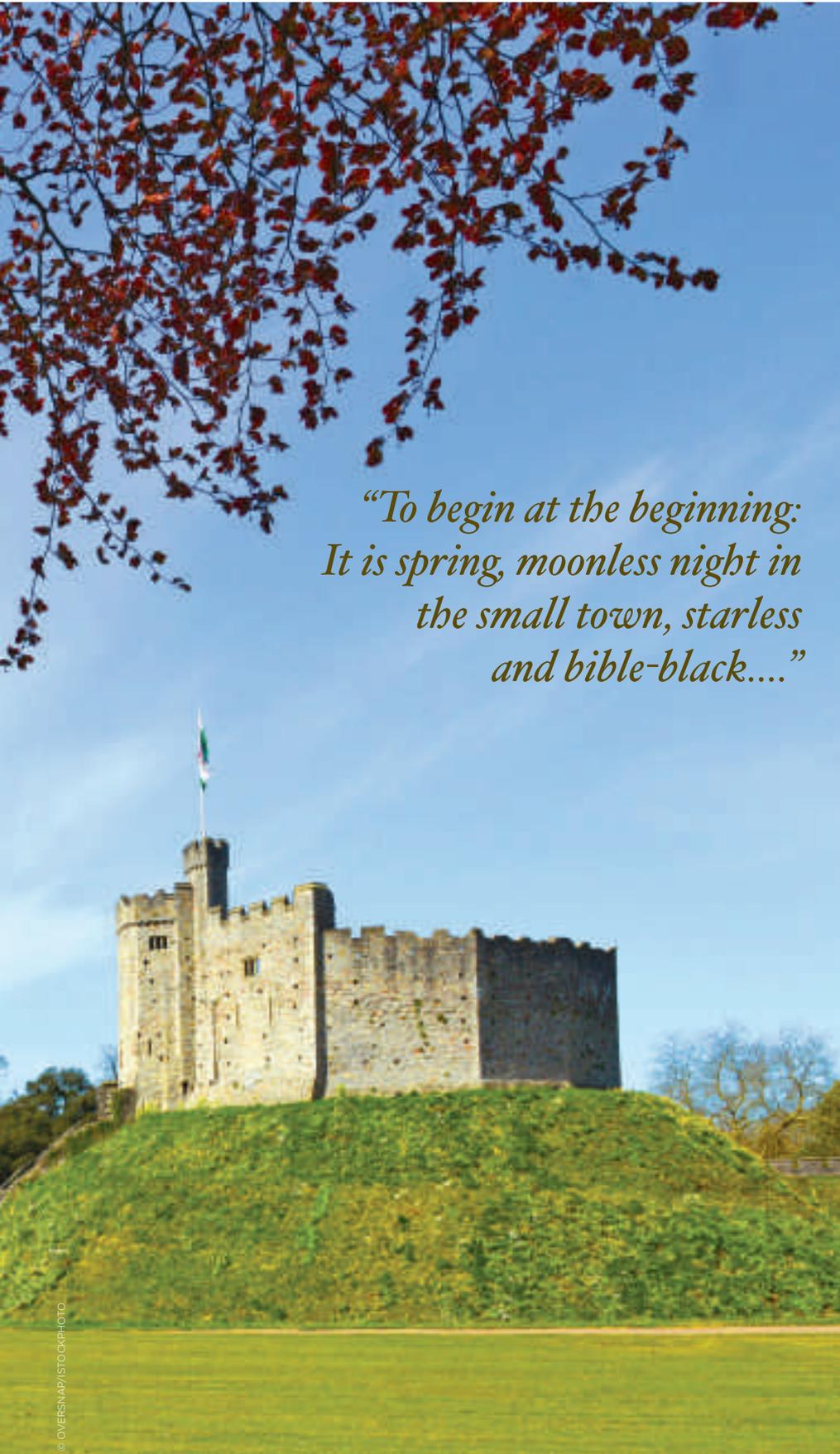


A POETIC LAND

– Wales Celebrates
Dylan Thomas

Chris Robinson



*“To begin at the beginning:
It is spring, moonless night in
the small town, starless
and bible-black....”*

And so begins *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas - one of the most well-known poetic pictures in English literature. Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) is acknowledged as the greatest Welsh poet of the 20th century. His original, rhythmic and melodious use of words and imagery conjures visions of people and places like few others. Prince Charles recently observed, “One of the great legacies of Thomas’ poetry is that it inspires people to appreciate the incomparable landscapes of Wales.”

