Dylan Thomas: the Anti-Fascist Propagandist

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Anti-fascism is a complex theme, and one that Dylan Thomas's life intersected with in a number of ways: as a young man in Swansea, as a wartime propagandist, and as a horrified spectator to the destructive impact of Nazism and Holocaust. Remembering this aspect of Dylan's life is important both to understand Dylan's own politics, and to recall the ways in which fascism impacted on European culture more widely too. As we move further away from the era of fascism, and the post-war consensus that emerged rejecting nationalist extremism, the ways in which Dylan's anti-fascism was of great significance to his identity have, perhaps, become ever more clear. In general terms, historians of post-war Europe, such as Tony Judd and Dan Stone, have commented on the ways in which the post 1945 era was marked by an instinctual response rejecting Hitler, Mussolini and all that their politics entailed. But Dan Stone also worries about what the decline of this anti-fascist attitude holds for the future of European culture holds too.

So, following on from this concern, it important to recall the variety of ways in which anti-fascism manifested itself, and so Dylan's typically idiosyncratic engagement with the various anti-fascist milieus that he existed within offer a telling example of how creative energies of the mid century period were indelibly marked by a mood rejecting nationalist extremism. Moreover, examining such anti-fascist attitudes is more important than working out whether a particular form of anti-fascist material remains 'good' art or not. Moreover, a truly historically driven understanding of anti-fascism is far more concerned with establishing whether anti-fascist material was useful, whether it helped in some way with the immense struggle against the Nazi regime in some manner or another. In this essay, I hope to re-appraise Dylan in this regard, presenting his as a typically minor, but passionate, anti-fascist activist and intellectual, and representing one case study in a legacy that ought not to be forgotten.

To do this I will focus primarily on his wartime films, an aspect of his oeuvre that often comes across badly in the critical reception of Dylan's various materials. Andrew Lycett has discussed this at some length, but in his biography of Dylan emphasises quotes suggesting he considered his film experiences to be merely 'hack work'.[1] Meanwhile, Paul Ferris dismissed wartime scripts as 'facile' in his brief treatment of this chapter in the Thomas story.[2] The latter is a particularly regrettable viewpoint, especially if we consider these film scripts as products of a specific historical situation, created primarily as functional, anti-fascist media, and produced for an immediate purpose and never for lasting posterity. A more positive assessment of this early

film work comes from John Ackermann, who produced the most comprehensive study of Thomas' various filmic experiences, *Dylan Thomas: The Complete Screenplays*. As this essay will show, Ackerman is right to stress that, over time, more creativity entered into the picture, and Dylan's later scripts were also used to test out ideas and techniques he was developing regarding scriptwriting more generally.

Before moving onto the films themselves, gaining a sense of Dylan's wider political sympathies are of course important to any discussion on how his anti-fascism can be understood. To do so, it is also important to stress that 'anti-fascism' as a concept comes with many narrow clichés, largely pointing to attempts to prevent fascist organisations marching on the streets developed by radical left wing activists. Yet such anti-fascist street demonstrations, and clashes, are just one form of what we can consider anti-fascist activity, amply demonstrated by a recent edited volume by leading expert on British anti-fascism of the interwar period Nigel Copsey.[1] In his estimation, Copsey suggests we adopt a much looser and expansive approach to the issue of defining what 'anti-fascism' is, and calls for us to recognise that anti-fascists are simply those people who loosely identify themselves as such, and so can come from all political backgrounds, including the political right, and can develop their actions in a wide range of forms. Anti-fascist cultures ought to be seen as far more expansive set of activities than simply rowdy street demonstrations. They incorporate essays, fiction, plays, and myriad other cultural forms that, somehow, seek to reject fascism. Moreover, the theme is concerned with how people establish a sense of their own identity too. With this more expansive approach in mind, we can see that in many ways Dylan's own cultural output, and identity, was formed in an era defined by firstly the growth of fascism, followed by a time when the world was coming to terms with the extremes of genocide that it unleashed during the Second World War. All this raises the question: how can we understand Dylan's wartime propaganda films within a wider set of anti-fascist values, and better understand the context within which he created films that are often easily dismissed as holding little to no value?

