That took place over the next three years. Richard Jenkins became Richard Burton and left Wales in the autumn of 1943 to appear in his first professional stage production, *The Druid's Rest*. He went on to spend time at Oxford University, in the RAF at various bases around England and in Canada, and on demobilisation from the forces went straight into a career on stage and screen. He never lived in Wales again, basing himself initially in London, and then, from 1957 in Switzerland. He never seriously considered returning to his homeland. Even when he thought about coming back to the UK it was to England, to the London area, or to near Oxford, that appealed most. He returned occasionally to Pontrhydyfen and Taibach, usually with a great fanfare as the unofficial Prince of Wales, but never for more than a few days. And, after almost three decades of living in Europe, Mexico, on a yacht in the Mediterranean and spending considerable time in the USA, he died in Switzerland and was buried in Céligny in August 1984, the funeral service including the Welsh air 'Sospas Fach'. He was buried in red, with a copy of Dylan Thomas's poems, but his decision to lay his bones on Swiss soil was an emotional one as well as a fiscal one: he reasoned that he had been happiest in his home, Pays de Galles, a home from home.

The adult Richard Burton performed his Welshness with *hwy!*. But the Welshness that Richard Burton preserved, displayed and consumed, as a globe-trotting international film star and celebrity, could barely be anything other than reified. It became reduced to a series of labels, badges, boxes to be ticked: coalmining and class politics, alcohol, Welsh male voice, rugby, a sometimes shaky grasp of the Welsh language and Welsh history, a reverence for the greats of Welsh literature. But it was not a living entity. It was frozen in time, static, stagnant, ossified. That outcome was unavoidable given Burton's lifestyle and lack of any continuing real connection to the Wales that was evolving in his absence. His was a simulacrum of Welshness.

The angst of the realization that his living connections to Wales had been

38 Ibid., 5 February 1943.

permanently severed comes through powerfully in this, the last quotation from the diaries, dated 24 July 1969. It is written after a short-lived attempt to stay off alcohol had come to an abrupt end the previous day:

Being (relatively) sober for the last three or four days I have learned a great deal. Drink, for instance, is a great anodyne. I had forgotten how boring people are. I'd forgotten how afraid people are. I'd forgotten how boring I am. And how all of us lead lives of quiet desperation, and bugger you Thoreau.³⁹ It is some ungodly hour in the morning.

I have since the above paragraph, taken a shower [...] cleaned myself of every orifice, laboured over the cleansing of a body which will never be clean, examined a brain, some cells of which will never function properly again, and, in general, have dismissed me as a completely lost cause. There is no going back. There is no Isaiah's burning coal to cauterize a lifetime of self-indulgence.⁴⁰ What would you like to do Rich? You want a back room in Paddington with a gas-fire and bobs to put in it and no bath but a public one around the corner just off Praed Street? You want a good girl who thinks you are the world's best bank clerk and will defend you against any bank manager who cares to take you on at the staff party? Well, you won't find one, baby. You want Pontrhydyfen and the unbelievably bad weather and 10 quid a week and the lust for the pint that you can't afford and the other man has? You can't have it fellah. I mean you can have the pint but not the lust. Go home, said George Moore to John Millington Synge, Go home.⁴¹ Well, I got news for you Thomas Wolfe, you can't go home no more.⁴²

At Richard Burton's core remained a profound *hiraeth*, not for the Wales as was, but for the Wales which, at the age of eighteen, he had left for ever. That Wales had been, in the term employed by Professor Zimmern, an 'American' South Wales in its final flourish, bouncing back with confidence and brio from the hardships of the Depression years as the Second World War began to crank up. That was the Wales in which Burton's politics had been forged, that was the Wales which had equipped him with so many of the intellectual and emotional resources that would serve him so well in his career.

- 39 An adaptation of Henry David Thoreau's line, 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation'.
- 40 Isaiah, 6. 6-7 (King James version): 'Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged'.
- 41 George Moore (b.1852, d.1933), novelist, poet, playwright, who wrote that 'a man travels the world in search of what he needs and returns home to find it'. John Millington Synge (b.1871, d.1909), playwright and poet.
- 42 Thomas Wolfe (b.1900, d.1938), novelist, author of *You Can't Go Home Again* (New York: Harper, 1940).

John Gielgud is reported as saying that Richard Burton ‘came from nowhere’, a remark that, if it is true, illustrates a failure of understanding on the part of Sir John.⁴³ We know that Richard Burton didn’t come from ‘nowhere’, he came from somewhere. He came from a South Wales that first he and now we have lost. The rich texture of that South Wales is evident in the first diary that Richard Walter Jenkins ever kept.

43 Melvyn Bragg, in *In From The Cold?*

