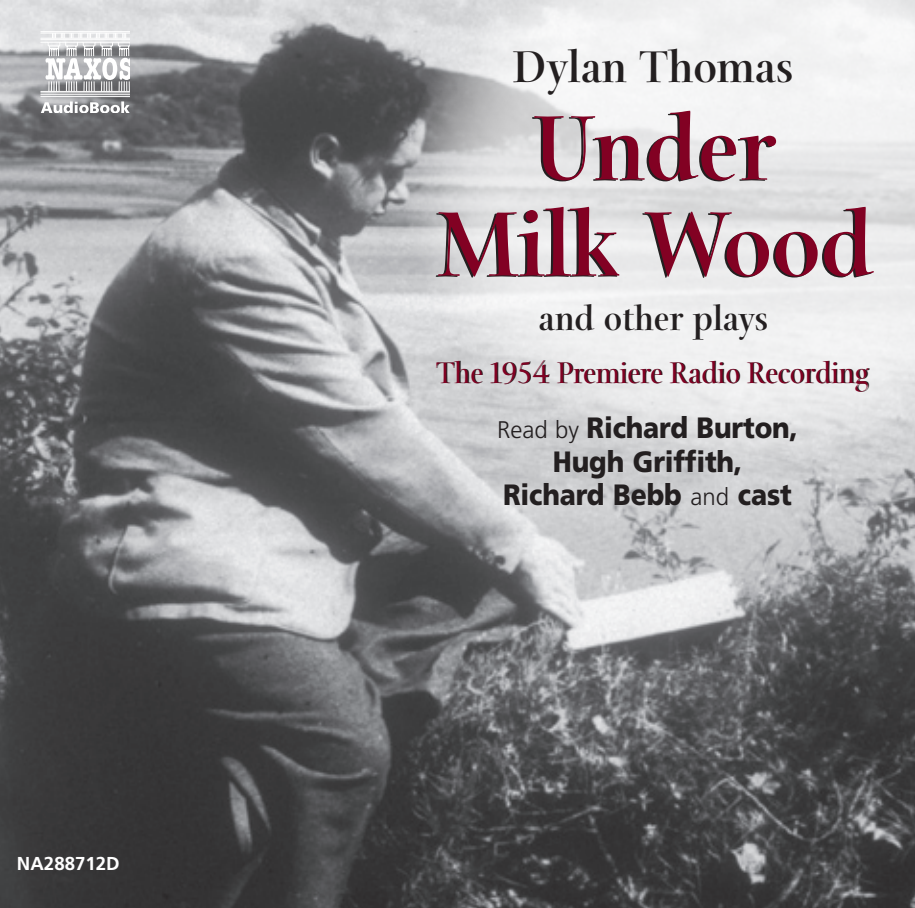




NAXOS  
AudioBook



Dylan Thomas  
**Under  
Milk Wood**

and other plays

**The 1954 Premiere Radio Recording**

Read by **Richard Burton,  
Hugh Griffith,  
Richard Bebb** and cast

NA288712D

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## **UNDER MILK WOOD – A PLAY FOR VOICES**

<b>1</b>	FIRST VOICE To begin at the beginning:	5:12
<b>2</b>	FIRST DROWNED Remember me, Captain?	1:39
<b>3</b>	FIRST VOICE From where you are...	0:30
<b>4</b>	MR EDWARDS Myfanwy Price!	1:18
<b>5</b>	FIRST VOICE Come now, drift up the dark...	1:44
<b>6</b>	MOTHER This little piggy...	2:16
<b>7</b>	FIRST VOICE Now, in her iceberg-white...	0:44
<b>8</b>	MRS OGMORE-PRITCHARD Mr Ogmore!	1:09
<b>9</b>	FIRST VOICE In Butcher Beynon's...	0:29
<b>10</b>	ORGAN MORGAN: Help! cries Organ Morgan...	0:28
<b>11</b>	FIRST VOICE At the sea end of town...	0:27
<b>12</b>	UTAH WATKINS Thirty four, thirty five...	3:07
<b>13</b>	FIRST VOICE Now behind the eyes and secrets...	2:54
<b>14</b>	FIRST VOICE Time passes. Listen. Time passes.	1:58
<b>15</b>	REV. ELI JENKINS Dear Gwalia! I know there are...	2:00
<b>16</b>	FIRST VOICE Now, woken at last by the out-of-bed...	0:23
<b>17</b>	LILY SMALLS Oh, there's a face!	2:14

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18	FIRST VOICE Mary Ann the Sailors...	2:39
19	FIRST VOICE Now frying-pans spit...	1:19
20	FIRST VOICE Mr and Mrs Cherry Owen...	1:32
21	FIRST VOICE From Beynon Butchers in Coronation Street...	1:09
22	FIRST VOICE Up the street, in the Sailors' Arms...	2:38
23	CAPTAIN CAT Maggie Richards, Ricky Rhys...	3:49
24	FIRST VOICE People are moving now, up and down...	3:28
25	FIRST VOICE There's the clip clop of horses...	0:46
26	FIRST WOMAN Mrs Ogmores-Pritchard	1:01
27	FIRST VOICE Outside, the sun springs down...	1:32
28	FIRST VOICE And in Willy Nilly the Postman's dark...	2:34
29	SECOND VOICE ...herring gulls heckling down to the harbour...	2:07
30	FIRST VOICE The music of the spheres is heard distinctly...	2:33
31	POLLY GARTER I loved a man whose name was Tom...	3:44
32	FIRST VOICE And the morning school is over...	2:45
33	FIRST VOICE And the shrill girls giggle and muster around him...	1:46
34	GOSSAMER BEYNON I don't care if he <i>is</i> common...	1:14