In terms of political outlook, there is some debate as to where, precisely, Dylan's sympathies lay. Nevertheless, it is broadly clear that he was a man very much of the radical left, if not a clear case of a Marxist or a communist. Form a young age Dylan identified with anti-establishment values, and, coming of age in South Wales during the 1930s, it is probably not surprising that he developed this instinctually left-leaning politics. John Ackerman has written on his intuitive leftist attitudes by highlighting that Thomas was not an artist who connected with

[1] Copsey footnote

ideology on a deep, intellectual level, in the same way as one can see in Auden or Spender during the 1930s. Rather, for Thomas it was a received wisdom taken from aspects of Welsh radicalism that helped to shape his left-wing views.[3] Moreover, Thomas was not simply an emotive left-winger without any ability to formulate sustained political thought, nor should one confuse a reluctance to politicise his poetry with a detached attitude towards politics. Victor Golightly's analysis of Thomas' politics in the 1930s is useful too, stressing his persistent engagement with Marxist viewpoints and figures while in Swansea. Characters such as Bert Trick were particularly important here, and Golightly's analysis draws out Thomas' active role within these politicised circles.

In this period, such sympathies increasingly came into conflict with the new politics of fascism. Fred Janes recalls Thomas' ambiguous, but distinctly anti-fascist, politics, as follows:

> … he could even feel tremendous sympathy with people who were completely opposite in point of view … he had this universal outlook … I think that if Dylan had ever affiliated himself in any close way with the Communist Party – I don't recall his having done this … - I'm absolutely certain that this would have been in line with what I have just said in that he was anti-fascist, anti-fascist most certainly in the sense that fascists were exclusive people … they wanted to narrow things down … to me fascism is completely anti-human, and Dylan would have been anti-fascist on these grounds. (35)

Moreover, one notorious episode in Dylan's experiences in Swansea helped to draw him into worlds where anti-fascism was a clear presence: his role in demonstrating against the British Union of Fascists in 1934, who were able to mount a 3,000 strong demonstration in Swansea.[4] Talking about his role in opposing this demonstration, in a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson, Dylan even suggested that he was thrown down some stairs in a confrontation with the BUF. In reality, this was pure mythmaking. He also went on in the letter to boast of writing a seditious article on the BUF. The point here is not whether the story was true, or to examine the article in any depth, but rather to highlight the way the episode shows how Dylan liked to cultivate an anti-fascist profile, and incorporated this into an emerging political identity. In another example on this theme while in Swansea, Thomas and a local councillor, Mainwaring Hughes clashed in the pages of the *Swansea Guardian*, a paper hosting a wide variety of left and right wing political views. Hughes defected for a time from the Conservatives to the BUF in the 1930s, and was publically critical of local Jewish people too. Such examples show how Dylan embraced an anti-fascist identity, even if this was not clear from his poetry from the period.

While developing elements of an anti-fascist profile publically and among his contacts, Dylan also commented to contacts on the theme of how he was prepared to use his writing abilities as a means to advance political points. He was a promoter of pacifism too, and a supporter of the left leaning No More War Movement. Writing to Ithel Davies on the way, as a writer, he could contribute to the No More War Movement, again in 1934, Thomas explained:

> ... we believe the present militarist trend of national politics makes it imperative that those who object to War in any shape or form should actively identify themselves with the Movement … we wish to enrol ourselves, not merely as nominal members but as active propagandists … We would wish to propagate, through the columns of all the journals at our disposal, the urgency of bringing together in a common front those who hold similar views to ourselves.[5]

So, when examining his later propaganda work, this sort of attitude is important to establish: writing considered less important aesthetically could be militated towards a political or social goal. Its purpose was different, so Dylan set different standards for it. (Indeed, looking at Thomas as a writer more generally we find different standards set for different types of work. Much of his prose fiction, such as *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Dog* and *Adventures in the Skin Trade*, were not written with the notoriously careful and precise artistic voice that he developed for poetry. Rather than sweating for days over a single line or even word, copying and recopying drafts, such prose was written quickly, and often for money – as one might well expect form a jobbing writer.) In sum, before war in Europe broke out, we can clearly characterise Dylan's politics as radically left sympathising, to the point of holding close links with communists, and also decidedly anti-fascist in outlook too. These qualities came together again, in his wartime scriptwriting.

