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# Cultural policy and place promotion: Swansea and Dylan Thomas

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## Abstract

As former industrial cities have experienced radical changes to the bases of their economies, the imperatives of finding new roles and functions has often led to the adoption of cultural policies. These are diverse and partial but have become part of place promotion policies designed to attract visitors and investors. The connection with a literary figure offers one exploitable quality and this paper explores the adoption of Dylan Thomas, poet and writer, as an icon for Swansea. What emerges is the existence of a diversity of interested individuals and groups, who start from different positions but work towards a common goal. The tensions about the life and works of the poet, evident over the 50 years since his death are still there but the key players, including the City and County of Swansea, are finding ways of reconciling their differences in the 'production' of Dylan Thomas. This use of a writer and his local connections forms part of the more general process of making a cultural policy for the city.

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## Preamble

Leave the M4 at junction 42. BP Chemicals at Llandarcy, which closed a year or two ago, is on your right and the Glamorgan Health and Racquets Club now occupies part of the site. Behind the hill is the Lower Swansea Valley with its disappearing scars, testimony to Swansea's place in history as an industrial city. BP Petrochemicals at Baglan is visible on the left. It is being downsized and the new sign proclaims its transformation into the Baglan Energy Park. Continue along the A483, past the golf course, across the roundabout landscaped with Welsh Development Agency funding, and past the sign for the Swansea/Neath Environmental Action Area. Further on is the former Ford plant, re-named Visteon, and specialising in chassis production. Petroleum storage tanks, now semi-redundant, flank the road until you reach the new Swansea Bay sewerage works, which won awards for design and green technology. Then you reach

the sign marking entry to the city of Swansea. From here you glimpse the curve of Swansea Bay, with the Mumbles lighthouse at the far point, and see the city hug the bay and spill up into the hills. Pass the McDonalds Drive-Thru and a turning to the docks. The Swansea-Cork ferry sails daily and container ships dock here, some bringing coal, ironically, to a port that was a hub of that trade for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Across the river from the ferry terminal is Swansea Marina. The Spontex factory moved a few years ago following a fire and there is environmental upgrading on the site, behind the luxury townhouse development. Approaching the city centre, a small sign points left to the Dylan Thomas Centre where, with some modest permanent exhibitions and a calendar of events, the City and County of Swansea proclaims itself as the birthplace of Dylan Thomas and the 'lovely, ugly town of his prose.'

## 1. Introduction

Dylan Thomas is often described as a product of Swansea, formed by the social and geographical context of his time and his hometown, but the production of Thomas as poet, cultural icon and 'brand' is ongoing.

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This paper explores Swansea's use of Dylan Thomas as a strand of urban cultural policy and the intersecting geographies in which he has become entangled. Our concern lies less with his writings or his places than with the motivation for and resistance to his use as a promotional device. We are interested principally in the *making* of cultural policy and this paper offers a rare focus on the front-end of an often meandering decision-making process.<sup>2</sup> We consider the evolution of a cultural policy in the City and County of Swansea,<sup>3</sup> how it was conceived, how broader processes inform it and how local circumstances shape it. We ask why a renewed interest in Thomas has arisen, what key individuals and organisations think Thomas can offer Swansea and how they feel he should be used, whether developments are part of a coherent cultural policy and whether tensions emerge around using someone considered a 'difficult figure'?

The debates encompass a range of groups with varying roles and priorities. We interviewed council members and officers, Dylan Thomas Society members, academics, writers, consultants, representatives of arts organisations and the commercial sector, and those involved in the 1995 UK Year of Literature and Writing.<sup>4</sup> Their professional and personal voices often became difficult to disentangle as most spoke both for their organisation and from a personal perspective, and we draw attention to the extent to which we found policy to be strongly shaped by individual voices and personal perceptions.

Swansea's cultural policy has changed in scope and status over time and opinions remain mixed about how clearly defined it is, but what became evident was that the policy was largely *unwritten*. We also found that despite their differing positions on Thomas, our interviewees exhibited a remarkable degree of conformity with respect to Swansea's adoption of a Dylan Thomas promotional strategy. All subscribed to what might be called a shared politics of necessity; the issue was not *whether* it should be done, but *how*. The debate was framed within a twin discourse of 'appropriation' and 'appropriateness.' Swansea is appropriating both Dylan Thomas and models of urban cultural policy judged to be successful elsewhere. At the same time, this is situated

within a moral concern that such appropriation be done 'appropriately.'

We start by putting Swansea into a wider context by considering changing conceptions of the relationships between culture and economy. Looking at attempts to remake the city's image following its industrial decline, we position Swansea's 'turn to Thomas' within broader patterns of literary tourism, place promotion and increasingly culture-led urban redevelopment policies. We discuss the emergence of a Dylan Thomas 'industry' and suggest that the Council's moves to mobilise Thomas as a 'brand' arose almost incidentally from Swansea's attempts to market itself as 'a city of literature.' We close with some observations about shifts in decision-making that have shaped the policy process and comment on the progress Swansea is making with its Dylan Thomas strategy.

## 2. Cultural twists and economic turns

The intertwining of 'culture' and 'economy' and the role played by culture in economic development is now well recognised (Kong, 2000). The post-war political economy of the arts and changes in government policy provide some context for what has happened in Swansea. Arts funding and policy planning became a responsibility of the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB).<sup>5</sup> The Local Government Act of 1948 allowed authorities to fund arts promotion and over time they took on increased service delivery responsibilities for the arts. By the 1970s, economic crises in the form of "de-industrialization, a falling tax base and declining public expenditure" moved the arts further down the list of priorities (Goodwin, 1993, p. 147). New ways of thinking about the economy and culture emerged with shifting political objectives and a repositioning of the statutory sector away from service provision to an enabling role and, Harvey (1989) observes, an increasing entrepreneurial role. The Thatcher government of 1979 produced a radical shift away from the social policy objectives of the 1970s and the arts were expected to make their own way in the marketplace and to bring economic benefit to the state. This prompted something of an economic turn in language and attitude for arts organisations, now under pressure to justify their funding with more than a 'quality of life' argument:

I said that we must change the argument to get more funds. We must say that money spent on the Arts was not subsidy but investment. I pro-

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based largely on a series of semi-structured interviews carried out in Swansea during 1998–1999 as part of a project in the Department of Geography, University of Wales Swansea, exploring relationships between cultural policy, literature, tourism and place.

<sup>3</sup> The City and County of Swansea is a unitary authority which replaced Swansea City Council and parts of West Glamorgan County Council after Local Government Reorganization in Wales in 1996. For simplicity we refer to the local authority as 'Swansea Council.'

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for details. Many individuals 'wore more than one hat' at a time, which illustrates the often closely woven social and institutional networks in local politics and the arts.

<sup>5</sup> The ACGB was created by J.M. Keynes in 1945 and replaced the 1939 Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. It received a Royal Charter in 1946.

duced statistics showing that for each million pounds invested, the Treasury received three million from foreign tours and tourism, royalties and employment taxes. I led the Arts Council into its sad future decline of quantifying the arts in material terms (Field, former Assistant Financial Director of ACGB, Sinclair, 1995, p. 129).

The Arts Council was founded by J.M. Keynes largely to protect the arts from the economy, but by the 1980s, the arts were viewed as an integral part of it; in 1995 they were listed in the top five revenue earners for the exchequer with a central role in tourism, urban regeneration and wealth creation (Sinclair, 1995, x).<sup>6</sup> Here, rather than operating as some kind of shared process of meaning and signification, culture becomes reified as a ‘thing’ with ‘outputs’ that can be quantified. But as Crang (1997) reminds us economic processes do not simply appropriate a passive cultural sphere. Instead, for strategic reasons, these organisations selectively adopt a business mentality.

In Swansea, interviewees from various backgrounds articulated their ideas in remarkably similar ways. That the Tourism Officer or Council Leader should talk about product development and marketing strategies is perhaps not surprising, but the Chair of Cultural Services also talked enthusiastically about branding and the tourist ‘offer’; even the Literature Officer was equally comfortable organising poetry readings or “delivering Dylan Thomas product” to tour companies.

### 2.1. *Cultural policy, cultural industries and place promotion*

It is useful at this point to make distinctions between several strands of thought that relate to urban cultural policies. Arts policy within the United Kingdom has typically been concerned with art collections, museums, theatre and classical music concerts, but there have been shifts towards a much more encompassing notion of culture including, but not restricted to, the arts and popular culture has become the frame of reference for contemporary expressions of cultural policy. While events programming remains an important element of authorities’ cultural services remit, cultural policy has broadened to play an increasing role as a tool in culture-led regeneration. Darlow (1996) groups these approaches into production-based strategies, which promote the development of a cultural industries sector, and consumption-based strategies, which focus on cultural programming, image promotion and marketing, though notes that these approaches are rarely neatly distin-

guished in practice. Montgomery (1990) and Bianchini and Parkinson (1993) identify a third ‘cultural planning’ approach which uses culture more strategically by combining cultural production and arts provision with urban revitalisation, design and marketing.

