

R.S. Thomas A Short History

He was born in 1913, in an English speaking Welsh family living in Cardiff. After this initial urban beginning, his family moved to Holyhead on Anglesey, in the far north of Wales, when he was nearly six. Later they lived in England. He went to Bangor University, and at the age of 23 years trained in the Anglican Church of Wales to be ordained in 1936 at St Michael's College, Cardiff. As an adult, he served as curate and priest in the rural Welsh Marches, Cardiganshire and Caernarfonshire. He married a Welsh painter at 29 years old. As an adult he learnt to speak and write the Welsh language. In 1994 he retired from the priesthood and settled in Anglesey, as a conscious return to his perceived roots.¹

Much of R.S. Thomas' poetry has been described as revealing less interest in a poetry describing a moment of experience, but more of a philosophical questing for existential questions.¹ Some have highlighted the influence of Kierkegaard's writing on Thomas.^{1 2}

In many ways he was a man of paradoxes. He was an activist for the Welsh language but wrote mainly in English, an Anglican priest ministering to a non-conformist Welsh congregation, he was a devout man who was troubled with doubt, and was loyal to his home land but highly critical of its moods and character.² It may be because of this that the question of 'why?' is behind many of his poems. Much of his poetry are full of intense strivings, bitter disappointments, and puzzled opportunities which comprise human experience. Much draws from the physical landscape of rural Wales, an observed landscape of his spiritual search.²

Motion encourages readers of R.S. Thomas' work to consider his many poems as a whole fragmented masterwork, their principal emotional achievement is to show the faith that grows in waiting and discriminating.²

Some describe R.S. Thomas as a form of prophet, calling people back to something that is in danger of being lost. His writing expresses passion and charisma. He was highly critical of technological change as controlling, and was known for being extreme on occasion, such as being supportive of the spate of English holiday home burnings in the 80s and 90s.³

From a personal perspective, the main impact of his poetry is in what is not said, the silences surrounding it, and the unspoken challenge to the reader to rediscover the existential in an increasingly dumbed-down and numb world.

¹ A. Sonjae *From Cardiff to Canaan: R.S. Thomas and Geoffrey Hill* in *The Journal of the Modern British and American Poetry Society of Korea* No.2 (1997) pages 5 – 29 as downloaded from the World Wide Web on 12th April 2004, 'http://www.sogang.ac.kr/~anthony/ThomasHill.htm'.

² A. Motion *Foreward* in R.S. Thomas *R.S. Thomas Collected Poems 1945-1990*, (London: Phoenix Press), xi – xii.

³ J. Ezard, G. Gibbs. *Wales Loses its most sustained lyric voice*. The Guardian Newspaper, Wednesday September 27, 2000.