

Dylan Thomas'
**A Child's
Christmas in Wales**

"Sweet, funny...a rollicking production." Providence Journal



A play with music adapted and
directed by Tony Estrella,
based on the works of Dylan Thomas

sandra feinstein-

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STUDY GUIDE

A Child's Christmas in Wales Study Guide

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THEATER AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE AND DISCUSSION

(PLEASE READ CAREFULLY AND GO OVER WITH YOUR CLASSES BEFORE THE SHOW)

Speaking to your students about theater etiquette is ESSENTIAL. Students should be reminded that this is a LIVE performance and that they should not talk during the show. Impressing this upon students will enhance their enjoyment of the show and allow other audience members to do the same.

Talking during the show, chewing gum, rattling candy wrappers, etc. can be disruptive to the actors on stage and will not be tolerated during the performance.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BEFORE SEEING THE SHOW AT THE GAMM THEATRE:

- What are the differences between live theater and cinema? (Two dimensional vs. three dimensional; larger than life on the screen vs. life-size; recorded vs. live, etc.)
- Discuss the nature of film as mass-produced, versus the one-time only nature of live performances. How does live theatre enhance the story, bringing the characters to life on a stage vs. seeing the characters on screen? Live theatre is like story telling, it brings the audience into the story.
- Discuss the elements that go into producing a live performance: The lights, set, props, costumes, and stage direction. All the people involved in the "behind the scenes" elements of the theater are working backstage as the play unfolds before the students' eyes. Tell them to be aware of this as they watch the show.

From Gamm Artistic Director Tony Estrella

We commune in the theater for many reasons. Ultimately, we can boil them down to our inherent human need for understanding: the attempt to grasp something significant as to the whys and wherefores of our existence, and to have a good laugh and/or cry along the way. And we do so in a group that, by its nature, assures us we are not alone and validates our individual cares and concerns by the very fact that they are shared among strangers. We casually refer to this collective as an *audience*. Unlike a television *viewership*, which spends its evenings over- (or under-) whelmed by a bombardment of visual imagery, theater audiences share a story primarily by listening.

Dylan Thomas was, by any measure, an extraordinary poet and storyteller whose great celebratory and buoyant power lies in his words' impact on the ear. Their muscular, musical rhythms, somewhere between nursery rhyme and Shakespeare, reach their height when spoken — when given flight by that most beautiful of all instruments, the human voice. Best to let him speak for himself:

"I should say I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words. ... What mattered was the *sound* of them as I heard them for the first time on the lips of the remote and incomprehensible grown-ups who seemed, for some reason, to be living in my world. And these words were, to me, as the notes of bells, the sounds of musical instruments, the noises of winds, sea, and rain, the rattle of milkcarts, the clopping of hooves on cobbles, the fingering of branches on a windowpane, might be to someone, deaf from birth, who has miraculously found his hearing. I did not care what the words said, overmuch, nor what happened to Jack and Jill and the Mother Goose rest of them; I cared for the shapes of sound that their names, and the words describing their actions, made in my ears; I cared for the colours the words cast on my eyes ... I fell in love—that is the only expression I can think of—at once, and am still at the mercy of words...."

Fifty years after Thomas' death in a hotel room in New York City, we, his *audience*, are still at the mercy of the great Welsh poet's infatuation with words and his joyous celebration of life, family, and the undying, awe-stricken wonder of childhood. I hope you enjoy the sounds and sights of his holiday memories. May your own be as transcendent and wonderful.

Iechyd Da, Merry Christmas, Peace...

UNIT 1 RESOURCES

A Child's Christmas in Wales

by Dylan Thomas

One Christmas was so much like another, in those years around the sea-town corner now and out of all sound except the distant speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment before sleep, that I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six.

All the Christmases roll down toward the two-tongued sea, like a cold and headlong moon bundling down the sky that was our street; and they stop at the rim of the ice-edged fish-freezing waves, and I plunge my hands in the snow and bring out whatever I can find. In goes my hand into that wool-white bell-tongued ball of holidays resting at the rim of the carol-singing sea, and out come Mrs. Prothero and the firemen.

It was on the afternoon of the Christmas Eve, and I was in Mrs. Prothero's garden, waiting for cats, with her son Jim. It was snowing. It was always snowing at Christmas. December, in my memory, is white as Lapland, though there were no reindeers. But there were cats. Patient, cold and callous, our hands wrapped in socks, we waited to snowball the cats. Sleek and long as jaguars and horrible-whiskered, spitting and snarling, they would slink and sidle over the white back-garden walls, and the lynx-eyed hunters, Jim and I, fur-capped and moccasined trappers from Hudson Bay, off Mumbles Road, would hurl our deadly snowballs at the green of their eyes. The wise cats never appeared.