Ongoing reconceptualisations of culture emerged strongly in our interviews. Officers and Members felt that conflating culture with the high arts was an error and authorities should interpret culture in its broadest sense and support popular culture, sport and leisure as part of their cultural service responsibilities. Council support for a major concert by the Welsh band ‘The Stereophonics’ at Swansea’s Morfa sports stadium in 1999 was cited as a good example of this and an important precedent for Swansea Council. They argued that local people recognise rugby to be an important part of their culture and, in an interesting blending of cultural forms, footage of Welsh rugby tries was shown on screens at the concert. This event was significant, firstly, in illustrating the shift from direct service delivery to a supporting role by the Council. Secondly, it was felt to provide a valuable means of expressing local culture and building feelings of cultural pride and confidence. Interviewees commented on an outpouring of Welsh pride at the event; 50,000 people attended, Welsh flags were everywhere, and people broke into a spontaneous chorus of ‘Cwm Rhondda’ at the end. Cultural policies are developing new purposes and Barnett (2001) has commented upon the dual role of cultural policy in the European Union in promoting a shared sense of European culture whilst respecting national and regional diversity.

The Chair and the Director of Leisure Services welcomed the repositioning of culture higher on the government’s agenda in recognition of the way that culture and leisure are driving so much economic regeneration. They suggested the language of ‘culture’ was now so crucial that ‘Leisure’ or ‘Arts’ departments in local authorities would be subsumed under a cultural label, following the pattern of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).<sup>7</sup> Swansea Council has since moved to a cabinet system of local government in which a ‘Culture and Recreation Cabinet Member’ replaces the ‘Chair of Leisure Services.’

In official and popular discourse, this shift away from ‘the arts’ to ‘culture’ accompanies a blurring with the ‘culture industries’ (Mulgan and Worpole, 1986), to the

<sup>6</sup> Foreword by Lord Gowrie, Chairman of The Arts Council of England.

<sup>7</sup> Previously, responsibility for arts, sports, museums, galleries, libraries, heritage, tourism, broadcasting and the media had been scattered across the Treasury, the Home Office and Departments of Trade and Industry, Environment and Education. Coordination was poor and it was only with the formation of the Department of National Heritage after the 1992 General Election that these responsibilities were finally brought together under a single Ministry, renamed DCMS under the Blair government in 1997.

extent that the Arts Council of Wales (ACW) no longer consistently differentiates between the arts, culture and the cultural industries in its literature (ACW, 1998, 1999). Nevertheless, some remain uncomfortable with the term and a Swansea writer voiced his concern, suggesting: “I don’t think the people who throw that sort of expression around have much time for painters and poets and short story writers.” Pratt (1997) defined the culture industries as the production system for the arts and media, their supporting infrastructure, distribution systems and places of consumption. His estimate was that in 1991 4.5% of all UK employees were in culture industries and Hall relates this to an ongoing process of transformation:

Nations and cities have passed at an extraordinary speed from a manufacturing economy to an informational economy to a cultural economy. (Hall, 2000, p. 640)<sup>8</sup>

A culture industry becomes “an abstraction for any economic activity that does not create material products” (Zukin, 1995, p. 11) so, with de-industrialization the production of symbolic goods assumed a new importance. Zukin (1995) terms this a new ‘artistic mode of production’, noting that “culture is more and more the business of cities, the basis of their tourist attractions and their competitive edge” (1995, pp. 23–24). Thus, culture became mobilised as part of a post-industrial strategy (Frith, 1991, p. 137). Greater London Council introduced its 1981 ‘Industrial Strategy’, with some emphasis on leisure and tourism and recognition of the significance of cultural industries, and other cities with culture-led policies included Birmingham (McGuinness, 1996–1997), Liverpool (Madsen, 1992), Bristol (Bassett, 1993; Griffiths, 1995), and the particularly high profile re-imagining of Glasgow as the 1990 European City of Culture (Myerscough, 1992; Booth and Boyle, 1993;

Boyle and Hughes, 1994). Although these cities had common strands in their strategies, there were differences. Glasgow, perhaps with the biggest image problem, had a broader focus on place promotion; London and Birmingham had clearer industry biases.

Swansea is taking a consumption-based approach, promoting culture for local users and tourist markets. Examples of cultural industries can be found within Swansea’s urban economy, and there are moves towards a more production-based approach, particularly as part of the development of a cultural quarter (URBED, 1997; Wilson, 1997), but unlike cities such as Manchester which have a stronger and more established policy of developing cultural industries, these are relatively small in number. Among these various strands of cultural policy, therefore, it is place promotion for cultural tourism that is most relevant to the Swansea study.

Place promotion (Gold and Ward, 1994, p. 2) is the use of publicity and marketing to create selective images of specific localities targeted at specific populations. During the 1980s, older industrial cities began to change from industrial promotion to more strategic city image initiatives with a focus on tourism (Lim, 1993). Bramwell and Rawling (1996) recognised a proliferation of place images with a persistent set of general aims concerned with attracting visitors, appealing to inward investors, increasing local pride, identity and self-confidence and countering negative perceptions. Cities were in competition with each other and each sought an image that was different and distinctive. McCrone et al. (1989) discuss branding processes that attempt to attach specific attributes to different places though, ironically, this shared drive towards ‘differentiation’ risks producing its own homogeneity with cities duplicating ‘flagship’ projects such as sports stadia, arts venues or waterfront developments.

## 2.2. *Reinventing Swansea: place promotion and cultural tourism*

Swansea was one of the earliest industrial cities with non-ferrous metalworking that dated back well into the eighteenth century and a global significance that earned it the title of ‘metropolis.’ There are ‘Swansea’s’ in many parts of the world that owe their name to a connection to South Wales at that industrial era. In addition to copper, zinc, and lead-working, Swansea had iron and steel works, coal mining and a long association with the manufacture of tinplate. The issue of creating an identity was not relevant at this time as Swansea, the industrial city, was a major, known player.

The city’s de-industrialization was slow but conclusive. No coalmines, non-ferrous metals, tinplate works, steel works or petrochemicals remain. Major employers

<sup>8</sup> The terminology of the ‘culture industries’ and ‘creative industries’ is not consistent, however. At times they are used interchangeably, for instance by Hall (2000). Elsewhere there are some important disparities in definition. Pratt (1997) includes fine art, literature, publishing, printing, film, recording, broadcasting, production, distribution and advertising, museums, libraries, nightclubs, theatres and galleries in his definition of the culture industries, but not sport, tourism or entertainment. The government’s Creative Industries Task Force defines the ‘creative industries’ as advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software, television and radio (DCMS, 1998, p. 1). Museums, galleries and heritage are not included, though they make the point that there are people in ‘creative occupations’ in other sectors. The ACW defines ‘cultural industries’, more tightly to include the performing arts, visual arts, photography, craft, graphic and sector-related design, film, broadcasting, multimedia, literature, publishing, libraries, museums, heritage, arts venues, vocational arts education and community arts, but not advertising or software (ACW, 1998, p. 1).

now are the services, government offices, educational institutions and small to medium sized enterprises. Swansea has reached a stage in its history where, as a declining industrial city, authorities are seeking to reinvent it, and the policies being developed by Swansea Council reflect the place promotion and place marketing strategies adopted by many former industrial cities since the 1980s. Swansea has to some degree addressed each of the key initiatives identified by Bassett (1993, p. 1775).<sup>9</sup> Environmental enhancement of former sites of heavy industry has been carried out, principally in the Lower Swansea Valley, now an Enterprise Zone. Transport and communications have been improved, and leisure facilities promoted by the Council. A flagship waterfront development transformed the redundant South Dock into Swansea Marina in 1982 and, as part of Swansea's 'Percent for Art' scheme, one percent of the construction budget was allocated to public art (Boatswain and Osborne, 1996). The docklands Technium project for high technology industries is reclaiming another derelict waterfront site. The city operates the sixth largest municipal museum service in the UK, has an award-winning museum education programme and runs a series of festivals throughout the year. Swansea is also developing themed 'Quarters' in the city. Eight quarters, including a 'cultural quarter', were adopted with the endorsement of a 1997 City Centre Strategy Review in order to "enable a more focused marketing and promotion of areas to take place" (URBED, 1997, p. 1).