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35	FIRST VOICE In the blind-drawn dark dining-room of School House...	3:33
36	FIRST VOICE Lord Cut-Glass, in his kitchen full of time...	4:41
37	FIRST VOICE Captain Cat, at his window...	4:12
38	FIRST VOICE The child says, and then she forgets him too.	1:19
39	SECOND VOICE The afternoon buzzes like lazy bees...	3:58
40	FIRST VOICE Now the town is dusk.	0:58
41	MR PRITCHARD You first, Mr Ogmore.	1:30
42	REV. ELI JENKINS Every morning, when I wake...	1:52
43	FIRST VOICE Dusk is drowned forever until tomorrow.	1:57
44	FIRST VOICE Blind Captain Cat climbs into his bunk.	0:57
45	FIRST VOICE Mr Mog Edwards and Miss Myfanwy Price...	1:16
46	FIRST VOICE The thin night darkens.	0:51

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**RETURN JOURNEY** *read by Dylan Thomas and cast*

47	NARRATOR It was a cold white day in the High Street...	4:58
48	NARRATOR I went out of the hotel into the snow...	6:02
49	NARRATOR And he hurried on, into the dervish snow...	5:23
50	NARRATOR The Hall is shattered...	5:55
51	NARRATOR Even now, on the frozen foreshore...	4:41

**QUITE EARLY ONE MORNING** *read by Dylan Thomas*

52	Quite early one morning in the winter in Wales...	3:19
53	The town was not yet awake.	3:16
54	And climbing down again and up out of the town...	3:01
55	Oh, the town was waking now...	2:57

**Total time: 2:12:15**

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## Cast list

First Voice	<b>Richard Burton</b>
Second Voice	<b>Richard Bebb</b>
Captain Cat	<b>Hugh Griffith</b>
Rosie Probert	
Mary Ann Sailors	
Mrs Dai Bread Two	<b>Rachel Roberts</b>
Mrs Willy Nilly	
Mae Rose Cottage	
Polly Garter	<b>Diana Maddox</b>
Mr Mog Edwards	<b>Dafydd Havard</b>
Myfanwy Price	<b>Sybil Williams</b>
Mrs Ogmores-Pritchard	<b>Dilys Davies</b>
Mr Ogmores	<b>David Close-Thomas</b>
Mr Pritchard	
Dai Bread	<b>Ben Williams</b>
Willy Nilly Postman	
Butcher Beynon	<b>Meredith Edwards</b>
Gossamer Beynon	<b>Gwenllian Owen</b>
The Rev. Eli Jenkins	<b>Philip Burton</b>
Mrs Dai Bread One	<b>Gwenyth Petty</b>
Mr Pugh	<b>John Huw Jones</b>
Mrs Pugh	<b>Mary Jones</b>
Sinbad Sailors	<b>Aubrey Richards</b>
Cherry Owen	<b>John Ormond Thomas</b>
Mrs Cherry Owen	<b>Lorna Davies</b>
Nogood Boyo	<b>Dillwyn Owen</b>
Organ Morgan	<b>John Glyn-Jones</b>
Mrs Organ Morgan	<b>Olwen Brookes</b>
Wenny	<b>Norma Jones</b>

The Three Boys: Ian Griffith, John Watts and Philip Cyster

Children's songs and singing game: the children of Laugharne School

Produced by Douglas Cleverdon. Recorded 24th January 1954. Broadcast and issued on LP 1954.

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# Dylan Thomas

# Under Milk Wood

## a short history

On 25 January 1954, the BBC's *Third Programme* broadcast a new 'Play for Voices' by the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, who had died suddenly two months earlier in New York. The work was called *Under Milk Wood*, and it was recognised instantly as something quite out of the ordinary, both in terms of the drama itself and the performance.

It presented, in a remarkably vivid, engagingly elliptical way, a portrait of a small Welsh town, Llareggub. Here was a 24-hour slice of a community cut through the strata of small-town life to bring the listener past the front doors, past the niceties, into the hearts and minds of the people themselves. We're let into their thoughts, memories and feelings with the outside world running its own concurrent existence.

Now, half a century after that first transmission, it has become a classic of radio, perhaps the greatest radio play ever – an unforgettable 'comedy of humours', as the

critic Kenneth Tynan called it. It was, without question, the pinnacle of creativity in British radio, coming at a time when the medium had not been marginalised by TV, when millions still gathered around their 'wireless' to listen as a family.

*Under Milk Wood* casts such a strong shadow over Dylan Thomas's work that, in the 21st century, it is easy to think that it emerged fully formed in a short space of time, a moment when writer, performers and medium met and gelled into a classic event. But this was not really the case. It was a very special event, certainly. Everyone who participated in that recording was aware that something special was taking place. It might have been partially fuelled by the dramatic circumstances: the recent death of Thomas himself, an unequivocal feeling that here was a script that was much more than just an ordinary 90-minute radio play, and the fact that Richard Burton, the young classical actor

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of the moment, led an outstanding cast. And there was a high-octane atmosphere in the studio itself for many reasons: five days of rehearsal had been set aside – an unusual length even in those days – and there was a fair amount of pre-recording (including children's voices from Dylan Thomas's hometown of Laugharne); by contrast, Richard Burton himself was only able to come to the final rehearsal because of Shakespearean commitments at the Old Vic; and while at least it was not a live broadcast – transmission was the following day – it was in the early days of tape, and editing opportunities were fairly minimal.

