

Thomas, M. Wynn. *All that is Wales: the Collected Essays of M. Wynn Thomas*. University of Wales Press, 2017. 320 pages.

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This book collects a mixture of published and unpublished essays by M. Wynn Thomas. Thomas, Wales's leading literary scholar and one of its leading intellectuals, has published over twenty books on Welsh literature (in both English and Welsh) and on American literature. Welsh Writing in English as a formalised academic discipline is relatively nascent, having developed in the latter half of the twentieth century. Over the last three decades, M. Wynn Thomas has consistently been one of the guiding lights within the field. Much of Thomas's career has "been consciously devoted to the excavation and rehabilitation of the neglected writers of Wales" (4) and thus the volume includes eleven essays which explore nine of Wales's modern and contemporary anglophone authors in detail, as well as an introductory chapter. In short, the assembled essays offer a microcosm of Welsh Writing in English's academic development thus far: a handful of internationally renowned writers are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the depth and breadth of Wales's anglophone literary culture, which still struggles to receive both national and international attention.

Thomas's introduction to the collection offers concise summaries of his various studies over the last three decades, indicating both the development of his thought and effectively, though only implicitly given Thomas's characteristic modesty, outlining his immense contribution to our current understanding of Welsh culture. As well as tracing the shifting academic and cultural environment in Wales, which allowed the formal development of Welsh Writing in English as a discipline, Thomas's introduction also explores the personal, biographical foundation of his critical mindset. Thomas's personal meditation on the multiple sub-cultures of Wales to which he belongs complements the theoretical frame with which he begins his introductory essay: Michael Cronin's term "micro-cosmopolitanism" (1). This approach, Thomas suggests, "seeks to diversify or

complexify the smaller unit” (1) and “cosmopolitan,” a term often synonymous with large units of social organisation (major cities and populous countries), becomes instead “a signifier of a richness born of a constant process of cultural exchange wherever that is to be found and whatever distinctly local forms it takes” (2). If we understand “the smaller unit” of Wales as cosmopolitan in this way, Thomas’s volume of essays now becomes a book which signifies the richness born of Wales’s cultural processes and the local forms that Welsh writers give to those processes.

The first chapter explores the ways in which the Argentine-Welsh writer Lynette Roberts defined herself, analysing the relationship between her “international [and] intercontinental” background and her adoption of Welsh customs and culture (32). Thomas’s analysis of Roberts’s recently republished poetry and diaries shows her “devising strikingly original strategies of adaptation that would guarantee the creative survival of her singular identity” (33) and offers valuable insight into a still underappreciated modernist. Characterised by Thomas as a “participating outsider” (40), Roberts is one of three little-studied Welsh modernists that Thomas features in the first three chapters. That label “participating outsider” could just as easily apply to one of the subjects of Thomas’s second chapter, the border country writer Margiad Evans. Born in England as Peggy Whistler, Evans, like Roberts, adopted and constructed a Welsh identity. Drawing on his twin expertise in American and Welsh literature, Thomas offers a comparative analysis of Evans and the Mississippi writer Eudora Welty, which replaces discussion of the ‘influence’ writers may be subject to with a more nuanced exploration of “confluence” (57). Confluence points to a complex and multifaceted relationship between writers, one in which writers experience “the shock of self-recognition” (57) in one another’s work. In rejecting the simplistic question of ‘influence,’ Thomas offers an illuminating comparison of Evans and Welty’s use of space within their short fiction, demonstrating “the uncanny similarities of their minds” (74). In the third chapter, Thomas emerges as one of the few advocates of the fascinating Nigel Heseltine, another border country writer who made a “brief but valuable contribution to his country’s emergent English-language literature” (77). Thomas’s theoretical sophistication is displayed in this chapter, as he analyses Heseltine’s short fiction

through the frames of both cultural hybridity and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "schizo man" (78). Yet, this chapter also demonstrates the validity and importance of understanding Wales as a "micro-cosmopolitan" space. Heseltine is an unknown writer from a neglected part of the Welsh social-cultural sphere (the anglicised gentry) and his work remains out-of-print and barely studied. With a critic as accomplished as Thomas, even a volume of collected essays remains path-finding. There is little doubt, too, that these three oft-marginalised modernists are cosmopolitan in their cultural richness.

The fourth chapter turns to Wales's most famous literary son, Dylan Thomas, analysing the complex relationship between Dylan and his hometown of Swansea. M. Wynn Thomas deftly characterises the ambivalence and ambiguity of Thomas's linguistic experiment, demonstrating that not only is Dylan Thomas "a clever arranger of words" but he is also "a clever arrangement *of* them" (100). The fourth and fifth chapters analyse two novels by Emyr Humphreys, who recently celebrated his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Thomas emerges here not only as one of the most persuasive and perceptive readers of Humphrey's work, but also of Nonconformity's complex and enduring legacy in twentieth-century Welsh culture.<sup>1</sup> The sixth chapter, on Humphrey's 1965 novel *Outside the House of Baal*, is informed not only by Thomas's characteristically deep understanding of Welsh religious life but also by sustained study and use of archival sources tracing the development of the novel.