Swansea has adopted place promotion principles, including the search for difference, of which the Dylan Thomas theme is a key example. Bramwell and Rawling's (1996) study of marketing strategies of five British cities provides a useful context. Manchester used the big city image, selling itself as international, lively and cultural. Birmingham portrayed itself as an international centre, one of the world's great meeting places. Sheffield was a major sports and leisure centre with heritage industries. Stoke offered the 'china experience' and Bradford's first two-day promotional visits were 'In the footsteps of the Brontës' and 'Bradford's industrial heritage.' Behind these various initiatives were differing organisational structures. Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester have visitor and conference bureaux, private/public partnerships with some autonomy. Bradford and Stoke managed promotion and marketing from within the local authority as is the case in Swansea.

Swansea's place promotion is varied. Historically, it focused on industrial promotion to attract economic investors. Industrial heritage and reclamation in the Lower Swansea Valley have been marketed and Swansea also promotes its image as 'City by the Sea.' Swansea's function as a seaside resort is almost as old as its industrial legacy. It has a broad, sweeping bay and the spectacular Gower peninsula, the UK's first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) contained within the municipal limits. The Tourism Unit promotes a combination of coastline, countryside, shopping and nightlife for short break, activity markets and family holidays. Use of the Dylan Thomas connection to encourage literary tourists has occurred periodically over the years but only recently has this become a stronger component of place promotion. Swansea's literary status received a significant boost with its designation as the host city for the 1995 UK Year of Literature and Writing (YOLW) and attempts have been made to capitalise on that event. In 1998 consultants were commissioned to develop a Dylan Thomas Tourism Strategy and they produced a five year action plan to guide policy (TDI, 1998).

Promotion of the connections between writers and places as an aspect of cultural tourism has precedents (Herbert, 2001). Visitors are drawn to literary places for a variety of reasons. First, they may want to visit places that have connections with the lives of writers (Pocock, 1987, 1992). Writers' homes may create a sense of nostalgia and inspire awe or reverence (Marsh, 1993). Second, tourists may be attracted to places that form the settings for novels (Fawcett and Cormack, 2001) or, increasingly, their film adaptations.<sup>10</sup> Fiction may be set in locations that the writers knew and this merging of the real and the imagined can imbue such places with special meaning. Third, tourists may be drawn to literary places for some deeper emotional experience. Squire (1993) showed that visitors to Beatrix Potter's home were evoking memories of childhood and family. Fourth, a place may attract visitors because it is associated with a significant period or episode in a writer's life. The TDI report finds that the majority of visitors were interested mainly in Thomas's "writings" and "the environment that influenced his work." Fewer were concerned with "the places he lived", but there was considerable interest in linking his words to the interpretation of place (TDI, 1998, p. 16).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> These include broadening access to museums; developing community arts strategies; planning cultural districts and improving the infrastructure for cultural production. There is also more support for cultural production and its new technologies; flagship arts developments to boost urban regeneration; promotion of cultural tourism, heritage resources and festivals; and investment in public art.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, after the screening of the BBC's adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1995, visitor numbers to Sudbury Hall in Derbyshire and Lyme Park in Cheshire, which featured as the house and grounds of 'Pemberley', increased dramatically.

<sup>11</sup> These findings were based on 113 survey responses (37 interviews and 96 self-completion questionnaires) from visitors to the Dylan Thomas Centre between 23 and 31 May, 1998.

### 3. Dylan Thomas and Swansea: a slow embrace

Dylan Thomas had a complex and contradictory relationship with Swansea and his heritage continues to occupy multiple positions within Swansea's public and political imaginations. His attitudes toward Swansea were often negative, yet his emotional embrace of the place was affectionate and lasting. Swansea's embrace of Thomas, however, was slow to materialise and remains coloured by economic pragmatism and by the kind of reactions that Thomas inspired as a man. His reputation for wayward behaviour, wild days and drinking create an image many hesitate to support. This raises the question of how 'difficult' figures can be marketed, though it has not obviously affected, for example, Dublin's marketing of James Joyce and Brendan Behan.

A minority of visitors are literary tourists or local aficionados, but the majority have a general awareness rather than detailed understanding of Thomas and his work. A 1998 survey (TDI, 1998, p. 16) found that 75% of visitors knew about Dylan Thomas from leisure activities, reading and television rather than from academic study. However, there are common misconceptions about public awareness of Thomas's Swansea connections. Stevens explains: "Our research has revealed that those involved in tourism marketing assume that tourists know of Dylan's association in Swansea. Our market research reveals, however, that this is not the case." He comments that "even the Swansea Tourist Information Centre sells Laugharne rather than Swansea" (TDI, 1998, p. 14). Laugharne, in Carmarthenshire, has been a more visible and obvious attraction for literary tourists. Although they generally form stops along the same visitor itinerary, there has been little promotional connection between Swansea and Laugharne. The Boat House at Laugharne is the most famous site associated with Thomas, though he only lived there for the final five years of his life. His first 20 years were spent in Swansea and it remained the place in which he was most productive and where he wrote most of his finest work.<sup>12</sup>

#### 3.1. Dylan's "ugly, lovely town"

Perhaps his best-known description of Swansea, these words offer a perceptive comment on the nature of the town.<sup>13</sup> Described as a product of industrial provincialism (Stead, 1978, p. 48), Thomas was born in 1914 at no. 5 Cwmdonkin Drive in the Uplands, a respectable,

middle class and predominantly English-speaking suburb of Swansea. The son of an English teacher at the Swansea Grammar School, he took little interest in anything other than English and his first poem was published in the school magazine in 1925. Thomas worked for a time for the local newspaper and began to meet at Swansea's Kardomah Café with a talented group of writers, musicians and artists which came to be known as the Kardomah Gang.<sup>14</sup> Critical of Welsh life and its chapel-going culture, Thomas wrote disparagingly of Swansea's provincialism and the claustrophobic middle class world that he inhabited. He left for London in 1934 and his first book of poems was published that same year (Thomas, 1934). For the next decade, after his marriage to Caitlin Macnamara, they led a fairly nomadic lifestyle, with periods in Wales, London, Hampshire, and Oxfordshire, often relying financially upon friends or family. They lived in Laugharne off and on from 1938, and in 1949 settled in The Boat House. Between 1950 and 1953 Thomas made four tours of the United States where he generated a substantial reputation and it was on his final visit in 1953 that he died in New York, aged 39.<sup>15</sup>

Thomas's relationship with Wales is well documented by Ackerman (1998), Davies (1986, 1987), Ferris (1999) and Fitzgibbon (1965). His wife Caitlin described Wales as the "land of his birth, which he never in thought, and hardly ever in body, moved out of" (Thomas, 1957). He often claimed that he needed to be there to write and tended to return when he had difficulties writing. Ackerman argues that "His inspiration and imagination were rooted in his Welsh background" and his writing was intimately bound up with both the society and the landscape with which he was familiar (Ackerman, 1973, i, p. 27). From the late thirties, Thomas increasingly used recognisable locations and became topographically very accurate in his writing. Many of his poems and short stories, particularly his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* collection (Thomas, 1940), describe Swansea in some detail. Davies talks of Thomas's 'biographical geography' (1986, p. 1) and in discussion emphasised this topographic nature of his work:

If you look at his work in relation to how Swansea was in the 1930s, most of the prose particularly . . . is very accurate. The names are sometimes changed; the 'Victoria Bar' is 'The Bay View.' . . . Well one of his finest stories, 'One Warm Saturday,' is set first of all in what is Victoria gardens, next to the Guild-

<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested that as much as three quarters of his work was completed in Swansea or based upon his 'notebooks' written in 5 Cwmdonkin Drive (Maud, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> "An ugly, lovely town . . . crawling, sprawling, slummed, unplanned, jerry villa'd, and smug-suburbed by the side of a long and splendidly curving shore." From 'Reminiscences of Childhood' (first version), in Thomas, 1954.

<sup>14</sup> The Kardomah gang dominated the cultural scene in Swansea in the thirties and included Daniel Jones (composer), Vernon Watkins (writer), Alfred Janes (artist), John Pritchard (writer), Wynford Vaughan Thomas (broadcaster), Charles Fisher (writer) and Mervyn Levy (artist).

