



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 3100

**Thomas L. Thomas
Papers**

1924-1995

5 boxes, 1 volume, 1.6 lin. feet

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Thomas L. Thomas
Papers, 1924-1995 (bulk ca. 1950-ca. 1980)
5 boxes, 1 volume, 0.2 lin. feet

Collection 3100

Abstract

Thomas Llyfnwy Thomas (1911-1983), native of Maesteg, Wales, was an accomplished baritone who became renowned as “The Voice of Firestone.” After the Thomas family settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Thomas became the youngest and first ever Welshman to win The New York Metropolitan Opera House’s annual competition. He turned down a contract at the Met for a life of radio broadcasts, live concert performances, lectures, and charitable work. At one point, Thomas was considered the highest paid concert artist in the United States. He retained strong ties with Wales, however, including a selection of Welsh songs in each performance, being invited to join the Gorsedd of Bards, and helping launch a Welsh television station.

This small collection features phonograph albums, correspondence, photographs, clippings, and audio- and videocassettes. The majority of the collection represents Thomas as an avid enthusiast of music and horses. The inclusion of press kits and correspondence from professional acquaintances and fans provides further insight into Thomas’s career.

Background note

Thomas Llyfnwy Thomas (1911-1983) immigrated to the United States from Wales in 1923 at the age of 12. The Thomas family, including father Josiah, mother Mary, older brother David (“Elwyn”), and younger sister Gwyneth, disembarked at Ellis Island. Josiah, a notable musician in his own right, arrived with the hopes of a better life for his family.

The Thomases, like many other Welsh families of the time, settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The appeal of this particular area lay in coal mining, an industry it shared with Wales. At one time Scranton contained the largest concentration of Welsh outside of England and Wales, and Pennsylvania was considered “the heart of the Welsh settlement.”¹

¹ Heimlich, Evan, “Welsh Americans,” Thomson Gale, <http://www.everyculture.com/multi/Sr-Z/Welsh-Americans.html> (accessed January 22, 2008).

Growing up in Scranton allowed Thomas to retain not only the heritage, language, and tradition of the Welsh nation, but also the support and encouragement of a tight-knit community. His proclivity for music, begun with cantatas at age 5, was encouraged and enhanced by Josiah's insistence on practice.

Embracing his new home while remaining faithful to his heritage was a balance Thomas was able to strike early in his life both personally and professionally. Not only did he converse in Welsh with brother Elwyn, he also made certain to include traditional Welsh songs in every concert performance.

After graduating from technical school, Thomas sat poised to become an executive engineer. This proved to be a turning point in his life as he walked away from the certainty and predictability of employment in engineering to pursue musicianship full time.

Recognition came first in 1932 at the Atwater Kent Competition, because of which, as a finalist, he was presented to President Hoover. Thomas would go on to place 2nd in a pool of singers that numbered 50,000. Not long after, both Thomas and Elwyn won the only two scholarships to study singing in New York with Oscar Seagle. The brothers provided support for one another as the money ran low and the opportunities dried up.

The struggling came to an end in 1937 when Thomas became the youngest singer and only Welshman to ever win The Metropolitan Opera House's annual competition. The prize of \$1,000 and a seven-year contract offered financial security and career stability. Thomas made his operatic debut in May 1937 and his performance was well received. Again, Thomas opted for a less certain path when he turned down the contract and lucrative Hollywood offers, believing that the Met was too big a leap for a young inexperienced singer.

It was with this regard for musicianship that Thomas launched the American Opera League in 1940. The organization sought to perform opera in English and give experience and employment to young, struggling singers. This ambitious endeavor ultimately failed due to insufficient funding.

Failing eye sight prohibited Thomas from enlisting during World War II, but he became involved as both entertainer and fundraiser. Banding together with other well known artists such as Joan Fontaine, Thomas held concerts for the troops. By throwing his name and voice behind the sale of victory bonds, Thomas helped raise a significant amount of money for the war effort.

Generally, Thomas spent the 1940s and 1950s on the road, performing on two broadcast shows per week in addition to the sixty live concert performances he gave in the United States, Wales, Germany, and Australia. At his peak, Thomas was the highest paid

concert artist in the United States.² His voice became so closely associated with Firestone that he became known as the Voice of Firestone.

During this hectic period, Thomas spent his down time relaxing on a 125-acre farm he purchased in New Jersey. It became a source of great pride as he grew his own vegetables and raised cows, pigs, and chickens.