The seventh and eighth chapters serve as further evidence of Thomas's commendable and illuminating grasp of the complex religious life of modern Wales, this time in relation to the Church in Wales and R. S. Thomas. The first one of these chapters explores the schisms and conflicts within the Church in Wales (especially between Welsh-speaking culture and the Church) and in turn the implications that this had for Thomas's poetry. The second chapter on R. S. considers the "mixed and ambivalent" (185) results that Thomas's retirement from the priesthood had for his thinking and writing. M. Wynn Thomas identifies three phases that R. S. went through following his retirement, and primarily analyses the second phase, the period between 1985 and 1992, which includes "important sections that highlight the fraught circumstances of his retirement" (186). In

concert with his chapters on the regrettably neglected Emyr Humphreys, Thomas's chapters on R. S. noticeably expand our scholarly understanding of the religious dimensions of modern Welsh literature, helping to dismantle the misguided (if perhaps understandable) assumption that modern Welsh literature was purely a reaction against organised religion, powerful as that impulse is in some writers. Furthermore, these chapters demonstrate the volume's careful balance between writers whose work has been given little or no consideration (such as Emyr Humphreys and Nigel Heseltine) and otherwise widely known writers (like the two Thomases) with little-studied sides to their work. M. Wynn Thomas is particularly adept at mining these otherwise unconsidered crevices.

The final three chapters take in Vernon Watkins, Leslie Norris and Gillian Clarke. Watkins, a friend of Dylan Thomas's, was once an internationally renowned writer and following the pattern of some writers collected in this volume (like Lynette Roberts), has since faded from view. Thomas locates Watkins as a "Gower poet" exploring "the native territory of his imagination" (214) as well as a writer who constructed himself as "the Taliesin of Gower" (219).<sup>2</sup> In the tenth chapter, Thomas concentrates on Leslie Norris's translations from Welsh into English, demonstrating the way Norris defined himself (implicitly and explicitly) in stark contrast to another great translator of Welsh poetry, Tony Conran. The comparison between the two points to the richness of the so-called 'Second Flowering', juxtaposing as it does the communal, socialised identity of Conran's translations and creative practise with the more individualised voice of Norris, noticeably more rooted in the English-national tradition.<sup>3</sup> An additional benefit of this essay is that it makes us aware of Conran as another significantly underserved voice in Welsh writing. Thomas primarily illustrates the ways Norris's translations "point up one limitation to be consistently found in Norris's faultlessly temperate poetry: its perpetual anxiety not to offend" (238). Finally, Thomas's eleventh chapter rounds out the volume with a consideration of the early poetry of Gillian Clarke, one of Wales's finest contemporary writers. This essay considers the ways in which women have been written out of and are writing themselves back into textual history, recounting Clarke's "gradual and phased awakening" as a poet (259). Thomas identifies Clarke as a pioneering woman writer during the

Second Flowering, concentrating on “her emphasis on the provisional, exploratory and tentative nature of the stances and images women tend fluidly to produce in their writings” (267).

Broadly, the collection makes clear the cosmopolitan nature of these individual writers and of Welsh Writing in English. The volume is, unlike some academic writing, a genuine pleasure to read. Thomas has done more than most to define his field, and this volume serves as both a statement of how far the study of Welsh Writing in English has advanced, of the riches it contains, and of the paths yet waiting to be trod. It is therefore an excellent tool for specialists in the area, but an even more valuable guide for those who want to enter this micro-cosmopolitan scene; for those who wish to begin to know all that Wales is.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is a topic on which Thomas has predictably already written the book: *In the Shadow of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales* (University of Wales Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The Gower is a peninsula in South Wales, immediately west of the city of Swansea (and part of the modern-day Swansea County area). Taliesin is the name given to two famous Welsh figures. The first is a historical figure and sixth-century poet, as well as one of the founders of the Welsh poetic tradition. The second is a folkloric figure, a magician and shapeshifter and, most famously, one of the characters found in the *Mabinogion*.

<sup>3</sup> The ‘Second Flowering’ of Welsh Writing in English is used to refer to the generation of writers that came to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, including Leslie Norris, Gillian Clarke, and Tony Conran. The ‘First Flowering’ of the 1930s is regarded as the first sustained manifestation of Welsh Writing in English, consisting of writers such as Dylan Thomas, Vernon Watkins, Lynette Roberts, Margiad Evans, R S Thomas and Nigel Heseltine.