<sup>15</sup> For biographies see Ackerman (1998); Brinnin (1956); Fitzgibbon (1965); Ferris (1999); Jones (1977).

hall, then moves to the Bay View, and then goes on to St Thomas on the other side of town and you can see that fairly accurately. Thomas was very precise. . . . ‘The Followers’ is another famous story. The story is set in ‘Warmely’<sup>16</sup> at the top of Eversley Road. . . . It begins with a fight in the old Grammar School, but the middle part is Thomas walking from 5 Cwmdonkin Drive to Eversley Road, and some of the houses mentioned are still there.

“The Hunchback in the Park,” one of his best known and most popular poems, is set in Cwmdonkin Park, one of the most significant sites in his early life. Other poems and stories journey through the town centre, the Gower or Carmarthenshire: for instance, “Old Garbo” leads from the newspaper offices and into the pubs on the High Street; “Fern Hill” describes Fernhill Farm, Carmarthenshire, where his aunt and uncle lived; and Thomas’s radio script “Return Journey” reminisces about the streets of pre-blitz Swansea. It has been argued that poetry is rarely as evocative and place-based as Thomas’s, which is why his work lends itself to literary tourism because, at least for the areas which survived the bombs, visitors can relate the poems and stories to Swansea’s landscape.

### 3.2. *Doubting Thomas*

Stead claims “Dylan Thomas was a man of Swansea. It was a town, a world that had made him. . . . Swansea was to remain a part of him” (1978, p. 10). However, while Swansea remained a central part of Thomas’s life, how far did Swansea want Thomas to remain a part of its cultural life and identity? Kong (2000) wrote of the tensions that arose in connection with cultural policies and Dylan Thomas provides a case in point in the sense that there were different views of his value as an icon for the city. The doubt about Thomas (West, 1970) stemmed from disapproval of his behaviour and moral worth, which influenced attitudes towards his work. Davies (1998) describes hostility towards him, informed largely by the Welsh Nonconformism of which he was so critical, and Ferris, one of Thomas’s biographers, remarked that local people had not just ignored Thomas but shown considerable contempt for him, “Or what they thought was him.”<sup>17</sup>

This comment raises the question of how far different versions of Dylan Thomas coexist. A lecturer in English literature discussed at least two different Thomases in our interview; the writer, whom he found fascinating,

and the cultural construct, of which he had tired. George Thomas (1978) identifies four widely recognised images of Thomas, but the one which gained particular currency in Swansea was of Thomas as scandalous, irresponsible, a womaniser and a drunk, who toured—and drank—his way around America.<sup>18</sup> This image was fuelled by Brinnin’s influential account of *Dylan Thomas in America* (1956) and, as Bogdanov comments, it remains a powerful and lasting association: “Some 2500 years of Welsh history and language, and globally we are represented by the transatlantic antics of two drunks—Richard Burton and Dylan Thomas” (Bogdanov, 1995, p. 6). Recent surveys reveal that these images persist. When visitors to Laugharne in 1993–1994 were asked about Thomas as a person, 37% of all descriptors focused on the ‘dark side’ of his character with phrases such as ‘wild’, ‘sponger’, ‘fraud’ and ‘drink problems’ (Herbert, 2001, p. 12). Reeves remarks on a widespread sense that Thomas “had somehow let Wales down” (Reeves, 1992, p. 1).

So, this moral disapproval of Dylan Thomas hindered his acceptance as a figure that Swansea might celebrate and coloured his reception as a poet elsewhere. A striking example was the campaign, supported by former US President, Jimmy Carter, to have Thomas recognised in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey. Carter himself wrote a poem about his exclusion:

. . . Poet’s Corner had no epitaph  
To mark the Welshman’s  
Sullen art or craft  
Because, they said  
His morals were below  
The standard there . . .<sup>19</sup>

This serves as an example of the ad hominem approach that Davies finds so prevalent in literary criticism (1998). It is interesting that Thomas’s reputation seems to have been much worse in Swansea than elsewhere. So, while national and international interest in Thomas grew, much local popular opposition remained.

Officer: We’re up against . . . a general kind of dislike of Dylan within Swansea, that he was a drunk, or he was obnoxious that he borrowed money and never gave it back, he was generally uncouth, and all of that, which the rest of the world is quite prepared to ignore thank you!

HW: It’s just Swansea? Do you think that negative view is widespread? Do you think it’s changing?

<sup>16</sup> ‘Warmely’ is the house where Thomas’s friend Daniel Jones lived and where the two often spent time together writing poems.

<sup>17</sup> Ferris, ‘Dylan on the Brain?’ talk, The Dylan Thomas Festival, 10 August, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> The other three he suggested are the angelic-looking youth in the portrait by Augustus John; the rich and distinctive voice of the radio performer; and the creator of ‘Under Milk Wood.’

<sup>19</sup> “A President expresses concern on a visit to Westminster Abbey,” preface, Perkins (1995). Thomas was given a place in Poet’s Corner in 1982.

Officer: It's *endemic!* It's endemic; it passes from generation to generation. People in Swansea will not even have read any Dylan Thomas and yet they'll still come out with this fact that 'he's a bum, so why should we?'

This demonstrates the difficulty of disentangling Dylan from his work, or judging his writing rather than his behaviour. There are a number of contradictions here. "A drunken yob. You ask the people of Swansea. That's how he's remembered," suggested the Chair of Leisure. Yet other writers, such as Hemingway, Behan and Joyce, have earned that kind of epitaph without it becoming an overwhelming burden to their heritage. Gwen Watkins, wife of Dylan's friend the poet Vernon Watkins, questions the assumption that a great artist need also be a great man (Watkins, 1978, p. 4). Moreover, she claimed that Thomas was far less rebellious than his reputation suggests, and many of his contemporaries commented that in their experience, Thomas was not the heavy drinker that Brinnin portrayed.<sup>20</sup> However, it also becomes clear that the Thomas myth was in large part a product of his own making as he consciously engaged in image-building, cultivating his reputation as poet and bohemian.

### 3.3. *Embracing Dylan*

However, we must not paint too negative a picture of Thomas's public standing. Worldwide his reputation is enormous, particularly in America, where most of his major collections are now held, and in Japan, Australia and Italy. While some of his work is complex and inaccessible, much remains well known and well loved and makes a strong showing in popular poetry collections. Both *The Nation's Favourite Poems* (Jones, 1996), based on a BBC poll,<sup>21</sup> and the *Classic FM Favourite Poems*, (Read, 1997) include "Fern Hill" and "Do not go gentle into that good night." These, along with "And death shall have no dominion," are judged among the greatest twentieth-century English poems. Thomas's lines:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light . . .

<sup>20</sup> Bennett, former Dylan Thomas Society chair, described him as a 'steady' but not excessive beer drinker. Ronnie Thomas, a contemporary of Dylan's at *The Evening Post* in the 1930s, said he was called a 'half pinter' partly because he was small for his age but mainly because he stuck to half pints. He also claimed he never saw him the worse for drink despite the colourful legends. Ronnie Thomas, 'Dylan at the Evening Post,' recording, played at 'Talking about Dylan,' The Dylan Thomas Festival, 6 August, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> This was a UK survey commissioned by the BBC and conducted by The Bookworm in 1995.

written as his father was dying, prove to have a particular resonance in the public imagination. Interviewees commented that they had encountered versions of these lines everywhere from politics to sports writing and Lycett cites figures suggesting they feature on 600,000 websites, commonly to preface the death of a loved one (*South Wales Evening Post*, 2001). Sales of his works remain high and his estate continues to be one of the highest earning of any British poet. New books about him continue to be commissioned and existing books republished.<sup>22</sup> A vote for "Icon of the Century for Wales" in Swansea's press ranked Thomas third (ahead of Richard Burton and shortly behind David Lloyd George and the winner, Tom Jones).<sup>23</sup> He still generates substantial newspaper coverage and keen interest from collectors. Towns, himself a bookseller and Thomas collector, emphasised that "any scrap of paper which can be identified as coming from his pen has found a market. There is always someone who wants to buy."