The 1960s ushered in some events and choices that would change Thomas's life. Thomas married Celia Goshinski, who he may have met decades earlier. Looking for a change of scenery, Thomas and Celia settled in Scottsdale, Arizona, and by the end of the decade Thomas had reduced his schedule to 5-7 concerts a month. International travel had taken its toll on Thomas and he began to tour domestically in knife and fork clubs giving lectures that were a mixture of song and story. Knife and fork clubs are organizations that promote networking and entertain through scheduled dinners which are accompanied by a lecture or performance.

In 1974, Thomas was reintroduced to listeners when Clyde Gilmour, a Canadian radio broadcaster, featured Thomas's music on his program *Gilmour's Album*. The broadcast ushered in a wave of appreciation from fans who sent mail to Thomas directly.

The year 1978 marked an important moment of recognition and pride for Thomas as Wales's Gorsedd of Bards selected him for honorary membership to the Bardic Throne. Individuals in this association represent those "who have made a distinguishable contribution to the Welsh nation, language, and culture."³ In an event known as The Royal National Eisteddfod, members are inducted into one of three orders. As a new inductee, Thomas was elected to the Ovate Order which requires its members to wear green robes.

Thomas was invited to participate in the launch of S4C, a Welsh television channel, on November 1, 1982. He wished the station luck via a live link from his home in Arizona.

On April 17, 1983, Thomas Llyfnwy Thomas died just one month before his native town of Maesteg, Wales was set to honor him. The ceremony proceeded as scheduled on May 11, 1983, and Thomas's cousin, Gwyn Bowen, accepted a plaque on his behalf. Thomas's remains are buried with his parents in Scranton.

Scope & content

This collection serves as an illuminating and substantial narrative on Thomas's life. The items span from 1924 to 1995 and consist of photographs, biographical materials, professional publicity, and correspondence. Other items include audio-visual materials, a plaque awarded by his native town of Maesteg, Wales, and a volume given to Thomas in honor of his performance in *H.M.S. Pinafore* at twelve years of age. Combined, these materials represent the professional and personal life of Thomas. Although the

² Elfred and Barbara Thomas, "Thomas Llyfnwy Thomas (1911-1983): Portrait of a Professional (Part 2)." *Welsh Music* 8, no. 4 (1987): 29.

³ The National Eisteddfod of Wales, "Gorsedd of Bards," <http://www.eisteddfod.org.uk/english/content.php?nid=43> (accessed January 17, 2008).

collection is detailed, items relating to his early life in Scranton and as a young performer in New York are not as prolific.

Box 1 contains two phonograph albums, photographs, and clippings that reflect Thomas's lifelong love for music and horses. The first folder contains an image of Thomas as Sir Joseph Porter in a 1924 school production of *H.M.S. Pinafore* in Wales, publicity shots from his early and later career, and two photos of sister Gwyneth's wedding. The second folder includes a 5 x 7 color photo, two black and white publicity shots, clippings about performances and appearances, and a song list in Thomas's own hand with a note explaining the purpose of such large handwriting. Folders 3 and 4 are filled with twenty-six black and white photographs of Thomas's farm in New Jersey. When Thomas purchased the property, it was in dire need of repair (see the press kit in Box 2 Folder 1 entitled "Publicity: 1937-1970") and images document its original state and remodeled appearance. Other photographs show Thomas posed with vegetables, cattle, and horses, showing that farm work had become a great source of pride to him.

Folder 5 contains seven 10 ½ x 13 ½ black and white photographs of the barn and house from various angles and in various states of repair. An 11 x 14 photograph shows Thomas with what appears to be a mule. A 2 ½ x 3 ½ photograph presents the house in its original state with two people posed on its porch.

Two phonograph albums are the last pieces in this first box. One entitled *Welsh Traditional Songs* (Victor Records) contains an inscription to Celia. The album consists of four sleeves, one for each disk holding a total of eight songs. The other album, *Worship in Song*, was produced to benefit Thomas's church, The Church of the White Spire. The album, recorded in 1969, is two sided and contains twelve songs. The sleeve provides Thomas's photograph and brief biographical note in addition to a concise history of religious music. Items related to this album, including thank you notes from U.S. Senator Paul Fannin and Hillary Rodham Clinton, are in Box 2 Folder 5.

Box 2 contains programs from various concerts and lectures, press kits, itineraries, scrapbook photos and clippings, and other miscellaneous items. The first folder contains several original and photocopied programs of Thomas's performances, the most notable being a Carnegie Hall program circa 1942; clippings, such as a photocopied review from *The New York Times* of a 1941 performance in *Cyrano*; scripts from several *Victory Loan Hour* programs; photographs including an 8 ½ x 11 black and white of Thomas with Maxine Stelman, Edward Johnson, and a general manager of the Metropolitan Opera House; and a press kit that provides interesting tidbits about Thomas's hobbies, farm, and adjustment to America.