The sense of anticipation surrounding the occasion was underlined by the unusual interest of Harley Usill, far-sighted founder of the spoken-word record label Argo, who agreed even before the recording to release the broadcast as an LP. His judgement was unerring: it is said to have sold over two million units – on LP, tape and now CD – over the years.

Though sudden in its final appearance, *Under Milk Wood* was the culmination of a life's work for Dylan Thomas. It has been called the 'Welsh *Ulysses*', and Joyce's masterpiece

certainly did lay seeds in Thomas's mind. As early as 1932, in conversation with his mentor Bert Trick, Thomas mused about doing a 'Welsh *Ulysses*'; and there are clearly similarities: one town, 24 hours, the inner speech interwoven with exterior world, and the sense of everyday events as mythical. His word sense was also shot through with humour: it was as early as 1932 or 1933 that Thomas first came up with the name of Llareggub for the town. When Crick was surprised at such a Welsh word, Thomas advised him to read it backwards.

And it was as 'Llareggub', and later 'The Town That Was Mad', that the concept of 24 hours in a small town survived and mutated over the following two decades. Llareggub is in fact the name of a woman who appears in a stark story called *The Burning Baby* that Thomas had written in the 1930s; but there are many instances of words, names, phrases and, above all, atmospheres that first appear in stories, poems, scripts, letters and conversations before eventually reaching their final and finest form in *Under Milk Wood*.

Throughout the 1940s, Thomas played with the idea of 'Llareggub'. Initial sketches



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concentrated on painting pictures of the town and its inhabitants. Then he considered adding a storyline based on a Welsh town enclosed by barbed wire and called 'The Town That Was Mad'. He had mentioned that it was to be partially based on Laugharne, the Welsh sea town that he had made his home. Thomas even considered a play in which people of Laugharne would play themselves. 'They are so convinced that they're absolutely sane normal people. I think they'd be delighted to prove this on stage,' he told his friend, the writer Richard Hughes.

Parallel to his private life as a writer was Thomas's more public life – as a drinker and carouser, of course, but also as a performer. He began recording for the BBC in 1937, though the first broadcast was not auspicious: he forgot about the recording and had to be dragged out of a pub to a studio. He did not record again for nearly two years. But it was clear that he did have a natural and distinctive talent for reading poetry, particularly his own, but also that of others. Over the next few years his became an increasingly familiar voice on the wireless, and it extended beyond poetry as he began

to devise programmes of a different nature – observations on life and documentaries of all kinds. Though his broadcasting work was punctuated by his active social life, there was no doubting the charisma that crossed the airways.

Musing about Wales, especially the Wales of his youth, became quite a regular occupation. In 1943 he wrote *Reminiscences of Childhood* for the BBC Welsh Service, about Swansea. In 1944 he wrote and broadcast *Quite Early One Morning*, which presents his view of another Welsh town, New Quay. Here was the voice of the personal narrator, a foreshadowing of *Under Milk Wood*, both told in Thomas's idiosyncratic singing style:

Quite early one morning in the winter in Wales,  
by the sea that was lying down still and green as  
grass after a night of tar-black howling and rolling,  
I went out of the house where I had come to stay  
after a cold unseasonal holiday...

The town was not yet awake...

It is in *Quite Early One Morning* that Mrs Ogmore-Pritchard first appears, saying:

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'Before you let the sun in, mind he wipes his shoes,' one of the unforgettable lines in *Under Milk Wood*; also present are 'bombazine black' and 'the big seas of dreams', the kind of rich imagery that epitomises Dylan Thomas, Welsh no matter how he sounded, redolent of rhythm and chapel.

The following year, there was another affectionate look backwards at his childhood (perhaps more imaginary than true) in *Memories of Christmas*, which was broadcast on BBC Wales's *Children's Hour*. Shortly after this came *The London*: 'a day in the life of Mrs and Mrs Jackson, Ted and Lily, of number forty-nine Montrose Street, Shepherds Bush, London, W12'. This mixed narration with fantasy, and in form, if not Welsh content, it was an important precursor of *Under Milk Wood*. Thomas's biographer Andrew Lycett, in *Dylan Thomas: A New Life*, points out that in the same year, Edward Sackville-West asked, in the *New Statesman* 'why this remarkable poet had never attempted a poetic drama for broadcasting'.

With the benefit of hindsight, an unmistakable head of steam was gradually building. In 1947 came *Return Journey to*

*Swansea*, which steps even closer to *Under Milk Wood*. Here, personal narration and short character scenes are intermingled effectively and naturally. It is full of wit – sometimes against the narrator himself with his 'cut-glass accent' – and poetry, of course. The character interpolations have that immediacy which makes the form so successful in its more famous incarnation.

*Return Journey* also demonstrated how an atmospheric, descriptive piece could stand on its own with the slimmest of plots or driving storyline. Here, the unifying thread is a search for a lost time. Thomas was not to abandon the idea of a plot for *Under Milk Wood* for some time, but he was firmly in control of the medium of radio broadcasting.

In 1949 he sent a poem, *Over St John's Hill*, to an Italian literary magazine, *Botteghe Oscure*. This published work in Italian and English and was run by Marguerite Caetani, Princess di Bassiano. It was the first contact between the two and the poem's publication was to result in other collaborations. In 1952, very short of money, Thomas sent the first half of a script entitled *Llareggub: A Play for Radio Perhaps*, asking her, desperately, for £100.