Yet the places upon which the fictional small Welsh fishing village of Llareggub in *Under Milk Wood* were based remain little known and little visited by North Americans. As is also the case with many of the other exquisitely beautiful places in Wales that come to life in Dylan Thomas’ poetry. This year all that may be about to change as the travel spotlight illuminates this fascinating land of poets and warriors. For 2014 is the centenary of Dylan Thomas’ birth and it will be celebrated by a yearlong cultural festival throughout Wales – “Dylan Thomas 100”.

*Over Sir John’s hill,
The hawk on fire hangs still;
In a hoisted cloud, at drop of dusk, he pulls to
his claws
And gallows, up the rays of his eyes the small
birds of the bay*

My journey to Dylan Thomas’s Wales begins in the little town of Laugharne, in the southwest of the country, on the coast of Carmarthenshire. This was the place that provided him with a constant source of inspiration. He lived at the Boathouse in Laugharne for the last four years of his life during which time many major pieces of work were written - including *Under Milk Wood* and the lines above. Set in a cliff overlooking the expansive Taf Estuary, the Boathouse offers visitors a time trip back to a moment in the poet’s life when a stable family life combined with his own window on a scene of exquisite beauty allowed the words to flow from his pen. It’s as though I am with him in his old writing shed breathing in the silvery air of the estuary.

*“Pale rain over the dwindling harbour
And over the sea wet church the size of a snail
With its horns through mist and the castle
Brown as owls”*

Laugharne is on the newly opened Wales Coastal Path, the world’s first uninterrupted route along a national coast. This



The Dylan Thomas Boatouse

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1,400 kilometre trail encompasses beaches, estuaries, cliffs, woodlands and hills. It links these natural wonders with city waterfronts, historic castles...and several of the stops on the Dylan Thomas Trail. I take an afternoon's blustery hike on part of the trail in the far southwest of the country to experience the wild coastal wonders that are so much a part of a trip to Wales.

Nestled in valleys curling down to the sea are some gorgeous sights. St David's Cathedral was founded 1,500 years ago in the Dark Ages and is the smallest cathedral

city in the country – but with the finest views. Even smaller and more romantic is St Govan's Chapel near Bosherton. To visit this tiny chapel I clamber down a fissure in the coastal cliff face and brave attacks by outraged seabirds.

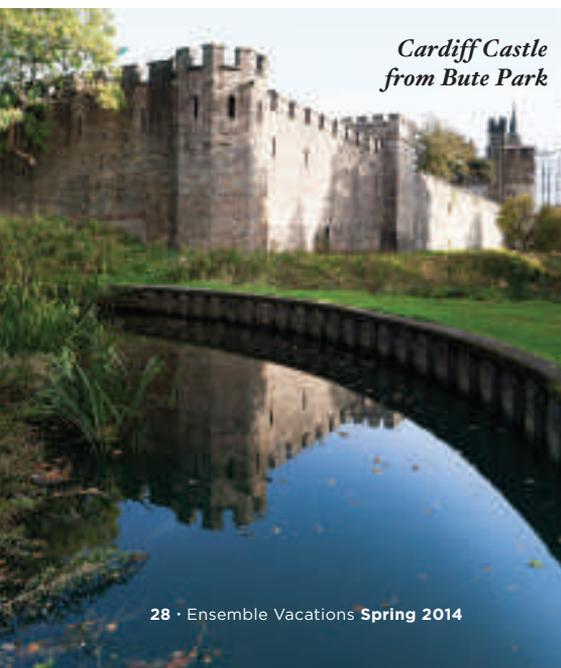
On around the coast to another Dylan Thomas location: New Quay. This delightful seaside town makes claims, along with Laugharne, to be the model for "Under Milk Wood". His favourite pub in town was the Black Lion. I nestle into a dark corner with a tasty local ale, and I can indeed see Thomas's characters come to life as the evening shadows lengthen. I dine in 'Dylan's Restaurant', surrounded by Dylan Thomas memorabilia.