We were so still, Eskimo-footed arctic marksmen in the muffling silence of the eternal snows - eternal, ever since Wednesday - that we never heard Mrs. Prothero's first cry from her igloo at the bottom of the garden. Or, if we heard it at all, it was, to us, like the far-off challenge of our enemy and prey, the neighbor's polar cat. But soon the voice grew louder.

"Fire!" cried Mrs. Prothero, and she beat the dinner-gong.

And we ran down the garden, with the snowballs in our arms, toward the house; and smoke, indeed, was pouring out of the dining-room, and the gong was bombilating, and Mrs. Prothero was announcing ruin like a town crier in Pompeii. This was better than all the cats in Wales standing on the wall in a row. We bounded into the house, laden with snowballs, and stopped at the open door of the smoke-filled room.

Something was burning all right; perhaps it was Mr. Prothero, who always slept there after midday dinner with a newspaper over his face. But he was standing in the middle of the room, saying, "A fine Christmas!" and smacking at the smoke with a slipper.

"Call the fire brigade," cried Mrs. Prothero as she beat the gong. "There won't be there," said Mr. Prothero, "it's Christmas." There was no fire to be seen, only clouds of smoke and Mr. Prothero standing in the middle of them, waving his slipper as though he were conducting.

"Do something," he said. And we threw all our snowballs into the smoke - I think we missed Mr. Prothero - and ran out of the house to the telephone box.

"Let's call the police as well," Jim said. "And the ambulance." "And Ernie Jenkins, he likes fires."

But we only called the fire brigade, and soon the fire engine came and three tall men in helmets brought a hose into the house and Mr. Prothero got out just in time before they turned it on. Nobody could have had a noisier Christmas Eve. And when the firemen turned off the hose and were standing in the wet, smoky room, Jim's Aunt, Miss. Prothero, came downstairs and peered in at them. Jim and I waited, very quietly, to hear what she would say to them. She said the right thing, always. She looked at the three tall firemen in their shining helmets, standing among the smoke and cinders and dissolving snowballs, and she said, "Would you like anything to read?"

Years and years ago, when I was a boy, when there were wolves in Wales, and birds the color of red-flannel petticoats whisked past the harp-shaped hills, when we sang and wallowed all night and day in caves that smelt like Sunday afternoons in damp front farmhouse parlors, and we chased, with the jawbones of deacons, the English and the bears, before the motor car, before the wheel, before the duchess-faced horse, when we rode the daft and happy hills bareback, it snowed and it snowed. But here a small boy says: "It snowed last year, too. I made a snowman and my brother knocked it down and I knocked my brother down and then we had tea."

"But that was not the same snow," I say. "Our snow was not only shaken from white wash buckets down the sky, it came shawling out of the ground and swam and drifted out of the arms and hands and bodies of the trees; snow grew overnight on the roofs of the houses like a pure and grandfather moss, minutely - ivied the walls and settled on the postman, opening the gate, like a dumb, numb thunder-storm of white, torn Christmas cards."

"Were there postmen then, too?"

"With sprinkling eyes and wind-cherried noses, on spread, frozen feet they crunched up to the doors and mittened on them manfully. But all that the children could hear was a ringing of bells." "You mean that the postman went rat-a-tat-tat and the doors rang?"

"I mean that the bells the children could hear were inside them."

"I only hear thunder sometimes, never bells."

"There were church bells, too."

"Inside them?"

"No, no, no, in the bat-black, snow-white belfries, tugged by bishops and storks. And they rang their tidings over the bandaged town, over the frozen foam of the powder and ice-cream hills, over the crackling sea. It seemed that all the churches boomed for joy under my window; and the weathercocks crew for Christmas, on our fence."

"Get back to the postmen"

"They were just ordinary postmen, fond of walking and dogs and Christmas and the snow. They knocked on the doors with blue knuckles"

"Ours has got a black knocker...."

"And then they stood on the white Welcome mat in the little, drifted porches and huffed and puffed, making ghosts with their breath, and jogged from foot to foot like small boys wanting to go out."

"And then the presents?"

"And then the Presents, after the Christmas box. And the cold postman, with a rose on his button-nose, tingled down the tea-tray-slithered run of the chilly glinting hill. He went in his ice-bound boots like a man on fishmonger's slabs.

"He wagged his bag like a frozen camel's hump, dizzily turned the corner on one foot, and, by God, he was gone."

"Get back to the Presents."