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It didn't contain a trace of what he still thought would be the plot – a town enclosed by barbed wire – but was just an evocation of a town and its people. The storyline would come, he thought.

The script had advanced with the support and help of the BBC producer Douglas Cleverdon. Initially, 'The Town That Was Mad', as discussed by Thomas and Cleverdon in 1950, was to have a storyline involving a town that was certified mad under post-war legislation. The townspeople would have to prove their sanity in court, cross-examined by blind Captain Cat. But none of this appeared in the script sent to *Botteghe Oscure*.

Cleverdon had already worked with Dylan Thomas, recording Thomas's own poetry and also that of Milton. His role over the next three years until its first performance was crucial – teasing out the script from an increasingly ailing Thomas, guarding it, and finally bringing it into brilliant daylight through the original BBC recording (and a second recording some years later). Without Cleverdon, it would probably not have happened. At one point Cleverdon (a former bookseller in Bristol) even tried to get the notoriously unreliable Thomas a job at the

BBC, when the poet was in even greater financial straits than normal. He asked that Thomas be put on the payroll for six weeks so that he could finish *Under Milk Wood*. When this was deemed unacceptable, he suggested paying Thomas five guineas per thousand words (at this point, a series was being discussed) and if it were not finished he, Cleverdon, would cover the payments from his own salary. Ultimately this was not necessary, but the commitment shown by Cleverdon was exceptional.

Equally important in the genesis of *Under Milk Wood* were Thomas's American contacts. In 1950 Thomas made his first trip to the USA and became a hit on the poetry-reading circuit. His presence, his reading manner and his poetry combined to create an impact in a similar way as happened with Oscar Wilde seventy years before. One of his principal champions and supporters was John Brinnin, a poet himself but also director of the Poetry Center at the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association in New York: the YM-YWHA society. He invited Thomas to read there and to organise further readings. Brinnin was to play a much greater role than simply a facilitator: it was his

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encouragement in New York (and sometimes in the UK) combined with Cleverdon's efforts in London that ensured the completion of *Under Milk Wood*.

In September 1952 Brinnin met Thomas in a pub in North London. It was there, during a discussion about programme options for another American tour, that 'Llareggub' was mentioned. It would provide, Brinnin suggested, a very different evening from that of a poetry selection: how was it going? Thomas said he could have it nearly ready by March in time for a performance by May. This would give American actors a chance to get to grips with the parts. It was also in this conversation that Thomas suggested a different title – 'Under Milk Wood' – as 'Llareggub' might be a bit obscure for American audiences. And so it became.

In April 1953 Thomas sailed for New York. He was met by Elizabeth Reitell, nominally assistant to Brinnin at the Poetry Center, but a well-connected and no-nonsense New Yorker. It was her job to make *Under Milk Wood* happen – which meant ensuring that it was written and that a cast was there, rehearsed, to perform it.

Thomas fulfilled various poetry and lecture

engagements in Boston, all the while working on the script. He gave the first solo reading of *Under Milk Wood* in Harvard on 3 May and continued a busy series of appearances. A week before the scheduled performance at the Poetry Center he rehearsed with the cast, making small changes to the script: Butcher Beynon chased after 'squirrels' rather than 'corgis' with his cleaver – changes meant for America only. He encouraged the actors with 'Love the words, love the words'.

He was still travelling constantly, reading poetry, addressing students and living on the edge. The day before the first performance, Thomas was in Boston. He came back into New York by train on the morning of Thursday 14 May and arrived in time for a rehearsal. He then made other small alterations to the script, working it into presentable form.

Elizabeth Reitell, in a talk called *Portrait of Dylan Thomas* given on the BBC's *Third Programme* in November 1963, recalled:

The curtain was going to rise at 8.40pm. Well, at 8.10 Dylan was locked in the backroom with me. And no end to *Under Milk Wood*. He kept saying 'I can't, I simply can't do this.' I said, 'You can, the curtain is going to go up.' Strangely enough, he wrote the

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very end of *Under Milk Wood* then and there, and he wrote the lead-up to it. He would scribble it down, I would copy it, print it so that the secretary could read it, hand it to John Brinnin, and hand it to the secretary, to do six copies. We all jumped into a cab finally and got over to the theatre at half-past eight and handed out the six copies to the actors.

He rushed through an ending – which became the final ending. At 8.40pm, he walked onto the stage with five American actors, and the premiere of *Under Milk Wood* was underway. Thomas read the First Voice, the Reverend Eli Jenkins and other small parts while the American cast shared the rest, performing in a mixture of English and attempts at Welsh – all with an unmistakable New York twang. The spoken-word publishing company Caedmon, who had already released LPs of Thomas, was on hand with a single microphone and an ordinary tape machine to record the event.

It was a success. It was fresh, inventive and entertaining. There were 14 curtain calls and a second reading some days later at the Poetry Center. By the time Thomas returned to the UK, news of the success had preceded him, and his agent David Higham

and Cleverdon were both keen to ensure a prominent English premiere.

