“A Child’s Christmas in Wales” is Dylan Thomas’s most famous recorded performance and prose work. Thomas’s text has become interchangeable with its 1952 Caedmon LP; in reading the words one cannot but hear Thomas’s voice, such is the power of the recording. The prose reminiscence recreates a Christmas idyll, inscribing within it a mourning for a lost childhood. The history of the writing of “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” and its evolution as the very first Caedmon LP release provides insight into Thomas’s process of adaptation. Frequently Thomas, from financial necessity, rescripted his broadcast writing to enable publication. Caedmon’s first release also marked an important transition in spoken-word history, the LP marks a shift in modern poetry’s relationship to its audience.

Tracing the rather convoluted composition of “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” shows us how Thomas worked as a freelance writer for public broadcasting and publications. Thomas had an extensive relationship with the BBC, he was contracted for at least 145 engagements during his lifetime. He was a consummate studio performer well before the Caedmon recording, not only reciting poetry on air, but writing features for broadcast and acting in BBC radio dramas. Early on in Thomas’s writing career, BBC producer Lorraine Jameson commissioned from him a talk “Reminiscences of Childhood” for “Children Hour” in Wales (1943). In July 1945, Jameson encouraged Thomas to submit a further talk, suggesting that he might write about “Memories of Christmas,” which Thomas scripted and it was broadcast in December 1945. Two years later Thomas published an article “Conversation about Christmas” for the magazine “Picture Post.” In 1950, he combined the original 1945 radio talk and the 1947 article to create “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” for the magazine “Harper’s Bazaar.”

In 1952, Thomas, accompanied by his wife, Caitlin Mac Namara, was making a second major reading tour of campuses and art centers across America. That year, Barbara Holdridge and Marianne Mantell, two graduates from Hunter College, disaffected by their work in the publishing and recording industry in New York, set up their own company, Caedmon records. Named after the earliest known English poet and funded with a shared investment of $1,800, Caedmon’s ambition was to disseminate literary works to a broad audience. The company adopted the slogan, “A third dimension for the printed page.” As Matthew Rubery points out, Caedmon’s mission was to persuade potential customers that spoken-word recordings not only reproduced great works of literature verbatim, but also enhanced the experience of reading them. Thomas himself proposed in a 1949 BBC broadcast that the listener should expect from the poet’s own reading “a memory of the original impulse behind the poems deepening maybe and if only for a moment, the inner meaning of the words on the printed page.” Caedmon’s founding was a response to a growing interest in the public performance of literature, and the
desire to capture the writer’s voice and rendition. David Furr proposes that Caedmon’s purpose was also “to capitalize on the poetic voice as entertainment.”

Thomas’s voice was very familiar to the BBC listening audience. For many cultural commentators of the 1930s and 1940s, radio provided poets with a potential new audience and the possibility of returning poetry to its oral roots. George Orwell’s 1945 pamphlet “Poetry and the Microphone” proposed that “by being set down at a microphone, especially if this happens at all regularly, the poet is brought into a new relationship with his work.” By 1950, poetry’s turn towards orality in the US had brought it to the stage as a public performance. Thomas’s recitations were to influence a generation of younger American poets.

Thomas was due to read at New York’s “Poetry Center” at 92nd Street Y on 31st January 1952. His poem “The White Giant’s Thigh” with its exploration of sexuality and desire had long captured Holdridge and Mantell’s imagination. They decided that Thomas’s poetry should become their first recording. Thomas had established a reputation as a mesmerizing and compelling reader of his own work (a talent few contemporaries could claim). Holdridge and Mantell decided to approach Thomas post performance, but were unable to get access to the poet. The following day, though an early morning call to the Chelsea Hotel, they were able to arrange a meeting. Caedmon pitched a “$500 advance against the first 1,000 records with a ten-percent royalty thereafter for the rights to one hour of Thomas reading his poems.” Thomas agreed, and the recording was scheduled for February 22nd at Steinway Hall in New York.