Folders 2 and 3 document Thomas's professional performances as the Voice of Firestone and various lectures at knife and fork clubs. Items include scripts, correspondence, programs, and itineraries. The pieces span from the early 1960s to 1976 and reflect Thomas's lifelong love for music and mission to provide young musicians with experience and exposure.

Gilmour's reintroduction of Thomas's voice to radio listeners led to an accumulation of fan correspondence, some of which is included in Folder 6 along with correspondence between Thomas and Gilmour. Folders 7 and 8 document Thomas's 1978 induction into the Gorsedd of Bards with a program and correspondence in Welsh and English and photographs originally housed in a scrapbook. Fifty-nine color 3 1/2 x 4 1/2 photographs show Thomas dressed in green robes at the induction and depict family gatherings in Wales and London. Photocopies record how the photographs were originally presented in the scrapbook.

Folder 9 contains clippings about S4C, an all-Welsh television station. The clippings mostly represent the period of its launch in 1982 and mainly derive from Welsh American newspapers.

Folder 10 contains obituaries and clippings memorializing Thomas up to ten years after his death in April 1983. Folder 11 houses a program and a clipping from an event set to honor Thomas in May 1983.

Folders 12 and 18 contain remembrances of Thomas including a two-part article published in *Welsh Music* in 1986 and 1987 (Folder 12) and correspondence between Thomas's cousin Elfred in Wales and Thomas's wife Celia in Arizona (Folder 18). Inventories of items donated to a museum (Folder 14), an Ellis Island Official Certificate of Registration (Folder 13), and miscellaneous clippings regarding Welsh Americans (Folder 19) round out the collection. Of note are some clippings and correspondence in Folder 14 related to Dr. Islyn Thomas, founding member of the National Welsh American Foundation and avid writer and researcher. Correspondence from Hillary Rodham Clinton expresses her appreciation for information supplied concerning her Welsh roots.

Folder 16 contains a 12,000-word biography with a family tree tracing Thomas's forefathers and male lineage. Comments and additions are written in pen throughout the biography.

Box 3 contains three videocassettes, two of which are telecasts featuring Thomas on the *Voice of Firestone* and the other is entitled *Maesteg Man Draw* (see Box 2 Folders 14 and 17 for English-language transcript); three audiocassettes, one of a memorial service, one of BBC radio broadcasts in 1987 featuring his songs, and one that may be of a wedding; and one open-reel audiotape entitled "TLT Sentimental Journey."

Box 4 contains the plaque awarded posthumously to Thomas by the citizens of Llynfi Valley and accepted by cousin Gwyn Bowen. Other items from this event are in Box 2 Folder 11.

Box 5 features poster-size publicity images: two black and white photos of Thomas in formal wear and one full-color sketch.

Separation report

None.

Related materials

At HSP:

Hartmann, E.G. *Americans from Wales*. New York: Octagon, 1978. (E184 .W4 H33 1978)

Jones, W. D. *Wales in America: Scranton and the Welsh, 1860-1920*. Cardiff: University of Wales with University of Scranton, 1993. (E184 .W4 J66x 1993)

Thomas, I. *Our Welsh heritage*. New York: St. David's Society, 1972. (HV3198 .A2 O8x)

British Broadcasting Corporation, South East Wales Maesteg – our guide to life in the Llynfi Valley, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/southeast/sites/maesteg>.

The National Library of Wales, <http://www.llgc.org.uk>.

The National Museum Wales, <http://www.museumwales.ac.uk>.

The National Welsh American Foundation, <http://www.wales-usa.org>.

Ninnau Publications, *NINNAU & Y Drych*, <http://www.ninnau.com> – The merging of 2 Welsh American newspapers, *NINNAU* and *Y Drych*, now known as *NINNAU & Y Drych*.

S4C, <http://www.s4c.co.uk>.

The Welsh Society of Philadelphia, <http://www.welsh-society-phila.org>. The “oldest ethnic society in America.”

Bibliography

Heimlich, Evan, “Welsh Americans,” Thomson Gale
<http://www.everyculture.com/multi/Sr-Z/Welsh-Americans.html>

The National Eisteddfod of Wales, “Gorsedd of Bards,”
<http://www.eisteddfod.org.uk/english/content.php?nid=43>

Thomas, Alfred & Barbara. "Thomas Llyfnwy Thomas (1911-1983): Portrait of a Professional (Part 2)." *Welsh Music* 8, no. 4 (1987): 29.

Languages represented

English, Welsh.