*Under Milk Wood* was still not finished. Thomas, back in Laugharne with his family, continued to work on it while also working on a BBC programme, the long-term project of an opera with Igor Stravinsky (whom he had met in America), and various poems. In September he was back in London to prepare for a flight to New York. He visited Cleverdon on 15 September carrying the handwritten manuscript of *Under Milk Wood*. Cleverdon immediately set a secretary to type it out, returning it to the author afterwards. The following day, Thomas rang Cleverdon in a panic, saying that he had lost the manuscript somewhere. Fortunately, Cleverdon was able to say that he could provide a copy for him to take to New York. Some days later, after Thomas had already left, Cleverdon tracked down the manuscript in a Soho pub.

Thomas took part in two further performances of *Under Milk Wood* at Kaufmann Auditorium sponsored by the Poetry Center on 24 and 25 October. Again, he made certain small changes to the text to accommodate American speech ('gypsies' were substituted for 'gyppos') and shortly

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after he celebrated his 39th birthday, on 27 October. Engagements, parties and a lot of drinking followed – and he fell ill. On 5 November he lapsed into a coma and he died in hospital on 9 November.

Plans for the BBC recording of *Under Milk Wood* had already been made. *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* had been through many guises in the 20 years since the first germ of an idea mentioned to Bert Trick, but for much of that time it was seen as a play for radio. Radio was such a prominent part of Thomas's life – not least as a source of income – that he repeatedly emphasised the medium for which it was designed.

He sold early drafts to *Botteghe Oscure*, at his death he was working on an abridged form for the American magazine *Mademoiselle*, and on his return from the first performance in the Poetry Center his agent and the publishers Dent discussed bringing it out in book form.

Meanwhile, Cleverdon was assiduously and determinedly ensuring that it would be heard on radio. The death of Thomas did not deter him. The BBC could draw on experienced radio voices from BBC Wales for the character parts. Daniel Jones, the Welsh

composer, close friend of Thomas and his literary trustee, was commissioned to prepare the music and children from Laugharne to sing the songs in pre-recorded sessions.

In his authoritative book on *Under Milk Wood – The Growth of Under Milk Wood* – Cleverdon says unequivocally: 'Had Dylan lived he would have taken the part of the First Voice in the broadcast productions.' The favourite to take his place was Richard Burton, the young Welsh star (fortunately in London where *Under Milk Wood* was to be recorded) in the Old Vic's Shakespeare season. Cleverdon finalised the script, incorporating some of the changes made by Thomas in New York, and sent it to the Director General of the BBC for censorship clearance. It was deemed fit to record in its entirety though in the end a few words were cut.

The music was recorded on 15 and 16 January at Laugharne School. The introduction of tape some years before enabled these children's songs to be pre-recorded and mixed in later – but most of the sound effects were done live in the studio at the time of the recording.

Five days of rehearsals were scheduled – an unusually long period even for those

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relaxed days – from Wednesday 20 January to Sunday 24 January. Burton was playing Hamlet at night and rehearsing Coriolanus during the day so he hadn't time to attend rehearsals. In his book Cleverdon says that he pre-recorded Burton reading the narration and used this recording during rehearsals; but Richard Bebb, who read Second Voice, denies this (see Richard Bebb's account). Perhaps Cleverdon confused this recording with the 1963 version that he made subsequently. However, Burton did join the cast on Sunday morning for the final rehearsal, and the recording in the afternoon. It was clearly a hugely creative time, but also fraught. Daniel Jones, as literary trustee, refused to allow a few extra speeches, written by Thomas in New York, to be incorporated in the BBC performance, despite pleas by Cleverdon. They have since been reinstated in the 'definitive' edition of the play.

The other major difference between the BBC broadcast version and the 'definitive' edition is the use of First Voice and Second Voice. Thomas clearly split the part of the narrator between two actors for the BBC version that he handed to Cleverdon before travelling to New York. According to Bebb,

this was not for any textual or dramatic reason, but because it was part of an unspoken tradition within BBC Radio to try to employ as many actors as possible. In all the performances given by Thomas himself, and in subsequent recordings, and in virtually all performances, there has always been only one narrator.

The cast was a mixture of professional and semi-professional, even amateur, actors. At the heart was a core of professional actors, most of whom were highly experienced in the special art of radio performance. Richard Burton was already the leading young actor of his day. Nurtured by his adopted father Philip Burton (a school teacher turned radio producer and occasional actor), Richard had been a child actor and, despite being relatively young at this stage, knew the ins and outs of a radio studio like an old professional. It was this that enabled him to feel relatively confident in stepping in to do First Voice with virtually no rehearsal. He found it a tougher task than he had imagined, but was able to draw on his radio experience and natural talent to produce one of the most charismatic performances in radio history. Another especially vivid performance came

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from Hugh Griffith, an established figure who effectively used his gravelly voice to create an unsurpassable blind Captain Cat.

Bebb, another young Welsh actor, had just joined the BBC Radio Rep. – that changing group of actors who expect to be called in at any moment to read a letter, a quote, play Romeo or a part in a modern drama. Versatility, quick thinking, natural talent and an awareness of the microphone as a friend are the requisites for a job with the BBC Radio Rep., which still exists. He read the part of Second Voice.

Gwenyth Petty was a young actress based in BBC Wales, and, with many of her colleagues, came up to London to take part in this production.

I was in Cardiff when I remember being told that there was a production being planned for the Third Programme. It would mean a week in London. I was pleased because my boyfriend was a medical student at St Thomas's. There was a lot of traffic between the BBC Rep. in Wales and London. I went into Studio 2 and there was Douglas Cleverdon with the script spread out on the grand piano. We had no idea the impact that work would have.