Sarah Parry proposes that Caedmon’s emergence was made possible by Columbia’s development of the long-playing LP in 1947. This technological advance allowed the storing of up to 22 minutes of recorded sound on each side. Unbeknownst to Thomas, the new technology would lead to him recording, by happenstance, “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.” At Steinway Hall that day, Thomas initially recorded five poems: “In the White Giant’s Thigh,” “Fern Hill,” “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night,” “Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait” and “Ceremony After a Fire Raid.” However, the poems only filled one side of the LP disc. Holdridge recalls that Thomas addressed the problem, and suggested, “Well, I did this story that was published in ‘Harper’s Bazaar’ that was a kind of Christmas story.” A copy of the magazine was found and Thomas used it as a score for his reading.

“A Child’s Christmas in Wales” offers a conversational narrative given from the perspective of an adult self, recalling a child’s world. Thomas evocatively recreates the small rituals of family gatherings, boyish escapades and humorous tall tales. His lists of toys, confectionary and gifts is an attempt to create a magical innocence. We are however, reminded that Thomas’s Christmas is set in between two world wars. The voice of the adult self, impresses upon its listener that the work is both an elegy for Christmases past and loved ones lost—“the distant speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment before sleep.” At its center, “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” offers an unnerving doubling of Thomas as young boy: “out of the snow clogged lane would come a boy the spit of myself, with a pink tipped cigarette and the violent past of a black eye, cocky as a bullfinch.” This symbolism echoes Thomas’s technique in his successful BBC radio feature “Return Journey to Swansea” (1947). “Return Journey” married a portrait of the city with self-portraiture, the narrator (Thomas) is tasked with searching for an elusive character called “Young Thomas.” For the LP, Caedmon’s sound engineer Peter Bartók (composer Béla Bartók’s son) is credited with creating an intimate atmosphere. His sound editing became a signature of the label’s recording style.

“A Child’s Christmas in Wales” was released on April 2, 1952. A year later, Dylan Thomas was dead. Caedmon’s first LP became something of a posthumous acoustic monument--by 1960 it had sold 400,000 copies. The sleeve of the record evolved over time; the first release used a decorative pattern which referenced the book jackets of publishers such as Penguin, to reinforce a certain “literariness.” Later Caedmon dropped this conservative design, and with the help of
artist Antonio Frasconi, developed their distinctive woodblock print sleeve. Frasconi also
designed the cover for Caedmon’s historic New York recording of “Under Milk Wood.”

Caedmon’s remarkable first release denotes an important cultural moment, it brought together
many of Thomas’s most famous poems and prose into one accessible listening. The LP also
offers us a document from Thomas’s arduous US reading trips; in a letter to Caitlin he opined,
“I’m hardly living. I’m just a voice on wheels.” xi Thomas’s friend Oscar Williams asserted that
the Dylan Thomas performances at the Y, “exploded into the great fame of poetry readings... [he]
really launched the reading of poetry aloud in America.” xii Importantly, this Caedmon LP
helped distil and disseminate Thomas’s influential performance style to a younger generation of
poets in America, and the world.

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iii Dylan Thomas 'On Reading One's Own Poems' in Dylan Thomas: The Broadcasts ed. Ralph Maud (London: Dent,
iv David Furr, Recorded Poetry and Poetic Reception from Edna Millay to the Circle of Lowell (Basingstoke UK,
v George Orwell, ‘Poetry and the Microphone’, in Radiotext(e), ed. by Neil Strauss (New York: Semiotext(e), 1993),
pp. 165–71 (pp. 166). Originally published as New Saxon Pamphlet 3 (March 1945).
vi The Untold Story of the Talking Book p. 186.
vii Sarah Parry, 'The Inaudibility of Good Sound Editing: The Case of Caedmon Records’ Performance Research : A
viii Barbara Holdridge, 'Caedmon: Recreating the Moment of Inspiration' NPR Broadcast December 5th 2022
x A Child’s Christmas in Wales, p.31.
xi 'The Inaudibility of Good Sound Editing’ pp. 27-8.
xiii Oscar Williams in Dylan Remembered: Volume 2 1935-1953 Interviews by Colin Edwards Ed. by David N.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those the Library of Congress.