"There were the Useful Presents: engulfing mufflers of the old coach days, and mittens made for giant sloths; zebra scarfs of a substance like silky gum that could be tug-o'-warred down to the galoshes;

blinding tam-o'-shanters like patchwork tea cozies and bunny-suited busbies and balaclavas for victims of head-shrinking tribes; from aunts who always wore wool next to the skin there were mustached and rasping vests that made you wonder why the aunts had any skin left at all; and once I had a little crocheted nose bag from an aunt now, alas, no longer whinnying with us. And pictureless books in which small boys, though warned with quotations not to, would skate on Farmer Giles' pond and did and drowned; and books that told me everything about the wasp, except why.

"Go on the Useless Presents."

"Bags of moist and many-colored jelly babies and a folded flag and a false nose and a tram-conductor's cap and a machine that punched tickets and rang a bell; never a catapult; once, by mistake that no one could explain, a little hatchet; and a celluloid duck that made, when you pressed it, a most unducklike sound, a mewling moo that an ambitious cat might make who wished to be a cow; and a painting book in which I could make the grass, the trees, the sea and the animals any colour I pleased, and still the dazzling sky-blue sheep are grazing in the red field under the rainbow-billed and pea-green birds. Hardboileds, toffee, fudge and allsorts, crunches, cracknels, humbugs, glaciers, marzipan, and butterwelsh for the Welsh. And troops of bright tin soldiers who, if they could not fight, could always run. And Snakes-and-Families and Happy Ladders. And Easy Hobbi-Games for Little Engineers, complete with instructions. Oh, easy for Leonardo! And a whistle to make the dogs bark to wake up the old man next door to make him beat on the wall with his stick to shake our picture off the wall. And a packet of cigarettes: you put one in your mouth and you stood at the corner of the street and you waited for hours, in vain, for an old lady to scold you for smoking a cigarette, and then with a smirk you ate it. And then it was breakfast under the balloons."

"Were there Uncles like in our house?"

"There are always Uncles at Christmas. The same Uncles. And on Christmas morning, with dog-disturbing whistle and sugar fags, I would scour the swatched town for the news of the little world, and find always a dead bird by the Post Office or by the white deserted swings; perhaps a robin, all but one of his fires out. Men and women wading or scooping back from chapel, with taproom noses and wind-bussed cheeks, all albinos, huddles their stiff black jarring feathers against the irreligious snow. Mistletoe hung from the gas brackets in all the front parlors; there was sherry and walnuts and bottled beer and crackers by the dessert spoons; and cats in their fur-about watched the fires; and the high-heaped fire spat, all ready for the chestnuts and the mulling pokers. Some few large men sat in the front parlors, without their collars, Uncles almost certainly, trying their new cigars, holding them out judiciously at arms' length, returning them to their mouths, coughing, then holding them out again as though waiting for the explosion; and some few small aunts, not wanted in the kitchen, nor anywhere else for that matter, sat on the very edge of their chairs, poised and brittle, afraid to break, like faded cups and saucers."

Not many those mornings trod the piling streets: an old man always, fawn-bowled, yellow-gloved and, at this time of year, with spats of snow, would take his constitutional to the white bowling green and back, as he would take it wet or fire on Christmas Day or Doomsday; sometimes two hale young men, with big pipes blazing, no overcoats and wind blown scarfs, would trudge, unspeaking, down to the forlorn sea, to work up an appetite, to blow away the fumes, who knows, to walk into the waves until nothing of them was left but the two furling smoke clouds of their inextinguishable briars. Then I would be slap-dashing home, the gravy smell of the dinners of others, the bird smell, the brandy, the pudding and mince, coiling up to my nostrils, when out of a snow-clogged side lane would come a boy the spit of myself, with a pink-tipped cigarette and the violet past of a black eye, cocky as a bullfinch, leering all to himself.

I hated him on sight and sound, and would be about to put my dog whistle to my lips and blow him off the face of Christmas when suddenly he, with a violet wink, put his whistle to his lips and blew so stridently, so high, so exquisitely loud, that gobbling faces, their cheeks bulged with goose, would press against their tinselled windows, the whole length of the white echoing street. For dinner we had turkey and blazing pudding, and after dinner the Uncles sat in front of the fire, loosened all buttons, put their large moist hands over their watch chains, groaned a little and slept. Mothers, aunts and sisters scuttled to and fro, bearing tureens. Auntie Bessie, who had already been frightened, twice, by a clock-work mouse,

whimpered at the sideboard and had some elderberry wine. The dog was sick. Auntie Dosie had to have three aspirins, but Auntie Hannah, who liked port, stood in the middle of the snowbound back yard, singing like a big-bosomed thrush. I would blow up balloons to see how big they would blow up to; and, when they burst, which they all did, the Uncles jumped and rumbled. In the rich and heavy afternoon, the Uncles breathing like dolphins and the snow descending, I would sit among festoons and Chinese lanterns and nibble dates and try to make a model man-o'-war, following the Instructions for Little Engineers, and produce what might be mistaken for a sea-going tramcar.