When we asked if there had been a revival in interest in Thomas, some interviewees responded that this notion of a revival was a misnomer for, in terms of the public appetite for his writing, he had never been away. Tourism officers, Dylan Thomas Society members, and, we were told, Aeron Thomas (Thomas's daughter and Dylan Thomas Society President), remarked that interest tended to come in cycles and peaked every 10 years or so. However, while the local authority's earlier Dylan Thomas initiatives were not sustained, there was a shared sense that circumstances had changed and this time would be different. The fact that it is approaching 50 years since Thomas's death is significant. With the deaths of many of his generation, particularly the original trustees of the estate, Davies commented that Thomas had been 'freed' from 'the custodians of the memory.' New letters continue to come to light, and existing material can be discussed in a way that was sometimes difficult while his contemporaries remained alive, allowing a fresh look at Thomas. With a new generation more tolerant attitudes have emerged; for instance 25% of Laugharne visitors stressed Thomas's vulnerability with phrases such as 'unable to cope' and 'own worst enemy' (Herbert, 2001). Strong negative

<sup>22</sup> Paul Ferris's revised biography was republished by Dent in 1999 and his re-edited *Collected Letters* in 2000; Sinclair's *Dylan the Bard* was published in 1999; Laurie's *Dylan Thomas's Wales* came out in 1999, sponsored by S.A. Brain. Penguin have included *Under Milk Wood* (Davies, 2000) and *Dylan Thomas: Selected Poems* in the launch of their new-look Penguin Classics series, Thomas, 2000; Goodby and Wigginton (2001) have published a book of critical essays in Palgrave's 'New Casebook' series; Andrew Lycett has been commissioned to write a new biography of Dylan Thomas by Weidenfeld and Nicolson for publication in 2003.

<sup>23</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 9th January, 1999.



perceptions have diminished, though not disappeared.<sup>24</sup> Overall there seems to be more acceptance of the contradictions of Thomas's life and a willingness to question the dominant images, see them as irrelevant, or part of his attraction. The Council too finds itself in a different position. Motivated by a need to re-invent Swansea, and aware of significant public interest, it is developing a greater commitment to Thomas. The consultants' report advises that:

There now appears to be a renewed enthusiasm and momentum that cannot be ignored. . . . The time is right to embrace this strategic approach to capitalise upon Swansea's links with one of the main poets of 20th century Britain. (TDI, 1998, p. 2)

#### 4. The 'industrialization' of Dylan Thomas?

Launching his revised biography of Thomas, Ferris spoke critically of 'the Dylan Thomas Industry,' whilst acknowledging he had been part of it himself for some 25 years.<sup>25</sup> A few weeks later, at the second annual Dylan Thomas Festival, he commented that it had not seemed much like an industry in the early days but had changed dramatically over time.<sup>26</sup> So, if Dylan Thomas has been turned into an industry, it is a process about which not everyone feels comfortable.

##### 4.1. Swansea as a city of literature?

In 1992 Swansea was designated host city for the 1995 UK Year of Literature and Writing, part of the ACGB's *Arts 2000* initiative.<sup>27</sup> Regional politics probably played a role as many argued that Wales had to host at least one of the eight years. The hometown link with Dylan Thomas undoubtedly added weight to Swansea's bid, but more important was the innovative proposal to create a National Literature Centre for Wales. Consid-

erable difficulties dogged the YOLW, however, including tensions between local authorities,<sup>28</sup> the YOLW committee and writers' groups; the resignation of the first Director; a contentious architectural competition; difficulties completing building work on schedule and attracting commercial tenants; and funding uncertainties. Nevertheless, against the odds, the YOLW team ran a remarkably successful year-long festival of events featuring visits from hundreds of writers, artists and celebrities from around the world.<sup>29</sup>

The derelict Old Guildhall in Swansea's Maritime Quarter was converted into 'Tŷ Llên,' literally 'House of Literature,' which opened in March 1995. The building continues to run a literature programme and functions as an arts venue, restaurant and conference centre, though it remains a problematic institution. Its purpose was not well defined and a role as a *National Literature Centre for Wales* failed to materialise. As the Literature Officer explains, after the YOLW the Centre drifted for some time: "We didn't have the staff to market and run the place properly, so the building was flopping along in abeyance for quite a long time really, and it's an expensive place to run." The Centre has left the Council with an expensive political and cultural problem.<sup>30</sup> Its closure could communicate the wrong message about commitment to culture and certain obligations were written into the terms of the grants and loans that funded the renovations. Consultants were therefore employed to advise on a new strategy.

The first consultants' report (AEA, 1996) described the tensions arising from a fundamental incompatibility between a festival-led idea and building-led scheme. It recommended that the Centre be retained but that priority be given to establishing an identity for the building and promoting a much more specific literary product. They recommended that a permanent Dylan Thomas

<sup>24</sup> For instance, Swansea vicar, Joseph Griffin, criticised governors for naming a new school 'Dylan Thomas Community School' as Thomas was not an appropriate role model for young people (Peregrine, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Ferris, 1999, official launch, Waterstone's Bookstore, Swansea, 16 June, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Ferris, 'Dylan on the Brain?' talk, Dylan Thomas Centre, 10 August, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> *Arts 2000* celebrated a different art form in a different region in each year leading up to the Millennium: 1992 Music (Birmingham), 1993 Dance (East Midlands), 1994 Drama (Manchester), 1995 Literature and Writing (Swansea), 1996 Visual Arts (North of England), 1997 Opera and Musical Theatre (East Anglia), 1998 Photography (Yorkshire and Humberside) and 1999 Architecture (Glasgow). Though launched by the ACGB, reorganization into the Arts Council of England, the ACW, the Scottish Arts Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland had occurred by 1995.

<sup>28</sup> At the time of the YOLW Wales still had a two-tier local authority and both Swansea City Council and West Glamorgan County Council were involved.

<sup>29</sup> Writers and artists from 30 countries visited during the Festival, which involved 500 literature and arts events and around 100 community projects (Everett, 1996, p. 14). Honorary President Jimmy Carter, and Vice Presidents Lord Callaghan and Aeron Thomas visited Swansea during the year. Buzz Aldren, Julian Barnes, Bono, Allen Ginsberg, Seamus Heaney, P.D. James, Brian Keenan, Ian McEwan, Adrian Mitchell, Van Morrison, Terry Pratchett, Michèle Roberts, Rose Tremain, Marina Warner were just some of the many speakers. Festival Patrons included Margaret Atwood, Björk, Jane Campion, Günter Grass, Mario Vargas Llosa, Arthur Miller, Salman Rushdie, Edward Said, Ken Sara-Wiwa and Paul Simon.

<sup>30</sup> The loss of half a million pounds annually was often mentioned in interviews and in the local press. Council Minutes record a loss of between £400,000–£450,000 per year, although in an interview the officer overseeing the Centre pointed out that a substantial proportion of this arises from an accounting exercise that costs into the calculation a nominal 'asset rental loss' of some £200,000 per year leaving an annual cost of around half of what is normally quoted.

exhibition, a writers' café and visitor centre be developed, but it was the Council's decision to rename the building 'The Dylan Thomas Centre' that emerged as the crucial impetus to developing a fuller Dylan Thomas strategy.<sup>31</sup> While some assumed a commitment to the Dylan Thomas brand was a natural outcome of the year, others were less convinced it would have happened at all had it not been for the pressure to reassess the building's future after the YOLW. A senior officer in Leisure argued that the Dylan Thomas strategy arose directly out of reports exploring possible roles for the building.

It [the report] kind of focused our thinking about the potential of Dylan Thomas. No one really grasped in the City [Council] that the Dylan Thomas is a saleable product. I hate to talk about literature like that, but there we are, needs must, and even at national government policy level now the arts and culture are being seen much more in terms of generators of economic activity than they have been.

Curiously, then, it was neither the recognition of Thomas's importance as a literary figure, nor the fact of hosting a major literature festival that finally brought about a commitment to promoting Dylan Thomas. Rather, this was a problem-led strategy, stemming from a failure to determine what exactly 'a literature centre' should be. Only when the Council's hand was forced was there a real impetus to look more seriously at Thomas.

This came at a time of growing interest in cultural and literary tourism. One commercial sector interviewee observed, "Even they [the Council] can't not notice that there are now Brontë trails, and Jane Austen country. ... Literary tourism is everywhere, so the council is sort of piggy-backing on that." A senior Leisure Services officer explained:

We're not immune here in Swansea to what's happening on the kind of national, international tourism base and the recognition of, you know, Haworth country ... interest in D.H. Lawrence's birthplace, Dickens's birthplace in Portsmouth. You name it really, everybody's on that kind of bandwagon.

This growth of literary tourism has been explored in some detail; see, for example, Jane Austen (Herbert, 1991, 2001) Beatrix Potter (Squire, 1993, 1996), and the

Brontës (Pocock, 1987). The Centre Manager argued that Thomas has a similar potential, "not mega, but substantial." Literary tourism is not a huge sector of the tourism market but it is an expanding and relatively high earning sector.

The YOLW improved Swansea's cultural infrastructure and helped it gain some recognition on the literature circuit even if it did not achieve the hoped-for national reputation. The Council is now taking Thomas more seriously and we ask what this new approach entails and how key groups and individuals have reacted to these proposals.