*"All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the bay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery
And fire green as grass."*

Exploring the Carmarthenshire countryside where Thomas spent some of his happiest years, I trace the passage of time and peoples through the landscape. Pentre Ifan is an atmospheric megalithic burial chamber with a huge capstone poised on three massive upright stones. It dates back to 3500 BC and it punctuates a ridge above the Nevern Valley. Close by here is where the great blocks of Stonehenge were hewn. The Romans were here too... at Dolaucothi I explore a Roman gold mine tucked away in a fold in the hills. Cilgerran Castle is an imposing reminder of the efforts of the Normans to subdue the Britons/Welsh. It stands on a precipitous, craggy promontory overlooking the river Teifi and is as romantic a ruined castle as any you will find on the Rhine. And I find time to simply roam the Welsh hillsides, the "fields high as the house".

Wales has a poetic tradition stretching back into the mists of time. For this is the land of the true Britons - where the British

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Cardiff Castle from Bute Park



retreated west into the mountains in the face of Romans and Anglo-Saxon invasions. Even the place names reek of poetry. The well-known Anglesey village of *Ianfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch* translates to the lyrical “Mary’s Church in the hollow of the white hazel near the rapid whirlpool and the church of Tysilio with a red cave”. The *Eisteddfod* has grown from this Bardic tradition and is a festival of literature, music and performance celebrated at national and very local venues.

There has been a resurgence of Welsh pride and confidence as the modern country voted in a 1997 referendum to create The National Assembly for Wales. The Assembly possesses the power to govern Wales internally. I love the strong, positive attitude that is clear in so many of my conversations around the towns and villages – conversations that come very easily and unbidden in this part of the world.

And now this resurgence of “Welshness” is putting the country more prominently on travel itineraries. Cardiff, the capital of the country, is just a two hour train journey from London. Cardiff itself has been reborn as a 21st century city that has reconnected with its waterfront. Here I juxtapose the old and new. First a tour of Cardiff Castle, with its two thousand years of history spanning Roman walls, medieval halls and nineteenth century palace. Then a must-visit attraction for all Tardis fans: the Doctor Who Experience, where you can take an interactive journey with the Doctor on a rollicking adventure through time and space. Somehow this seems to aptly mirror the similar journey I have taken with Dylan Thomas through the glorious landscapes and people of Wales.

On the train back to London I cross the Severn Estuary that separates Wales from England and I listen to the evocative recording of *Under Milk Wood* with Richard Burton as the Narrator. It describes the scenes, dreams and lives of Llareggub. Dylan Thomas had a wicked sense of humour: Llareggub is ‘bugger all’ spelt backwards. But his words bring to life a people and a country that beg to be visited in this, his centenary year.



Ensemble Experts Suggest

Air Canada has multiple daily scheduled flights and **Air Transat** has daily charter flights to London, which is just two hours by train or three hours by rental car from Cardiff. **Transat Holidays**, **Trafalgar Tours** and **Insight Vacations** have UK coach tour itineraries that include Wales.

Literature Wales has a literary tour program for 2014 that focuses on Dylan Thomas during his centenary year. A Dylan Odyssey offers 23 one-off extraordinary experiences www.literaturewales.org/dylan-thomas-x2014.

The Dylan Thomas Trail runs through places associated with the poet in west Wales: www.newquay-westwales.co.uk/trail.htm. For planning your trip to Wales I recommend www.americas.visitwales.com as a great place to start and for Dylan Thomas events and celebrations go to www.dylanthomas100.org.