Or I would go out, my bright new boots squeaking, into the white world, on to the seaward hill, to call on Jim and Dan and Jack and to pad through the still streets, leaving huge footprints on the hidden pavements.

"I bet people will think there's been hippos."

"What would you do if you saw a hippo coming down our street?"

"I'd go like this, bang! I'd throw him over the railings and roll him down the hill and then I'd tickle him under the ear and he'd wag his tail."

"What would you do if you saw two hippos?"

Iron-flanked and bellowing he-hippos clanked and battered through the scudding snow toward us as we passed Mr. Daniel's house.

"Let's post Mr. Daniel a snow-ball through his letter box."

"Let's write things in the snow."

"Let's write, 'Mr. Daniel looks like a spaniel' all over his lawn."

Or we walked on the white shore. "Can the fishes see it's snowing?"

The silent one-clouded heavens drifted on to the sea. Now we were snow-blind travelers lost on the north hills, and vast dewlapped dogs, with flasks round their necks, ambled and shambled up to us, baying "Excelsior."

We returned home through the poor streets where only a few children fumbled with bare red fingers in the wheel-rutted snow and cat-called after us, their voices fading away, as we trudged uphill, into the cries of the dock birds and the hooting of ships out in the whirling bay. And then, at tea the recovered Uncles would be jolly; and the ice cake loomed in the center of the table like a marble grave. Auntie Hannah laced her tea with rum, because it was only once a year.

Bring out the tall tales now that we told by the fire as the gaslight bubbled like a diver. Ghosts whooped like owls in the long nights when I dared not look over my shoulder; animals lurked in the cubbyhole under the stairs and the gas meter ticked. And I remember that we went singing carols once, when there wasn't the shaving of a moon to light the flying streets.

At the end of a long road was a drive that led to a large house, and we stumbled up the darkness of the drive that night, each one of us afraid, each one holding a stone in his hand in case, and all of us too brave to say a word. The wind through the trees made noises as of old and unpleasant and maybe webfooted men wheezing in caves. We reached the black bulk of the house. "What shall we give them? Hark the Herald?"

"No," Jack said, "Good King Wencelas. I'll count three." One, two three, and we began to sing, our voices high and seemingly distant in the snow-felted darkness round the house that was occupied by nobody we knew.

We stood close together, near the dark door. Good King Wencelas looked out On the Feast of Stephen ... And then a small, dry voice, like the voice of someone who has not spoken for a long time, joined our singing: a small, dry, eggshell voice from the other side of the door: a small dry voice through the keyhole. And when we stopped running we were outside our house; the front room was lovely; balloons floated under the hot-water-bottle-gulping gas; everything was good again and shone over the town.

"Perhaps it was a ghost," Jim said. " Perhaps it was trolls," Dan said, who was always reading.

"Let's go in and see if there's any jelly left," Jack said. And we did that.

Always on Christmas night there was music. An uncle played the fiddle, a cousin sang "Cherry Ripe," and another uncle sang "Drake's Drum." It was very warm in the little house. Auntie Hannah, who had got on to the parsnip wine, sang a song about Bleeding Hearts and Death, and then another in which she said her heart was like a Bird's Nest; and then everybody laughed again; and then I went to bed. Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steady falling night. I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.

A Brief Biography of Dylan Thomas



Dylan Thomas was born in Wales in 1914. He was a neurotic, sickly child who shied away from school and preferred reading on his own; he read all of D. H. Lawrence's poetry, impressed by Lawrence's descriptions of a vivid natural world. Fascinated by language, he excelled in English and reading, but neglected other subjects and dropped out of school at sixteen. His first book, *Eighteen Poems*, was published to great acclaim when he was twenty. Thomas did not sympathize with T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden's thematic concerns with social and intellectual issues, and his writing, with its intense lyricism and highly charged emotion, has more in common with the Romantic tradition. Thomas first visited America in January 1950, at the age of thirty-five. His reading tours of the United States, which did much to popularize the poetry reading as new medium for the art, are famous and notorious, for Thomas was the archetypal Romantic poet of the popular American imagination: he was flamboyantly theatrical, a heavy drinker, engaged in roaring disputes in public, and read his work aloud with tremendous depth of feeling. He became a legendary figure, both for his work and the boisterousness of his life. Tragically, he died from alcoholism at the age of 39 after a particularly long drinking bout in New York City in 1953.