#### 4.2. Branding Thomas

'Branded' first in the pejorative sense by Nonconformist Wales and sectors of the literary world for his lifestyle, writing style or subject matter, Thomas is now subject to a commercial form of branding by Swansea Council. Semiotic analyses of branding show the symbolic meanings of a product to be crucial and Pawson (1997) outlines ways in which cultural meanings and place identities are created through branding strategies. He argues that these strategies are inherently spatial and Hopkins explains that place promotion and tourism development are "both a cause and consequence of a spatially liberated, consumeristic, image driven culture" (Hopkins, 1998, p. 66). Swansea has aspirations to develop its cultural assets and create an image or distinctive brand as discussed by McCrone et al. in 'Scotland the Brand' (McCrone et al., 1999). The Director of Tourism and Economic Development stated that Swansea had a strong interest in branding. To stimulate tourism and boost the economy tourists are being invited to 'consume Swansea' and to consume *in* Swansea by branding the city through its association with Thomas. The Council's interest follows the brewery S.A. Brain's decision to invest in Dylan Thomas and market a new brand of beer called 'Dylan's ale.' Their research found the 'Dylan Thomas' brand to have a strong commercial appeal in Wales, especially to a younger market.<sup>32</sup>

A Cultural Services committee representative explained that the starting point of the Dylan Thomas strategy was that the city needed a unique selling point,

<sup>31</sup> Reference to 'renaming' the building is a slight misnomer. Though launched as 'Tŷ Llên' for the YOLW, the whole building, including those parts with no literary function intended for commercial let, had technically been called 'The Dylan Thomas Centre.'

<sup>32</sup> 'Dylan's Smooth' ale was launched in spring 1998. A new brand, 'Dylan's Export' has since been launched at the 2000 Dylan Thomas Festival. S.A. Brain's research found the 'Dylan Thomas' brand to have a strong and positive association with a young, trendy, creative and unconventional image of Wales (TDI, 1998, p. 19). We found quite mixed feelings about Dylan's ale among Dylan Thomas Society members. Some had no problem with this while others expressed concerns given Thomas's reputation for drinking and the circumstances of his death, but Thomas's Estate had granted approval and had given the brewery permission to use Thomas's writings in their promotional materials.

an identifiable brand, with which it could compete. He argued, “That brand, clearly, has got to be Dylan Thomas”:

Councillor: So the idea is that you sell Dylan Thomas and by selling Dylan Thomas you sell Swansea. . . . What that will do is raise Swansea’s profile, in the same way that James Joyce . . . raises the profile of Dublin, . . . Lawrence has been sold in Nottingham and Shakespeare in Stratford on Avon. You will automatically associate [them].

HW: So the two become synonymous?

Councillor: [*With rising enthusiasm*] So that when you think of Dylan Thomas, you think about Swansea, so that everything that then happens about Dylan Thomas automatically sells Swansea, even though Swansea might not even be mentioned. . . . That’s the idea of it, to sell this place so that people start thinking about coming here, which brings economic input into the city.

The aim is to embed Swansea and Dylan Thomas as a kind of mnemonic in the public imagination. The starting point is economic: “The motivator for Dylan Thomas as a brand is *nothing* to do with literature,” [emphasis in original] he added, “It has to do with branded tourism.” However, he did stress that the spin-off would be an increase in literary activity. He envisages a virtuous circle in which both visitors and cultural producers are attracted to the city by its literary and cultural associations and their presence, in turn, reinforces and enhances that reputation. However, he also recognised that this process is contested and that others have real concerns about the ways in which Thomas is used.

While groups and individuals did raise concerns, our interviews revealed above all a shared acceptance that the appropriation and promotion of Thomas was necessary. One academic felt that:

Local authorities are simply reflecting the economic state of the area. They’re *desperate* to find something that will bring people in to spend money. And I think that is how they see Thomas. They see him as somebody who can be marketed because he has an international name.

Another academic reflected:

Part of me deplores it but part of me sympathises with the council. I’ve got mixed feelings. If I were in tourism in Swansea, I’d use Dylan Thomas.

The Dylan Thomas Society’s position on branding Thomas was discussed by the Chair: “I don’t think we’d

have any problem with that . . . I think that we’re concerned that things are . . . tasteful rather than tasteless.” Other responses were that any branding must be ‘creative,’ ‘not tacky or naff,’ ‘intelligently done’ and ‘sustainable.’ So, it was a resigned acceptance at times, and tempered with a concern that developments should be sensitive, should not ‘overdylanise’ places with which he is associated, and should be carried out in a way that neither misuses Thomas nor overshadows other local writers and artists. A workshop exploring responses to the proposed strategy, concluded, “There was a general consensus that the appropriate and sensitive exploitation of Swansea’s linkages with Dylan Thomas was welcomed and considered long overdue” (TDI, 1998, p. 1). Stead, an historian, writer and broadcaster, explained:

I think it’s right that Dylan Thomas should be used to give Swansea a literary dimension. . . . I think, first of all, every city has to look for a gimmick, you *have* to do it. You have to do it in this kind of world. Manufacturing has gone, and even if hadn’t it would not be labour intensive, so the arts are an important part of any city in the world, the arts are big business, and you have to accept that we’re living in a consumer society. . . . It’s absolutely right that Swansea uses him. I think that is absolutely legitimate . . . [but] he should be used in a creative way.

One respondent spoke out strongly against the Council’s deployment of culture, objecting to what he described as the authority’s philistinism and its use of Thomas as “a crude touristic thing that has absolutely nothing to do with writing.” Yet even he accepted that “it would be folly to ignore an asset of that kind. . . . Cities have to work to their strengths.”

The dominant viewpoint that emerged is that this commodification of culture is a necessary process. This lends support to Bianchini and Parkinson’s claim that the adoption of cultural strategies has become increasingly uncontested (1993, p. 199). The naturalisation of this rhetoric also supports Frith’s suggestion that what is significant is “not how successful culture is as a local industry, but why the left now agrees with the right that this is the best way to think it” (1991, p. 137). In the words of a senior and long-time Labour Councillor:

I’ve always felt we’ve never used the Dylan Thomas name enough. . . . Our first consideration is the people of Swansea, and you can see that we’ve got assets that we’re not using for the benefit of the people of Swansea.

In his view it would clearly be wrong *not* to exploit Thomas commercially. His argument therefore

constructs this process of cultural commodification as itself a moral responsibility.

#### 4.3. *Stuffed chicken or Celtic tiger*

The question of branding raised the issue of the council's logo. The current logo, sometimes referred to disparagingly as "the stuffed chicken," is an osprey but some feel strongly that the logo should be an image of Dylan Thomas. In council reports, the local press and our interviews Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Barcelona, Bilbao and Glasgow were all mentioned as good models of culture-driven regeneration, but by far the most commonly cited example was Dublin. This creates a pleasing symmetry as Thomas himself wrote fondly of Swansea as his "marble city, city of laughter, little Dublin."<sup>33</sup> Recent Irish economic success has labelled it 'the Celtic Tiger' (Sweeny, 1998; Breathnach, 1998). The Irish economy has been described as "one of the most remarkable economic transformations of recent times: from 'basket-case' to 'emerald tiger' in 10 years" (Henry and Deane, 1997, p. 541; Economist, 1997, p. 26) and tourism has played a significant role in this growth. Swansea wishes to duplicate some of Dublin's success by developing a 'Dylan Thomas Country' strategy modelled on 'James Joyce Country.' An officer for Leisure explained: "We're prepared in a sense to pick anybody's brains, you know there's no point in reinventing the wheel" for, as the Council Leader made clear, "Dublin has made very good plans and is doing very well out of it. We intend to copy." In the words of another Leisure Services officer:

*Dylan* promotes Swansea. That's right. *We* don't need to do it, we just have to get on the back of him and hang onto his tail feathers and go for it. [emphasis in original]

So, would 'ditching the chicken' and seizing Thomas instead help to Swansea move closer to a Celtic tiger economy?

In some respects the Dublin parallels were written in to the story almost before it began. Kevin Thomas, former Director of The Welsh Academy,<sup>34</sup> originally encouraged Swansea to bid for the YOLW and was influenced by his visit to Dublin's Writers' Centre (Thomas, 1991). Later, the TDI report recommended a Council study visit to Dublin on the grounds that it is the best example of a city utilising the strategies described in the report (TDI, 1998, p. 33), but, while

Swansea can certainly learn from Dublin, the two cities do have some fundamental differences, so Swansea must be wary about trying to translate directly from the Irish experience.