Petty read for Cleverdon and was invited to London to join the cast of *Under Milk Wood*, playing Lily Smalls and Mrs Dai Bread One. In that first BBC recording also was Sybil Williams, Burton's wife, a gifted actress in her own right – she played Myfanwy Price.

The BBC recording used a varied cast to create a rich soundscape of a Welsh fishing village. There were experienced professionals, such as Hugh Griffith who played Captain Cat, and Rachel Roberts. Many of the other actors were, strictly speaking, amateurs in that they earned their living in other ways. One example was the aforementioned Philip Burton, who recited the poetry of the Reverend Eli Jenkins with aplomb. These semi-professionals or amateurs appeared regularly on BBC Wales and knew how to create and project distinct characters.

All these different strands came together to make a legendary recording. From its first broadcast on 25 January 1954 it was acknowledged as something extraordinary and it established *Under Milk Wood* as a classic, to be repeated many times a year for many years. Though it may have found its perfect milieu, it wasn't long before stage versions appeared. Cleverdon was involved in



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the first UK stage production which opened at the Theatre Royal, Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 13 August 1956 and then travelled to the Edinburgh Festival. The parts of First Voice and Second Voice were brought together and played by Donald Houston. The production reached London in September and played for seven months. Cleverdon then directed the first US stage production which opened on Broadway at the Henry Miller Theatre on 15 October 1956.

In 1963, Cleverdon made a second recording of the play for the BBC. The intention was to present a 'full version' reinstating speeches which Jones had refused to allow in 1954. Once again, Cleverdon turned to Richard Burton as the single narrator. Some of the original cast came back, but sometimes in different parts. Hugh Griffith was Captain Cat again; Gwenyth Petty played Rosie Probert and reprised Lily Smalls; Rachel Thomas, who had played Rosie Probert, earlier switched to Mrs Pugh and reprised Mrs Willy Nilly. But while it may have been textually more correct, and had improved technical standards, this second BBC recording couldn't match the spirit and magic of that first recording.

Burton later made a video recording of *Under Milk Wood*. Anthony Hopkins and a carefully chosen cast, produced by George Martin, then made a brave attempt at putting a different, modern spin on it for another commercial recording in the 1980s.

However, despite certain raw moments, audible edits, and sonic limitations of the period, the original 1954 recording remains by far the one to hear. It is one of those rare occasions when the greatness of the work is matched, not just served, by the greatness of the performance – and fortunately, the BBC microphones were on hand to record it.

**By Nicolas Soames**

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**Richard Bebb** was 27 and a new member of the BBC Radio Repertory Company when he joined the cast for the recording of *Under Milk Wood*. Coincidentally, he had been sent the script just before he had joined. Here, he remembers the events of half a century ago.

‘Dylan Thomas wrote the First Voice unquestionably for himself. He was a magnificent broadcaster with an outstanding voice. The main narration was divided into two, just to give an extra job to an actor – that was the tradition of the Features Department as opposed to the Drama Department of the BBC. The controls over the Features Department were much looser than they were over the Drama Department. If you worked for features you would very often find that two or three members had been added to the cast over lunch – some actors down on their luck had been met in some pub or other and brought back and we all gave them a few lines. That was the whole tradition of features: to use as many actors as possible. That’s why Dylan Thomas divided the narration into two voices, but there’s no question that he was planning to do the narration before he died.

‘When Dylan Thomas died in New York, the BBC radio production was already scheduled to be broadcast in January. Now, the removal of Dylan Thomas as the narrator meant that the obvious person to do Voice 1 was Richard Burton. The snag was that Richard Burton was the leading man at the Old Vic at the time, alongside John Neville, and they were alternating all the great parts. In this particular week Richard was playing Hamlet and rehearsing Coriolanus which meant that there was no way he could get to any of the rehearsals. The first rehearsal that he was able to attend was on Sunday morning, 24th January, when we had to record it in the afternoon at 2pm for broadcast the following day.

‘He was told, as I was told, that we must not use a Welsh accent. Dylan, though he had Welsh rhythm in his voice and could call up a Welsh accent if he wanted to for a reading of some short story about Wales, he nonetheless in his ordinary speech, as his many, many recordings demonstrate, showed no trace of a Welsh accent. So Douglas Cleverdon, the director, in fact thought that the narration should be done without a Welsh accent, though all the

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myriad number of parts in the play would be done with Welsh accents. That was what I was told from the very first rehearsal. And that's how I rehearsed it.

'I was then in the strange position of reading the whole of *First Voice* and *Second Voice* throughout five days of rehearsal, because Richard was not there and various cues needed to be given and so in the four days that I had this masterpiece in my hands I did all the rehearsals. To some extent, the material by the end of that time I had made mine. And it was an almost intolerable thing for me to know that on the very last day somebody else, albeit my friend Richard Burton, was going to come in and take over more than half my part – it was an agony because I knew from the first time I read the script that this was the greatest radio play that had ever been written and that ever would be written. It is a work of unmitigated genius and a great, great comedy. I felt it was rather like being asked to create the role of Hamlet in the full knowledge that on the opening night somebody was going to walk in and take away the soliloquies from me.

'So, I have to say in my praise that I am

an unjealous person, but on that occasion I was seething with jealousy. I'd worked with Richard three or four times in radio and knew him because we were both Welsh boys who'd gone to Oxford and Cambridge and had been discovered and supported by the greatest Welsh actor of the time Emlyn Williams – he had picked Richard up as a 10-year-old boy and brought him to London to appear in a play, and he encouraged him ever after, and he put me into the theatre – so we had a lot in common. And without being in any way close friends, we liked each other. But there he was sitting at the other side of the microphone and I could have killed him.