Brief Chronology of Dylan Thomas' Life

Oct. 17, 1914 Dylan Marlais Thomas born in Swansea

Sept. 1925 Enters Swansea Grammar School, where his father was Senior English Master

April 27, 1930 Starts the first of the 'Notebooks' into which he copied his early poems. (The Notebooks continued until April 1934)

Aug. 1931 Leaves school. Employed as Reporter on the *South Wales Daily Post* (until Dec. 1932)

Nov. 10, 1934 Moves to London

Dec. 18, 1934 *18 Poems* published

April 1936 Meets Caitlin Macnamara/**July 11, 1937** Marries Caitlin Macnamara

Jan. 30, 1939 First son (Llewelyn) born in Hampshire

Dec. 20, 1939 *The World I Breathe* (a selection of his poetry and prose) - first publication in America

Sept. 1940 Begins work as scriptwriter for films with the Strand Film Company

March 3, 1943 Daughter (Aeronwy) born

March 1943 Continuous work as broadcaster begins

Feb.-June 1950 First American lecture tour

Jan.-May 1952 Second American lecture tour

Nov. 10, 1952 *Collected Poems 1934-1952* published

Dec. 16, 1952 Thomas' father dies

April-June 1953 Third American lecture tour

May 14, 1953 First performance of *Under Milk Wood* in New York

May 14, 1953 *The Doctor and the Devils*. The first of Thomas' film scripts to be published

Oct. 1953 Leaves on final American lecture tour

Nov. 9, 1953 Dies in St. Vincent's Hospital, New York City

God and Death and Triangles

November 9, 2003 marked the 50th anniversary of the death of Dylan Thomas, the larger-than-life Welsh poet and author of *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. Thomas died at the age of 39 in New York City from what was delicately described as an "insult to the brain." Because Thomas was such a highly autobiographical writer, a discussion of his oeuvre is incomplete without reflecting upon his brief and chaotic life, beset by debt, alcoholism, a turbulent marriage and paralyzing self-doubt. His later years were characterized by prodigious bouts of drinking and outrageous public spectacles followed by hours of self-loathing criticism. During his bleakest hours of delirium tremens, Thomas often claimed to have ruminated upon "God and Death and Triangles." These themes of the sacred, the morbid and the abstract resonate throughout his work.

How then did such a deeply troubled artist craft the idyllic, confectionary world of *A Child's Christmas in Wales*?

A short piece originally composed for radio broadcast, *A Child's Christmas in Wales* combines two of the author's earlier works: *Memories of Christmas* and *Conversation about Christmas*. The result is, in the words of fellow Welsh poet Leslie Norris, "the best Christmas since Dickens." In it, the poet revisits a favorite theme: childhood, or rather nostalgia for a lost, idealized and innocent past. According to Thomas biographer Paul Ferris, the poet was "obsessed with being 'little': a little person, a little poet." And he viewed himself as a child in need of nurturing.

Along with the melancholic loss of childhood innocence, the Welsh national character and language permeate Thomas's writing, as evidenced by the rich poetry, punning and verbal dexterity of *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. Thomas had a complex relationship with his country, once remarking: "Land of my fathers, and my fathers can keep it." However, Wales also represented the comfort and safety he deeply craved, for he was admittedly "domestic as a slipper." Weary from a lifetime of self-abuse and ill health, Thomas retreated in this story to the halcyon days of childhood Christmases in Swansea, Wales. We can all understand the crystalline promise of the season's first snow, the warmth of familial embraces and the hope (if only for a little while) of peace on earth. *A Child's Christmas in Wales* is Dylan Thomas at his best: raucous, devilishly playful and finding joy in simple pleasures.

While the disturbing autobiographical details of Thomas's life provide insight into his complex work, they should not detract from his lasting legacy; searing poetry and prose rich in lyricism, romance and pathos. All are present in his best-known works including the poems *Fern Hill*, *Do Not Go Gently into That Goodnight*, and his brilliant play for voices, *Under Milk Wood*.

Jennifer Madden

Jennifer is PhD candidate in theater studies at Brown University and teaches theater history at Wheaton College.

Welsh Culture & Traditions

Y Nadolig (Christmas)

As in many other European countries, Christmas and its attendant celebrations came to be the best-loved time of the year in Wales, and there are many traditions connected with it, some religious and some entirely secular. For example, this was the time of the year when a plough was brought into the house and placed under the dining table to mark the beginning of the Christmas season, when work was suspended on the farms. The ploughshare was ceremoniously wetted with beer to show that even if it wasn't being used for a short while, its services were not forgotten and should be rewarded. Much of the rest of the day was spent in feasting and merry making, but it was also a time for rough-and-tumble games of football, or squirrel and rabbit hunting.

