

“A Child’s Christmas in Wales ”

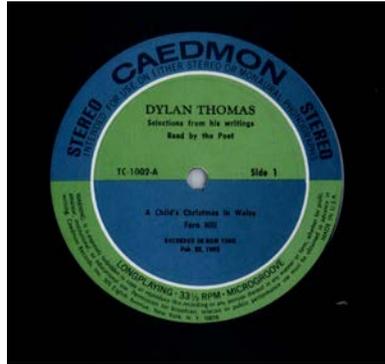
—Dylan Thomas (1952)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

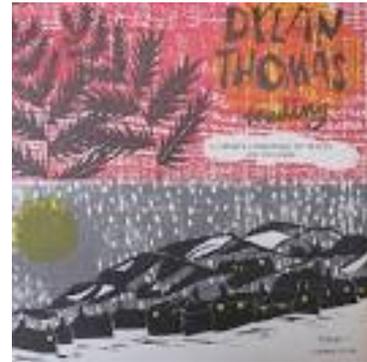
Essay by Cary O’Dell



Author Dylan Thomas



Original release label



“Child’s” original album art

Circa 1952, Barbara (Cohen) Holdridge and Marianne (Roney) Mantell were recent graduates from Hunter College each with degrees in Greek Literature but with little knowledge of the “record biz.” Still, that didn’t stop the two New Yorkers from heading down to the 92nd Street Y one winter evening to hear renowned Welsh poet Dylan Thomas read aloud from some of his works. It also didn’t stop them from approaching him with the idea of recording some of his most famous compositions for their recently-hatched enterprise, Caedmon Records.

Named for the earliest known English poet, Caedmon was the young women’s entree to the world of recording. Caedmon was one of the first companies to mass market spoken-word recordings, laying the groundwork for the eventual, multi-million dollar books-on-tape industry. Known later as the “little company with a very high brow,” the majority of the company’s titles were readings by major figures of the literary world. During its lifespan, the company would record the likes of William Faulkner, Anne Sexton (recorded only months before her death), Katherine Anne Porter, Ezra Pound (retrieved from a mental hospital for his session), Eudora Welty, e. e. cummings, Edith Sitwell, Archibald MacLeish, and May Swenson, among others.

But their whole endeavor began with their bold invitation to Dylan Thomas. By this time, 1952, Thomas was nearly as famous for his drinking and carousing as for his poetry, though his collection, “Deaths and Entrances,” released in 1946 when he was 32, had already solidified his standing as one of the modern era’s most important voices. Thomas was also already recognized as a nearly peerless reader and performer, a commanding communicator of his own verse.

Holdridge and Mantell’s recruiting of Thomas was a protracted one. After being “snobbily” turned away at the stage door by an usher informing them that “Mr. Thomas will not see you,” the ladies proceeded to write a note to the poet, signed “with our first initials and last names, so he would have no inkling that we were women. Little did we know!”

Though they did not hear from Thomas himself, they did hear from his manager who encouraged the duo to call Thomas at his New York hotel, the Chelsea. According to Holdridge, “And we called and we called and we called.” Eventually, Holdridge began rising early, phoning at 4:30 or 5 in the morning, hoping to catch Thomas just as he was coming in from the night before. That worked.

They made a date for lunch at the Chelsea Hotel’s restaurant, The Little Shrimp, for the following Saturday. There, the group of four (Holdridge, Mantell, Thomas and Thomas’ wife,

Caitlin) struck up a fast friendship and bonded over their common love of bad puns. Thomas agreed to be recorded by the start-up label and even picked up the check for the meal.

Still, not all went smoothly. Thomas either slept through or blew off one session before finally showing up at the studio for a make-up appointment one week later. And though, on February 22, 1952, he showed up—thankfully sober—he brought with him no books, just a small collection of poems (“Fern Hill,” “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” “In the White Giant’s Thigh,” “Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait” and “Ceremony After a Fire Raid”). Those would not be enough for both sides of a long-playing record. So, Holdridge and Mantell—or “the two girls,” as they would eventually become known within the industry—inquired if he had anything else. Thomas then recalled “a kind of a Christmas story,” not even remembering its title, that he wrote some time prior for “some magazine.” Eventually, Thomas remembered the magazine to be fashion bible “Harper’s Bazaar.”

Hurrying to “Bazaar’s” office, Barbara and Marianne borrowed the only file copy of the story—under solemn promise to return it promptly. Back at the studio, Thomas, now reunited with his short story, “A Child’s Christmas in Wales,” was then secluded in the vocal booth to read it aloud for Caedmon’s nascent label.

“A Child’s Christmas in Wales,” Thomas’s evocative, heartfelt memory piece, was rich in detail and inventive in language. It was a near tone-poem of childhood remembrances, wintry images, and vintage dreams. Said Holdridge, “[It was the] dusting off of something that would have remained buried.”

“A Child’s Christmas,” as Thomas read it that day, was actually a hybrid of two earlier works. In 1945, Thomas had written and broadcast a piece over the BBC called “Memories of Christmas.” His script survives, but no copy of the broadcast is known to have endured. In 1947, he contributed a piece to “The Picture Post” titled “Conversation About Christmas.” Around 1950, Thomas combined these two earlier works to create “A Child’s Christmas in Wales,” appending “Conversation” to the end of the BBC script.

The ultimate power of Thomas’s words spoken by their author as they would be felt on record could even be felt in the studio that day. Holdridge related later, “It was momentous for us. We had no idea of the power and beauty of this voice. We just expected a poet with a poet’s voice, but this was a full orchestral voice.”

“A Child’s Christmas” begins:

*One Christmas was so much like another, in those years around the sea-town corner now
and out of all sound expect 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.*

Thomas’s vivid, precise but creative descriptions were only further enhanced by his deep, caressing, slightly-accented voice, which managed to be warm yet authoritative, dramatic yet simultaneously intimate. A whole generation of narrators and audio-readers have, seemingly, adapted their styles based upon his influence.

The final recording of Thomas’s “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” would go on to enchant the public and immediately transform the Caedmon company into a viable business. The “two girls” would go on to document much of the 20th century’s greatest literature (including a second session with Thomas in 1953) before selling their business to HarperCollins in 1970.

In an unusual phenomenon, it was the audio telling of “A Child’s Christmas” that made the text of the work famous. It was only after the release of the Caedmon version that publishers put “Christmas” into book form for the mass market. “A Child’s Christmas” has not been out of print since and has also since emerged in various formats, from lavishly illustrated children’s books to slim, beautifully bound “art books” geared towards adults.

“A Child’s Christmas” has also been adapted for the screen. In 1973, Sir Michael Redgrave narrated a television production for the “CBS Festival of the Lively Arts for Young People” starring the National Theater of the Deaf. In 1987, Denholm Elliot appeared a TV treatment. The work has also been put in animated form and produced for the stage. Orchestras have interpreted it to music or interspersed its sections with selections of holiday music for live performances. John Cale, a fellow Welshman, co-opted its title for a song on his album “Paris 1919” which appeared in 1973.

As can be imagined, “A Child’s Christmas” has also become a popular work for other orators and actors, either as an audition piece or as an annual holiday presentation, though even the best, most beautifully trained voices do often pale in comparison to Thomas’s own rich, original tones.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).