'Anyway, we started the rehearsal and Douglas Cleverdon, a small man to whom we owe very much the final years of the gestation of *Under Milk Wood*, came down to the studio and said, "Remember boys, no Welsh accent, right?" So Richard said "yes".

'Now, Richard was under intolerable strain, there is no question about it – playing Hamlet, which is not a small part, and rehearsing *Coriolanus* during the day, which is one of the most difficult Shakespearean roles, is enough for any man. And it was

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patently obvious that he had barely read the script. I have rarely seen a professional actor more at sea than he was throughout what was the final rehearsal. He was correcting himself, he was trying to hieroglyph the script to hit the right words – he gave the impression that he had never even read it. Richard was a very experienced broadcaster because his mentor, who had adopted him and given him the name of Burton, was in fact a schoolmaster but gave that up and during the war was a radio producer in Cardiff: obviously when they needed a young boy to do anything it was always Richard. So from an early age he was used to radio. And I think that possibly he thought he could get away with this without having done any work on it. But he was in a real mess and he looked despairingly at me at times, shrugging his shoulders and throwing his hands up in the air at his own inefficiency.

‘We got to the end of it and Douglas said that we would break for lunch and would be back here by 10 to 2 because we must be ready to start the recording at 2 pm.

‘I went off and had some sandwiches for

lunch but Richard stayed in the studio because he knew he was in trouble. And he didn’t go out for anything: we left him there and he was in exactly the same place when we came back.

‘Now, he’d had the time to do some of it – by no means all – but he had done some remedial work. We started the recording and to my utter amazement – and I am not even sure to this day, though I’ve thought about it often and I do not think it was deliberate – he opened his mouth for the first words and he said “To begin at the beginning,” and he went Welsh: deep, deep throaty Welsh. And he gave, there is no question about it, a magnificent performance, and it was so good because of the intense nervous stress he was under when he was recording it. I am not even sure in my own mind whether he even knew he had gone Welsh. I think his defences were down and he just did it. And this left me in the most awkward of all positions.

‘I was a new member of the BBC repertory company hoping to establish myself in radio, working with the most distinguished producer in radio features, much the most highly thought of, so

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what was I to do? I had been instructed by him throughout a week's rehearsal to speak my part without a trace of a Welsh accent. Should I throw my career away by disobeying this very influential man? What was I to do? I turned round to the control room. You could see the people there, the engineers, Douglas, the secretaries and so on, and nobody was looking into the studio – they were all bent over, looking at their scripts. I made frantic signals, trying not to disturb Richard's view or put him off, to say what was I to do. But there was no contact so, I thought, I just can't do a Welsh accent here. The first two speeches I did exactly as Douglas had instructed me to do them. And they sounded so ridiculous to me the moment I had opened my mouth that I thought, "there is nothing to do about it – I must go Welsh". So on the recording which so many people know, you will hear that the first two speeches of Voice 2 are done in an English accent and the rest of it in Welsh.

'Douglas never commented after the recording was over that this was done. Everybody was in tremendous praise for Richard because everybody knew how terrible he had been in the morning and

how ill-prepared, and what a magnificent performance he gave. We then went off at 4.30 to the Globe theatre to rehearse 25 minutes of *Under Milk Wood* in a semi-staged performance, which was part of a homage to Dylan Thomas, with Emlyn Williams, Richard Burton, Hugh Griffith and I think Edith Evans, though I am not 100 per cent sure. That was the story of the recording.

'But there is an interesting thing in Douglas Cleverdon's book. He wrote a book called *The Growth of Under Milk Wood*, very scholarly and detailed. And in this he says: "As Richard Burton was rehearsing at the Old Vic every weekday I pre-recorded his narration on the Sunday before so that I could use the discs for rehearsals and he could attend the final rehearsals and recording on Sunday 24th January." Now, I do not believe that that is true. I don't want to rubbish Richard Burton in any kind of way: I liked him very much and admired him greatly. But if you had been opposite him as I was you would know he had never read that script before. He didn't know how the sentences were going to end! And certainly no recording of his voice was

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heard by anybody from the first rehearsal onwards. I did all the readings. If Cleverdon had already done the recording at least we could have heard the opening big soliloquy, but we never heard anything. So I do not believe that statement is true. It is probably there to cover the situation of having left it to the last moment for your leading man to come in.

‘The rest of the cast had almost all the Welsh actors who were extant. But extraordinarily, very few of them were professionals. I can’t remember exactly how many there were altogether, but it was around 25, and of those only nine were fully professional – because the tradition of broadcasting in Wales was that most of the actors, excellent though they were, were in fact semi-professionals. They were broadcasters, but they all of them in Wales had other jobs. There were schoolmasters, garage owners, solicitors – I can think of innumerable different professions. Many were professionals, such as Meredith Edwards, John Glyn Jones, Hugh Griffith, of course, as Captain Cat, and Diana Maddox as Polly Garter – and Philip Burton I suppose you could call a professional actor, though

he had been a schoolmaster and was then a radio producer... but most of the others were Welsh amateurs. They were excellent, no question about it. But it is interesting that this epoch-making production was largely cast from semi-professionals.