In many parts of Wales up until quite recently, it was the custom to get up very early on Christmas morning to attend the Church service known as Plygain (Daybreak) held between 3 and 6 a.m. To pass the time during the long overnight wait on Christmas Eve, young people would make treacle toffee and decorate their houses with freshly gathered mistletoe and holly. It is known that for many centuries before the celebration of Christ's birth, country people brought green plants indoors in the depths of winter, especially evergreens, which are seen as symbols of the return of spring. The mistletoe was considered both as a magical plant and a powerful protector of the home from evil. The holly, a symbol of eternal life, was also prominently displayed, along with the ivy, rosemary and bay leaves. All too, had pleasant scents to disguise the many foul odors that had built up during the long months when doors and windows were shut tight against the winter cold. Dancing and singing to the harp under their festoons of greenery, many people spent an enjoyable Christmas Eve with their neighbors until the more serious time arrived to go to church.

There, the churches were ablaze with light, provided by as many as several hundred special Plygain candles brought by the parishioners in a recreation of the ancient festival of light. The Plygain itself was often a short form of morning service in which carols were sung by visiting soloists and groups of singers, but in some churches, as many as 15 carols were sung, and services may have lasted until 8 or 9 in the morning. The custom managed to survive in many country areas, and because of its simplicity and beauty is being revived in many others. The Plygain service sometimes came to an end when groups of men under the influence of drink, after a night spent merry-making, came to the church and created disorder. Often, however, a day of feasting began the end of the service, the principal dish consisting of toasted bread and cheese (the traditional "Welsh Rabbit"), washed down with prodigious quantities of ale. For those who could afford it, goose was the main course on the Christmas menu

Gwyl San Steffan (St. Stephen's Day, Boxing Day: Dec. 26th)

As in most of the rest of the British Isles, the day after Christmas Day was always most significant in the day-to-day events of Wales. Some activities that took place on this day seem peculiarly Welsh, including that of "holly-beating" or "holming." In this, it was customary for young men and boys to slash the unprotected arms of female domestic servants with holly branches until they bled. In some areas it was the legs that were beaten. In others, it was the custom for the last person to get out of bed in the morning to be beaten with sprigs of holly and made to carry out all the commands of his family. On many farms, horses and other animals were bled in a custom that was thought to be good for the animals' health, even increasing their stamina! Luckily for the livestock, and for the young women of the neighborhood who earned their keep as domestics, not to mention those who stayed in bed of a morning, these customs died out before the end of the 19th century (though there are many, I'm sure, who would welcome their return).

Nos Galan (New Year's Eve)

The activities of the Christmas season came to a climax at the New Year. It has been suggested that the detaching of one's self from the events of the immediate past and at the beginning of a new future gave the celebration special significance.

One custom associated with the end of the Christmas season, formerly carried out in all parts of Wales but only surviving the vicissitudes of the centuries in a few villages in Glamorganshire, is that of the Mari Lwyd. This consists of a horse's skull with false ears and eyes attached, along with reins and bells, covered with a white sheet and decorated with colored strips of cloth or bright ribbons and carried around on a pole. The horse's jaw is operated to open and close usually by a young, agile man, disguised under the sheet, who carries the Mari Lwyd from door to door accompanied by his companions, Sergeant, Merryman, Punch and Judy, and various others, all dressed in motley and faces blackened. At the house doors, verses are recited by the team as they beg for admittance. Those inside the house reply, also in verse, refusing entry until the visitors inevitably win the impromptu contest (they usually have prepared a whole list of impromptu verses well in advance). Once inside the house, the Mari chases the young ladies, one person plays the fiddle, Judy pretends to sweep the hearth, Punch engages in all kinds of mischief and so on until it is time for food and drink (the wassail) to be offered to end the nonsense. After feasting, the party goes on to the next house and the verse contest begins anew, continuing in this manner throughout the day. Good news concerning this ancient custom is that it is being revived in many areas where it had formerly died out, especially by students at the University of Wales, whose merry making in the streets of Aberystwyth is carried on entirely through the medium of the Welsh language.

At the New Year, the following Welsh customs were also observed, many of them until quite recently.

All existing debts were to be paid. If not, then the debtor would remain in debt throughout the whole year. It was also considered very unlucky to lend anything on New Year's Day, even a candle. How one behaved on this special day was an indication of how he would behave throughout the coming year. For example, if a man rose early on January 1st, his early rising was ensured the rest of the year. The custom of letting in meant that good or bad luck was brought to the household by the first visitor of the New Year. In some areas, it was unlucky for a man to see a woman first; in others, it was unlucky for a woman to see a man first. Some people believed that it was unlucky to see a red-haired man first. In my own youth in Clwyd, having been blessed with red hair, I was never allowed into anyone's home on this day, until a dark person had first crossed the threshold. If a woman was bold enough to be the first person to enter a neighbor's house, then there had to follow a parade of little boys throughout each room to break the witch's spell!

