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‘Radio’s a Building in the Air’: Lord Cut-Glass, Poet of the Airwaves

I like very much people telling me about their childhood, but they’ll have to be quick or else I’ll be telling them about mine.

– Dylan Thomas, ‘Reminiscences of Childhood’
(second version)

As a measure of the success of his first two volumes of poems, the twenty-two-year-old Thomas had been invited to make his first radio broadcast on 21 April 1937, a short feature of only fifteen minutes on ‘Life and the Modern Poet’ for Wynford Vaughan-Thomas at the BBC’s Swansea studio.1 For this he would be paid the welcome sum of four guineas. On the day, however, Thomas forgot that the programme was to be recorded in Swansea and was still in London at the appointed hour, so John Pudney had to organize for him to broadcast from there. If we add to this the fact of Thomas’s failure subsequently to provide a script, it is hardly surprising that ‘He was not invited back for eighteen months’.2 The occasion of his second BBC broadcast, on 18 October 1938, was a programme on ‘The Modern Muse’, with W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Louis MacNiece. A canon of English poetry in the 1930s, this second occasion only confirmed Thomas’s standing in the literary world. What it could not anticipate, however, was Thomas’s eventual standing in the world of broadcasting, both as a writer and as a reader. By 1953 and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, television was fast becoming established as the entertainment of choice in most British homes, and before he died in the same year Thomas had made one doubtful appearance...
on television. The 1940s, on the other hand, was the great age of radio. ‘Radio’s a building in the air’, he wrote in one of his notebook poems, and Thomas would become one of the kings of the virtual castle.

Radio features

His writing for radio began tentatively, in July 1940, when Thomas received his first BBC commission to write two short scripts for their South American Service, one on Christopher Columbus. Once he was based in London, he was more easily available to write talks on literary and, increasingly, other reflective and amusing topics, many of them personal in a way his poetry would never be. In the end, it would become another expressive medium for the poet, an extension of his letter writing style, only now the recipients of his missives were all anonymous. When Donald Taylor wound up Gryphon Films in December 1945, remarks Constantine Fitzgibbon, ‘for the next two years his only regular source of income was the B.B.C.’ The creation of the BBC’s Third Programme could not have been better timed from Thomas’s – and poetry’s – point of view. Here was a station dedicated to ‘high’ culture, part of the massive compensation offered the arts, through publicly funded bodies, for the progressive attrition of their paying audiences. Without this, without the arts councils and the expanding tertiary education system, poetry certainly would have been unable to survive. The BBC’s Third Programme, writes Fitzgibbon, ‘provided an outlet for poems and for poets such as had never before been offered by any broadcasting system anywhere’.5

Thomas was more than just a poet invited to talk on radio, however, he also wrote radio features, an end and art in itself. In January 1943, Thomas recorded a programme for the BBC’s Welsh service on ‘Reminiscences of Childhood’:

I was born in a large Welsh industrial town at the beginning of the Great War: an ugly, lovely town (or so it was, and is, to me), crawling, sprawling, slummed, unplanned, jerry-villa’d, and smug-suburbed by the side of a long and splendid-curving shore where truant boys and sandfield boys and old anonymous men, in the tatters and hangovers of a hundred charity suits, beachcombed, idled, and paddled, watched the dock-bound boats, threw