Subjects

Baritones (Singers) – United States – Welsh Americans
Folk songs, Welsh
Foreign radio stations – Canada - Toronto
Immigrants – Pennsylvania - Scranton
Immigrants – Welsh – United States
Newspapers, Welsh – United States
Opera companies – New York - Auditions
Radio broadcasters - Canada
Radio programs, Musical – New York (state) – New York
Television broadcasting of music – United States
Television stations - Wales
Welsh Americans – Pennsylvania – Scranton
Wales, South
World War, 1939-1945 – War work - Canada
World War, 1939-1945 – War work – United States

Firestone Tire and Rubber Company
Gorsedd of Bards - Membership
Metropolitan Opera (New York, N.Y.)
NBC Television Network
United Church of Christ – Arizona – Phoenix

Royal National Eisteddfod

Gilmour, Clyde, 1912-1997
Thomas, Celia, 1917-1999
Thomas, David Elwyn, 1908-1981
Thomas, Islyn D., 1912-2002
Thomas, Thomas L., 1911-1983

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Gift of Celia Thomas, 1997.

Alternative format

None.

Preferred citation

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], Thomas L. Thomas Papers (Collection 3100),
The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Processing note

Scrapbook photographs were removed for preservation purposes. The layout of the
scrapbook was captured by photocopying the book in its entirety.

Box and folder listing

* Folders marked with an asterisk contain material written, printed, or sung in Welsh.

Folder title	Date	Extent	Box	Folder
Throughout life - Love of music and horses	1924-ca. 1965, n.d.	9 items	1	1
Throughout life – Love of music and horses	1954-1978, n.d.	13 items	1	2
Throughout life – Love of music and horses, photographs	ca. 1950- ca. 1960	13 items	1	3
Throughout life – Love of music and horses, photographs	ca. 1950- ca. 1960	13 items	1	4
Throughout life – Love of music and horses, photographs	ca. 1950- ca. 1960	9 items	1	5
Record album, “Welsh Traditional Songs”*	ca. 1950- ca. 1960	1 item	1	n/a
Record album, “Worship in Song”	ca. 1969	1 item	1	n/a
Publicity	1937-1970, n.d.	30 items	2	1
Discovering talent and teaching voice	1962-1964, n.d.	18 items	2	2
Informal lecture recitals at dinner clubs and similar institutions	1965-1976, n.d.	34 items	2	3
News clippings	1968-1995, n.d.	7 items	2	4
“Worship in Song” for The Church of the White Spire	1968-1969, 1992-1993, n.d.	24 items	2	5
Clyde Gilmour, Canadian broadcaster features Tom’s records	1974-1995, n.d.	29 items	2	6
Royal National Eisteddfod, scrapbook	1974-1978	82 items	2	7
Royal National Eisteddfod*	1978, n.d.	7 items	2	8
New Welsh TV Channel S4C	1982-1993, n.d.	26 items	2	9
Memorial	1983-1995	5 items	2	10
Plaque	1983	1 item	4	n/a
Program and clipping removed from Box 4	1983	3 items	2	11
“Welsh Music Cerddoriaeth Cymru”*	1986-1987	2 items	2	12
Ellis Island	ca. 1992	1 item	2	13
Islyn Thomas	1993, n.d.	8 items	2	14
Miscellaneous clippings	n.d.	3 items	2	15
12,000 word background	n.d.	22 items	2	16
Maes Teg Man Draw transcript*	n.d.	1 item	2	17

Papers – Celia Thomas	1985-1992	7 items	2	18
Miscellaneous clippings –United Kingdom	1986, n.d.	8 items	2	19
Thomas L. Thomas Voice of Firestone telecasts	1949-1951, 1953, 1959	2 items	3	n/a
Thomas L. Thomas Memorial Service, Audiocassette	1983	2 items	3	n/a
Thomas L. Thomas Memorial Service, CD: Archival & Use	1983	1 item	3	n/a
Thomas L. Thomas BBC Radio Broadcasts, Audiocassette	1987	1 item	3	n/a
Thomas L. Thomas BBC Radio Broadcasts CD: Archival & Use	1987	2 items	3	n/a
Maesteg Man Draw*	n.d.	1 item	3	n/a
TLT Sentimental Journey	n.d.	1 item	3	n/a
Unspecified audiocassette, CD: Archival & Use	n.d.	2 items	3	n/a
Shakespeare's Complete Works- Inscribed to Thomas	n.d.	1 item	n/a	n/a
Poster Size Publicity; Color Sketch	n.d.	1 item	5	1
Poster Size Publicity; Black and White	1965	1 item	5	2
Poster Size Publicity, Black and White	1965	1 item	5	3