The most popular New Year's custom was one that was carried out in all parts of Wales: the Calennig (small gift). Very early on the morning of January 1st, groups of young boys would visit all the houses in the village carrying an evergreen twig and a cup of cold water drawn from the local well. The boys would then use the twigs to sprinkle the faces of everyone they met. In return, they would receive the Calennig, usually in the form of copper coins. Even the doorways of some houses (when the occupants were still asleep or away) were sprinkled, and all the while a short verse was sung or chanted that celebrated the letting in of the New Year. The custom continued from dawn until noon, (after which it was considered very unlucky indeed), and in certain areas the boy carried apples or oranges into which sprigs of holly or corn were inserted. These offerings later became very fancy, with raisins, hazel nuts, or colored ribbons all helping to decorate the fruit. The custom, in various forms, survived in some areas well after World War II, at least the chanting of a small verse or two in exchange for small coins.

UNIT 2. IN THE CLASSROOM

Vocabulary

You may wish to draw students' attention to the following words before they read the story. You might suggest they work with partners to look up the words and write definitions. Or test their knowledge and have them use them in a sentence.

brigade	belfry	tam-o'-shanters	marzipan
petticoat	weathercock	rasping	fags
wallowed	fishmonger	celluloid	irreligious
mulling	constitutional	bullfinch	festoons

As a more challenging vocabulary builder for 6th –7th grade students, hand out a copy of the essay "God and Death and Triangles" by Jennifer Madden, Unit 1, page 12 of this study guide.

oeuvre	ruminated	melancholic	halcyon
beset	resonate	permeate	crystalline
delirium tremens	idyllic	dexterity	raucous
			pathos

Dylan Thomas also liked to make up words such as *bombilating*. For a fun exercise, have students find words like *bombilating* for which no dictionary definition can be found. Ask them to write their own definition based on the context of the reading.

Poetic Device

Dylan Thomas drew on a Welsh bardic tradition of storytelling and oral poetry that plays on words, sounds, figures of speech and imagery. He used a variety of poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, simile, and metaphor.

Define and discuss the poetic devices used by Thomas.

alliteration: repetition of consonant sounds usually at the beginning of consecutive words, but also at the end or middle of two or more words in a line, sentence, or verse.

"...fish-freezing waves..."

"...their shining helmets standing among the smoke and cinders and dissolving snowballs..."

assonance: repetition in a line, sentence, or verse of the same vowel sound.

"...in those years around the sea-own corner own and out of all ound..."

metaphor: a figure of speech in which two things are identified with each other; a comparison of two things without the use of *like* or *as*.

"We were so still, Eskimo-footed arctic marksmen..."

"...two-tongued sea..."

simile: a figure of speech in which two essentially different objects are compared and shown to have one or more qualities in common. The Comparison is usually introduced by *like* or *as*.

"Sleek and long as jaguars..."

"Mrs. Prothero was announcing ruin like a town crier in Pompeii."

Suggested Cross-Curricular Activities

Reading & Writing

Have the students read "A Child's Christmas in Wales" out loud so that they can hear the sounds and visualize the images.

- a. Ask students to find and share examples of alliteration and/or assonance.
- b. Ask them also to find and share examples of metaphor and simile. Ask them to explain the difference between the two.
- c. Ask them to write a poem using two or more of the above poetic devices.

Have the students read aloud or to their selves (although out loud is best to hear the sound) another work by Dylan Thomas. A copy of *Fern Hill* is included in this guide (p. 21). Have students identify examples of simile, metaphor, alliteration and assonance.

Thomas popularized the poetry reading during his United States tour in 1950 (see biography p. 10). Encourage students to hold their own poetry reading, either reading their own poems or poems by a favorite poet. Host a "BYOP" (Bring Your Own Poem) party during the holidays or in honor of the 50th anniversary of Dylan Thomas' death.

Have students write a short story about their own holiday memories. To get started, suggest that they keep a journal over the holidays, recording their impressions and sharing them with the class after holiday vacation.

Younger grades may enjoy doing the word scramble included on page 20 of this guide.

Social Studies

Hand out the section on Welsh holiday tradition and culture.

- a. Have the student read for comprehension. Follow up with multiple-choice questions about the Welsh words and their meaning.
- b. Ask the students to reread *A Child's Christmas in Wales* and identify elements of Welsh holiday traditions as noted in the hand out.
- c. Ask students to share some of their families' holiday traditions, such as a big meal on Christmas Eve or a Christmas Day walk in the woods. For students of non-Christian faiths, this can serve as a good opportunity to discuss other holidays celebrated at this time of year such as Chanukah or Kwanzaa.

Geography

Hand out maps included in the study guide (p.17-19). There is a notated and a blank map of the United Kingdom. Hand out the blank map and have students fill in the country names from memory, without referring to the notated map.