There is another parallel with Dublin that has yet to run its course. Ireland, and Dublin in particular, enjoyed a strong flow of inward investment during the 1990s, especially into information technology industries. This fuelled a property boom in Dublin and rising levels of prosperity. Designation as an Objective One region allowed much of Ireland to qualify for economic aid and this has been no small factor. Since 1998, Swansea has fallen into Objective One classification and there are hopeful indicators, with projects such as the high technology Techniums that similar growth may be starting. With place promotion and marketing becoming increasingly important for Swansea, it is important to recognise that there is both 'positive' and 'negative' marketing at work (Jessop, 1997, p. 40). Classification as an eligible Objective One region has negative connotations but it can present funding opportunities. On one hand Swansea wants to enhance its image to attract business and tourism, but on the other, it must also strategically package its multiple disadvantages to compete for funds.<sup>35</sup> Here, deprivation becomes re-configured as a kind of competitive advantage and two contrasting faces of Swansea are selectively constructed for different audiences.

In Wales there are increasing trends to capitalise on constructions of 'Celtic heritage' (Gruffudd et al., 1999). Some interviewees suggested Wales has been missing out on this growing fashion for 'Celticness,' making the point that Celtic culture tends to be associated primarily with Irish culture and sometimes Scottish, but rarely Welsh. A Welsh Academy member identified a dilemma facing Wales as a result:

How then do I feel about the Wales Tourist Board saying we need now to promote Wales as a Celtic country? Part of me says rubbish! And also that it's dangerous because it misrepresents Wales to itself and the world. Part of me says for heaven's sake the Irish have made a mint out of it and what's more they've gained confidence by it. ... It's worked. So I've been preaching to various organizations that it's time to get onto this bandwagon ... although part of me deplures it, *deplures* it.

This comment is revealing in the way that it relates the construction of 'Celticness' to notions of confidence. Many interviewees felt that Wales lacks a sense of na-

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Vernon Watkins, 13 December, 1939 (Ferris, 1985, p. 435).

<sup>34</sup> This is the Welsh writers' organization, originally 'Yr Academi Gymreig,' now renamed 'Academi.'

<sup>35</sup> Hence the comment we often heard that worse than being a region's most disadvantaged area is being its *second* most disadvantaged.

tional confidence, so there seems to be a dual aspiration in adopting Dublin as a model. First there is a desire to learn from Dublin's planning process and its development of tourist product on the ground, and second is a hope to emulate the cultural confidence that Ireland is perceived to possess. The confidence theme is also explicitly picked up in S.A. Brain's promotional literature which claims that:

Dylan's [Ale] will capitalise on national Welsh characteristics such as imagination and humour and the project is considered by the company to complement the growing self confidence and positive energy apparent in Wales. (Press release, S.A. Brain, 23 April, 1998)

The position of Dylan Thomas as an important strand in Swansea's cultural policy is not secure, however, and should not be overstated. Swansea Council feels no obligation to promote Dylan simply because he is a local literary figure. It remains a pragmatic decision based on the expectation that Thomas and his writing offer economic potential. The Chair of Cultural Services was unapologetic that if other figures had greater potential as a brand they would be used instead. This sentiment shares similarities with the head of a development corporation interviewed by Clark:

We are in the development business, not the arts business. ... We find that actors walking around the streets, theatre activities in general, give off good vibrations; they make an area more renewable. If cement factories did that, we would be putting them in. (Clark, 1983, p. 13, quoted in Whitt, 1987, p. 25)

The tourism strategy recommends that Dylan Thomas initiatives should complement but not dominate existing tourism, leisure and cultural services (TDI, 1998, p. 21). The Council Leader described Thomas fitting into a second 'tier' of projects, behind six or seven major construction and infrastructure priorities. In something of a confidence boost, Swansea recently secured a couple of high profile projects. It won the bid as the location for the new National Industrial and Maritime Museum to replace the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum which closed its Cardiff Bay site in 1998. A £65 million-plus development is underway to create a showpiece Waterfront Museum in Swansea Marina. Due to open in 2005, some 300,000 visitors per year are predicted. Importantly, this is a Welsh, rather than just a Swansea initiative. Swansea Council leader Lawrence Bailey described the £11 million grant approved by the Heritage Lottery Fund as "a great vote of confidence in Swansea's ability to deliver not just a na-

tional but an international visitor destination" (Butler, 2001).

So, though Thomas is not being passed over, new opportunities have gained higher priority. As Towns explained:

I think that had the National Industrial and Maritime Museum not come here this [the Dylan Thomas strategy] would have had more impetus. Just when they were starting to really take this on board as something to promote, they got the chance of the National Maritime Museum which is huge as far as they're concerned, you know, with the money that could come and the prestige, because it is national.

While the museum's industrial and maritime connections are clearly appropriate to the city's heritage, it is the 'National' label that holds the key for Swansea's policy makers. In order to compete, Swansea feels that it needs national institutions:

HW: So has that been quite a deliberate thing wanting—with the Year of Literature, with the Museum—that kind of national designation?

Officer: It's been important because Swansea hasn't had it before you see. Cardiff has had all the national institutions.

The 'National' Literature Centre never gained this status and in 1998 Swansea lost to Cardiff in its bid to house the National Assembly of Wales. In addition to the museum, the other principal national acquisition has been the Sportslot-funded Welsh National Swimming Pool. This will be the only Olympic size pool in Wales and replaces Cardiff's Empire Pool, demolished to accommodate its Millennium Stadium development. This aspiration for national status also typifies Swansea's long history of rivalry with Cardiff. Great pride is attached to certain projects regarded as being successfully snatched from Cardiff. "Hands off our pool, Cardiff!" warns the South Wales Evening Post: "Swansea Council's men leader Mike Hedges today warned Cardiff to stop trying to steal the Welsh international swimming pool and national maritime museum" (Crockford, 2000). In a sense, this may be part of Thomas's appeal too. Stevens notes that "Many refer to the unique selling opportunity that Dylan Thomas provides for Swansea something that Cardiff does not have" (TDI, 1998, Appendix III).

## 5. Conclusion

This study of Swansea has allowed us to engage with several key issues that emerge as cities develop cultural policies. We ask three questions. Firstly, how coherent is

this cultural policy and how does it fit within development strategies? Secondly, What kinds of tensions emerge and how are they resolved? Thirdly, how does decision-making work to achieve cultural objectives? We close with some thoughts about how Swansea can work with a figure like Thomas.

The Council has made progress with Dylan Thomas initiatives, albeit more slowly than many had hoped.<sup>36</sup> Some expressed frustration that despite two consultants' reports (AEA, 1996; TDI, 1998), little had been implemented, but others argued that this incremental adoption of key recommendations would lead to substantial progress in the longer term.

### 5.1. *A coherent cultural policy?*

Swansea's 'strategy' seems curiously 'unstrategic,' though this may not be untypical. Officers argued that there was a strategic vision to which the council was committed, but it remained *unwritten*:

There's been a shift, you know, it's a dynamic. The thing people can't quite understand is opportunities don't necessarily follow a finite strategic path, right. Twelve months ago we wouldn't have been talking so exuberantly about the National Museum. That opportunity didn't exist. [...] It hasn't changed our resolve really in terms of looking at culture as an important regenerative development tool, as a marketing branding tool, as a tourism development tool. [...] There are lots of strategic aims underlying the development of culture. Some of them are obvious, some of them are opportunistic, and some of them are well established. We have to respond to that and the strategy has got to be dynamic; the fact that it hasn't been written down probably represents this fluidity in a way, but it doesn't demean the fact that we are committed to it really.

The Dylan Thomas Centre manager spoke of the 'natural' progression by which the strategy evolved:

The actual drive to promote Dylan, how did that start? [*Pause*] It started with an unofficial meeting between some councillors and officers and we were just talking about taking this place forward. I don't know who mentioned it but somebody said why don't we do a Dylan Thomas Festival. So I came

back to the Literature Officer and said 'We're doing a Dylan Thomas festival.' And it wasn't one of those things that was like a big idea and 'God isn't this fantastic' it was like, oh you know, of course, why not. So it was completely accepted. It was just a gradual next step.

Some criticised this as 'piecemeal' but others valued this more 'organic' approach. Both problems and opportunities may arise unexpectedly and can significantly alter the scope and direction of the strategy. The question of whether to purchase 5 Cwmdonkin Drive surfaced repeatedly over the years, but was not pursued due to concerns about cost and viability. At our interview with the Director and the Chair of Leisure, both were in high spirits, having minutes before agreed a lease on the house, an opportunity which had not arisen previously.

