

How did Dylan Thomas help Britain's wartime propaganda?

Video transcript: 'An aggressive pacifist'

Ifor ap Glyn:

Dylan Thomas's attitude to the war was riven with contradictions, and in order to begin to understand them, we need to look at his politics. One major influence on his political outlook when he was growing up in Swansea in the 1930s was his friendship with the communist sympathiser, and grocer, Bert Trick.

Dylan would often call at Bert's greengrocer's shop, here in Brynmill in Swansea, and in the flat above the shop, they would "plot the annihilation of the ruling classes", as he put it, over blancmange and jelly, supplied by Bert's wife.

Dylan described himself at the time as "a socialist but an unconventional one". However, by the time of the outbreak of the war, his politics if anything were even harder to define.

This is what he wrote to Bert Trick in September 1939:

Actor voiceover:

"I can't raise up any feeling about this war at all, and the demon Hitlerism can go up its own bottom: I refuse to help it with a bayonet."

Ifor ap Glyn:

He just wanted the war to go away and leave him alone, as he explained to his friend Vernon Watkins:

Actor voiceover:

"What do I want for Christmas? (...) I want a war-escaper – a sort of ladder, I think, attached to a balloon (...) Or a lotion for invisibility."

Ifor ap Glyn:

But it wouldn't leave him alone. Although he failed his army medical he was still liable for call-up for work in a munitions factory. With a wife and young son to keep, he needed a job, but all Dylan wanted to do was write.

But no-one at the beginning of the war would have expected Dylan Thomas to become involved in propaganda films. Dylan had a horror of killing, and he certainly didn't want to fight. But he was also equally dismissive of anybody who was involved in the war effort in less direct ways too.

Actor voiceover:

"Every literate or semi-literate party-goer in London is stampeding the Ministry of Labour, willing to do anything from licking stamps and bums to writing recruiting literature, or broadcasting appeals for warm bodies to become cold. (...) Principle prevents us, I hope, from propaganding."

Ifor ap Glyn:

But even after Dylan had got a job that suited his talents, a job that kept him out of uniform, his attitude to the war was as conflicted as ever.

This was formerly the Kings Head and Eight Bells, one of the many pubs in London that Dylan Thomas used to frequent. Unfortunately, he had a habit of picking fights with servicemen in uniform, and on one such occasion, after he'd been thrown out of this place with Caitlin, for starting trouble yet again, Caitlin was heard to remark despairingly, 'If only Dylan would just once pick a fight with a little man!'

His friend Vernon Watkins described him as 'The most aggressive pacifist I have ever seen'.

Image of Bert Trick courtesy of Emrys Jones/CGram Software Ltd

Image of Dylan Thomas courtesy of Getty Images

Archive film footage courtesy of Imperial War Museum and BFI