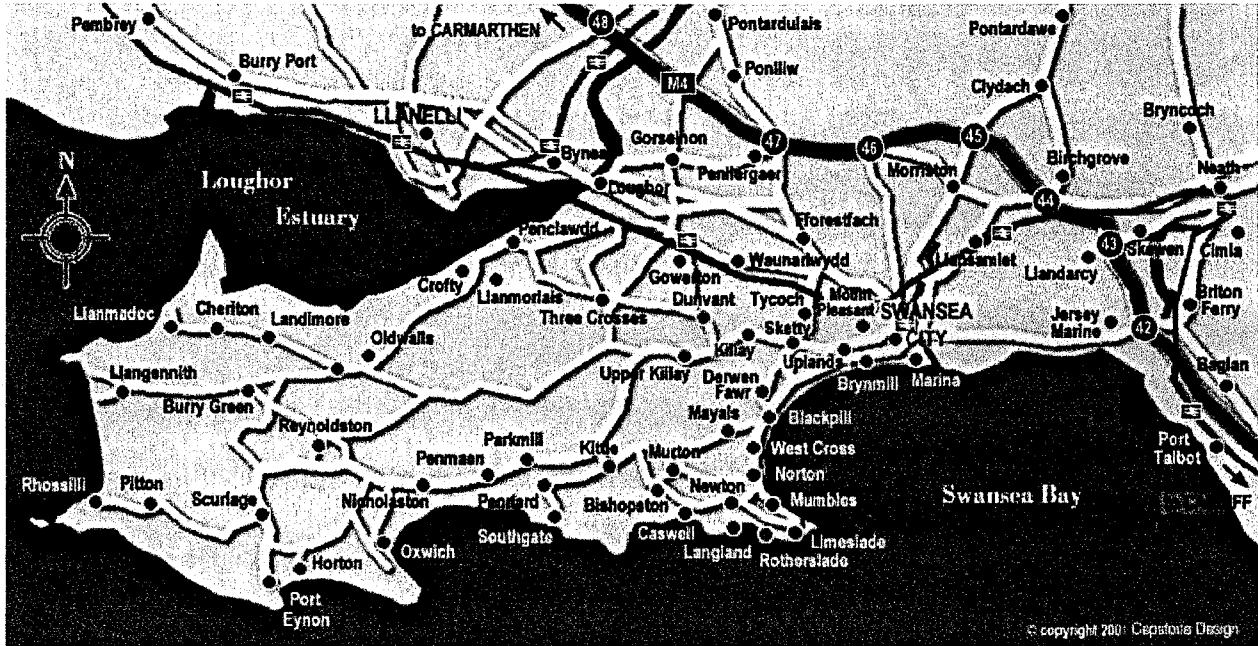
Hand out the map of Swansea, Wales and the surrounding area. Ask students to locate Swansea on the blank map and mark it with a large dot.

Younger students can use the blank map for coloring. Have them use a different color for each country i.e. red for Scotland, green for Ireland, blue for Wales, etc.





SWANSEA, WALES, AND SURROUNDING AREA



Holiday Word Scramble (with hidden message!)

All of the words below are found in *A Child's Christmas in Wales*

tihcsarm _ _ _ _ _ _ _

orhpreto _ _ _ _ _

srpents _ _ _ _ _

nlayd _ _ _ _

ashomt _ _ _ _

selwa _ _ _ _

gsnitdi _ _ _ _ _

naziparm _ _ _ _ _ _

jloly _ _ _ _

eotsimtle _ _ _ _ _ _ _

The letters in the boxes above form a secret holiday message:

_____!

Answer key: Christmas, Prothero, presents, Dylan, Thomas, Wales, Tidings, Marzipan, Jolly, Mistletoe.
Message: Happy Holidays!

Suggested Additional Reading

Fern Hill

by Dylan Thomas

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lifting house and happy as the grass was green,
 The night above the dingle starry,
 Time let me hail and climb
 Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
 Trail with daisies and barley
 Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
 In the sun that is young once only,
 Time let me play and be
 Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
 And the sabbath rang slowly
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
 And playing, lovely and watery
 And fire green as grass.
 And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
 Flying with the ricks, and the horses
 Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
 Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
 The sky gathered again
 And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
 Out of the whinnying green stable
 On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
 In the sun born over and over,
 I ran my heedless ways,
 My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
 Before the children green and golden
 Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
 In the moon that is always rising,
 Nor that riding to sleep
 I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
 Time held me green and dying
 Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Resources

Fletcher, Ralph, *Poetry Matters*, Harper Collins, NY, 2002

Peterson, R. Stanley, *Designs in Poetry*, Literary Heritage Series, Macmillan Publishing, NY, 1974

A Child's Christmas in Wales Copyright Dylan Thomas © 1955

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