The opportunism and flexibility of policy came across strongly. Asked if particular projects were under consideration, a senior Council member was non-committal: "Everything's under consideration [...] nothing's ruled in, and nothing's ruled out." Projects are kept on the 'back burner' and picked up as funds and circumstance allow. This is indicative of the economic pressures on councils and the unpredictability of the policy making process. The Dylan theme formed the 'soft end' of a broader strategy and more tangible projects, particularly those with a 'national' designation or with a more explicitly economic investment opportunity, moved to the top of the agenda.

### 5.2. *What kinds of tensions?*

There were tensions evident but these did not take the traditional form of conflict between 'high' and 'popular' culture. The debate was more about Thomas's character and the problematic aspects of his life-style. This dislike was never confined to local people. Kingsley Amis, who met Thomas during his own years as a Lecturer at University College, Swansea, described him as a thoroughly unpleasant man (Amis, 1992, p. 136).

It is this tension above all that has inhibited the city from adopting Dylan Thomas more fully. However there was a notable absence of tensions between the different groups who, appreciating the position in which the City and the Council find themselves, share a belief that the Dylan Thomas brand will be advantageous for Swansea. The council has explicit economic objectives in its cultural policy but these have been found acceptable to those primarily concerned with the literary legacy. The crucial issues are partly the pace of change, and particularly the *sensitivity* with which it is done. This is matched with a concern that Thomas should not overshadow new generations of local writers.

<sup>36</sup> The Dylan Thomas Festival has become well established as an annual event, now shifted from the summer to the autumn 'shoulder season' to fit better with the short-break market and to coincide with the anniversary of his birth. Four illustrated trail guides around Swansea and West Wales have been developed and a year of events is planned for 2003 to mark the 50th Anniversary of his death.

### 5.3. How does decision making work?

Dylan Thomas Society members expressed frustration that for years the Council had resisted what they saw as evident commercial advantages of promoting Thomas. A representative commented “I must say here and I don’t mind saying it on tape, that we didn’t exactly have much support from the city council.” However, they gave credit to those in the authority now working to promote Thomas’s profile.

This raises the question of who is actually taking forward this initiative. An officer in Leisure was blunt about there being a small group of key individuals driving this project; himself, the Literature Officer and a local bookseller. The ‘trio’ made up an informal ‘public-private partnership’ that was providing a comfortable and productive working relationship. Working at the ‘edges’ of the authority in this way offered them freedom, flexibility and opportunities to collaborate with like-minded individuals. It is interesting how their language constructs an ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the local authority: ‘we,’ here, is a small and informal group spanning the public and private sectors and the Council becomes ‘they.’

A history of departmental differences was mentioned repeatedly. One interviewee from outside the council observed “There’re *terrible* demarcation lines in local councils. They’re all working to the same place in the end. [...] The fact that Leisure and Tourism don’t work together is awful. They need to get over that.” The Dylan Thomas Tourism strategy was a strongly Leisure-led initiative and, while Economic Development and Tourism subsequently adopted it as an important strand of their work, there was initial resistance. Officers in Leisure pursued initiatives as best they could, “We are juggling what money is available to push the thing forward as we can and whatever help we can get from economic development and tourism we will get, but we’re doing it anyway.” The Leisure Officer outlined some early difficulties:

Leisure Officer: Consultants [were] employed to look at Dylan Thomas with regard to tourism, because whilst we’re all convinced that Dylan Thomas has substantial attraction in terms of tourism [...] we found it extremely difficult to convince anybody else.

HW: That seems surprising.

Leisure Officer: Yes, I mean the Wales Tourist Board [...] went into kind of raptures when they found that there was somebody who was actually prepared to promote Dylan Thomas within Swansea, I mean they were over the moon. But there are various departments within the author-

ity, and one person, I quote one person, ‘I do not see Dylan Thomas to be a major part of the tourist strategy within Swansea for the foreseeable future.’ And that’s the tourist department!

Comments were made that a few still had “the old mentality” of protecting territory rather than collaborating, but most agreed that changes in departmental culture since reorganisation enabled these departments to work together more effectively than in the past.

A local historian praised the council’s commitment to culture: “There is a seriousness of purpose, there are good people on the council.” Overall there was more confidence in the council, a feeling that its attitude had changed and a belief that the promotion of Dylan Thomas would now be more comprehensive, sensitive and sustainable. A former YOLW officer felt that plans for Thomas were now being dealt with more appropriately, “The new regime is different, will be far more sensitive and will know where it’s going.” Whereas other cities have embraced their literary connections readily and swiftly, Swansea’s hesitancy reflects the perceived difficulties associated with its particular heritage. The indications from Dublin and elsewhere, though, are that dissonance does not detract from interest.

### 5.4. What to do with a difficult child?

Thomas was Swansea’s ‘most famous son,’ but never its most favoured. As a figure with an international reputation and substantial tourist appeal, he offers Swansea a potentially lucrative ‘unique selling point.’ How, then, to balance that with his negative associations? Can a ‘difficult’ figure provide a sound basis for a cultural tourism strategy?

We suggest that it can so long as Swansea’s authorities resist the temptation to either sanitise or sensationalise Thomas. More productive would be to market precisely Thomas’s *contradictions*. Davies too suggests that this is the crux of his appeal and explains, jokingly, that:

Dylan Thomas was a slob. He was a dreadful man, absolutely terrible, [*laughter*]. ... I think what increasingly interests people, and I know what interests students, is this big difference between, if you like, the man and the work. Now, he was a terrible man and he wrote, I think, rather good and occasionally great poetry.

Rather than attempting to provide a singular and authoritative story, it should be possible to offer visitors the complex nature of Thomas through a series of questions: What was he like? How do we know? Can we separate someone’s ‘life’ from their ‘work?’ How did

place shape his work? How significant was his Welsh identity? Who made his image and how is it portrayed? What kind of myths and stereotypes are at play? The authorities should be open and self-reflexive about the tensions, and about the range of individuals and institutions complicit in constructing these images, including Thomas himself.

Competing images of Thomas remain in circulation and continue to arouse debate. Some argue that Thomas's reputation makes his work unacceptable; some that it is irrelevant; others that it is untrue; and still others hold that his image rather than his writing was the basis of his fame. Interviewed in a recent HTV Wales documentary, Hawkes described Thomas as image-obsessed caricature (Whitney, 2001) who turned himself into crude and overdrawn national and cultural stereotypes:<sup>37</sup>

He's the picture of what, popularly, people think poets should be. He's the romantic poet who drinks, falls over and is sick, and puts his hands up ladies' skirts. He fell quickly, I think, into a caricature and worse than that, he played up to English notions of what a Welshman, and particularly a Welsh poet, might be like. (South Wales Echo, 27 August, 2001)

Thomas was clearly concerned with his image and made efforts to build a reputation as a poet and a bohemian, so it is perhaps fitting that in Swansea's effort to rebuild its image the authorities are adopting a figure who was himself so skilled at telling stories and carefully cultivating his image.

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### Appendix. Methodology

The main research method was interviews conducted with 25 key informants over a period of time from September 1998 to July 1999. Additionally there was a considerable amount of local archival work, including press coverage, unpublished reports and council minutes, together with use of the wider literature. Outside the arranged interviews there was a continuing informal dialogue with more accessible individuals that extended

over much of the research period, particularly at festival events. The interviews took the form of semi-structured discussions in which the researcher prompted responses on a range of topics. The list of those interviewed was constructed to represent the different players in the debate about cultural policy, arts programming and the role of Dylan Thomas. We concentrated on those with professional or personal links with Thomas rather than interviewing visitors or consumers. The research period post-dated the Year of Literature and some of the key decisions concerning the Dylan Thomas Centre. Interviewees included elected members of the Council of the City and County of Swansea who had some particular interest in cultural policy. Also included was the Leader of the City and County Council. Officers in several departments in the same local authority broadly paralleled the areas of responsibility of the selected elected members, covering areas such as leisure, economic development and tourism. Also interviewed were officers with national organizations for the arts in Wales, planning consultants appointed by the City and County of Swansea to assess the potential role of Dylan Thomas in the promotion of tourism, officers in local societies concerned with the arts and including the Dylan Thomas Society, academics from University of Wales Swansea, local writers and business people with a special interest in Dylan Thomas. Interviews ranged in duration between 45 min and 1 h and 30 min. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed with the exception of one which was not recorded by request but detailed notes were made shortly after the meeting.

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<sup>37</sup> Hawkes is an Emeritus Professor at Cardiff University. Dylan Thomas was the subject of the final programme in the HTV Wales series 'Tin Gods,' shown 31 August, 2001, which was very critical about his work.



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