‘Halfway through the week of rehearsals there was a pause and into the studio came a very civilised and delightful man called Harley Usill, who was head of the Argo record company which was a subsidiary of Decca. They specialised in literary recordings and they had done the complete Shakespeare and a huge series of English poetry for the British Council. He came in and said that he had read the script of *Under Milk Wood* and he knew it was going to be a sensation when it was broadcast. Now, Dylan had only died in November and here we were in January and the family had no money. The event that we were going on to after the recording, the homage to Dylan Thomas, was arranged entirely for the benefit of the family, just so that they could pay a few bills because he died absolutely penniless.

‘Harley Usill said he was certain that this was going to be a major success and that

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the Argo record company would like to make LPs and sell them for the benefit of the family: would the cast agree to signing away any kind of recording rights to the Argo company so that all the profits could go to the family. And that's what everybody did. We signed contracts for nothing. The amusing thing is that several years later I discovered that there was one exception to the people who had agreed to forgo their rights: that was Hugh Griffith. Canny, North Walian as he was, from Anglesey, he had signed away his rights for five years. And so he made a very great deal of money after the five-year period was up. There was no question about it: it was a worldwide success. And it sold, I have been told, well over two million copies.

'If Dylan Thomas hadn't died in November, would he have been the sole narrator?

'No: I saw the original manuscript. Douglas had it when it was passed over to Daniel Jones, the composer of the music who was Dylan Thomas's literary executor. It was written as First Voice and Second Voice. It was entirely because of this "features" tradition that if you could make two jobs

out of one part you did it.

'Certainly it was originally conceived as a single narrator. There was no sense in having two narrators. Interestingly enough it was rebroadcast over a 10 or 15-year period, two or three times a year. It has received more broadcasts than any other programme, I think.

'Then somebody decided they ought to do a new production with Richard Burton, and they dispensed with the second voice. He did the whole thing, and oddly enough the whole thing is as dead as a dodo. It just has none of the magic. And the magic I genuinely believe came from the terror he was in. I believe he really dug very deep into his talent.

'I was beginning to work quite frequently in Cardiff. The Welsh are a wonderful race and I am desperately fond of them, but they are very emotional and the loyalties and the hatreds that existed in Welsh radio and later television were myriad. I went down about six or seven weeks after having done *Under Milk Wood*, expecting to be slightly fêted because of my association with this production, to discover that the whole of the BBC in Cardiff was

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absolutely outraged by the programme because they considered it a total slur on the Welsh nation. I was considered a traitor to have taken part in it.

‘By 1954, tape was being used in radio drama making editing possible – you couldn’t edit acetate recordings. Before that time all broadcast was live. During the recording of *Under Milk Wood*, there were retakes. Even though Richard gave this wonderful performance, in some of the speeches there were mistakes. I am sure I fluffed bits myself out of the nervous excitement. But it went out the following evening so there was very little time...’

‘Many of the sound effects were done in the studio, but there was a lot of pre-recording. Certainly the children’s voices had all actually been recorded at Laugharne school – where Dylan lived – before we started rehearsing. The songs were written and arranged by Daniel Jones, an uncomfortable character who was tremendously emotional about Dylan Thomas’s death and very conscious of his power as the literary executor. He refused to allow certain things that Dylan had written for the New York reading – additional

things, which were absolutely wonderful – to be included in the script because they were not in Dylan’s manuscript as delivered to the BBC. They were all put back in Richard Burton’s second recording of *Under Milk Wood*.

‘I have to say that I did it for schools’ radio in three parts, with a different cast, about six years later. It had all the really rude bits cut out. I did the whole of the narration so I do have the satisfaction of saying I have done it. But nothing quite matches that first recording... there is no doubt about that.’





**Richard Burton** (1925–1984), one of Britain's most successful film stars from the 1960s to his death, started his career as a child actor in radio. Nurtured by Philip Burton, a school-teacher turned radio producer (which the boy recognised by taking the name of Burton) he quickly established himself on the Shakespearean stage as a strongly charismatic figure. While his stage and screen career grew, Burton always had time for radio and audiobooks, making many records of English poetry for Argo. While he became a media figure with his turbulent relationship with Elizabeth Taylor, he will perhaps be principally remembered for this recording of *Under Milk Wood*.



**Richard Bebb** (1927–2006) was educated at Highgate School and Trinity College, Cambridge. He became an actor in 1947 in Michael Redgrave's *Macbeth* and then spent two years in repertory at Buxton and Croydon, where he met his future wife, the late Gwen Watford. They married in 1952 and had two sons.

From 1950 he worked regularly in all the theatrical media. He appeared in a handful of West End plays, over a thousand broadcasts, including sharing the narration with Richard Burton in the BBC recording of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and also almost 200 television plays, including Alan Bennett's *A Question of Attribution*; among other television appearances were *Barchester Towers* and Agatha Christie's *A Murder Has Been Announced*. His one important film appearance was as the successful cricketer in Terence Rattigan's *The Final Test*.

He owned the largest collection of historic 78s of opera singers in England and lectured at Yale, Harvard, Princetown and the Smithsonian on theatrical and musical subjects. He discovered the unknown cylinder recordings of Sir Henry Irving.

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Cover picture: Dylan Thomas in the garden of The Boat House, Laugharne, 1953

John Idris Jones

Courtesy of The Mary Evans Picture Library

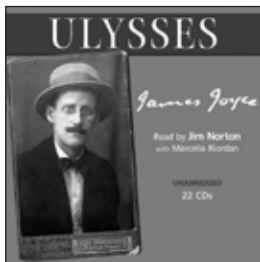
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