With the turn to war in Europe, we can gain a useful insight into Thomas's initial reactions to the conflict from his friend and biographer Constantine Fitzgibbon. Fitzgibbon commented on how, for Dylan, the 'war was a personal affront'. Moreover, for Dylan's bohemian, left-leaning circle, as for many of his generation, although they loathed Nazism, they also held similar feelings for the British state and politicians. Blame for the failures of appeasement, and the turn to war, lay with the British establishment every bit as much as with Nazism's ultra-nationalist war of expansion. More worryingly still, despite by this time having a wife and child, Thomas felt that a man of twenty-four would soon be called up to fight. So for an instinctual pacifist – though one perhaps unlikely to pass the state's rigorous standards to

meet such a character description – Fitzgibbon sets out how Thomas was thrown into deep crisis by the war.[6] With no money to emigrate, he summarised his attitude to the war in a letter to John Davenport:

> I am trying to get a job before conscription, because my one-and-only body I will not give ... all I want to do is write poems, I'm only just getting going now, and enough money to keep two and a bit alive ... my money-sources ... are diminishing or dying. Soon there will not be a serious paper paying inadequately for serious stories and poems.[7]

He relocated from Wales to London, living cheaply on the hospitality of Davenport, and soon came into contact with Donald Taylor, a producer for Strand Films. Via this connection, we see Dylan's wartime propaganda films emerge. In the 1930s, Taylor had become an established figure within the radical Documentary Film Movement, which itself had developed a style of media that combined a progressive politics with accessible, realist depictions of working class life, some directly filming everyday life. As with many other cultural forms of the era, the Documentary Film Movement was also lured into developing media that directly opposed fascism as a result of Britain being drawn into war. Taylor and Thomas hit it off instantly, and Dylan was taken on as a scriptwriter, securing his much-needed wartime income. He also took the work seriously – a point often minimised by subsequent commentators. 'He never took the job lightly', remarked Caitlin Thomas on her husband's wartime propaganda work, continuing: 'he was keenly interested in the new techniques he was learning, and he was hoping to move on to other forms of film writing when, as he expected, the film industry revived after the war'.[8] Film had always fascinated Thomas, and he was excited to be working in the industry. Further, so long as Dylan turned in scripts, he could travel to Wales and elsewhere during the war. Meanwhile, London's Café Royal, or its many pubs, hosted numerous Strand Films production meetings, with the bills covered by expenses. Finally, Dylan was also free to work on poetry, and other writing projects.

We can focus on Dylan's own films later, but first it is worth setting the wider context of documentary films, and their place within wartime propaganda, in this period. When turning to the historical literature on film in wartime Britain, we do get a clearer picture of the wider role for documentary film within the Government's project for film propaganda more generally. Curiously, historians of wartime propaganda Anthony Algate and Jeffrey Richards emphasise that this period, in a way, became a golden age for British filmmaking, with the scrutiny of the

newly established Ministry of Information (MoI) often helping to push up the production quality of film. Moreover, although documentary film was initially viewed with scepticism by the first head of the MoI's Film Division, Sir Joseph Ball, from 1940 Sir Kenneth Clark and then Jack Beddington developed a much positive attitude towards the documentary form of film propaganda. Estimates suggest that, during the war, documentary film represented around three quarters of all MoI commissioned films. Although there were efforts to remove any overt left-wing bias, the Documentary Film Movement was well placed to fill this demand.

In terms of overarching messages, propaganda film either needed to offer escapism, or focus on the war effort: while feature films provided opportunities the former, newsreel and especially documentary offered ways to develop the latter. Films that the ministry were happy to commission also needed to eschew a simple nostalgia for the past, and present stories evoking the idea of a people's war leading to a renewed Britain, while also celebrating democratic freedoms. Algate and Richards's analysis also stress that this agenda, broadly speaking, genuinely resonated with the public's imagination as to the aims and purposes of the war.[9] Nicholas Reeves's work on this topic also stresses the positive achievements of British films at this time. Though newsreels were less successful, he emphasises that both documentary and feature film reached their target audiences and successfully transmitted the messages that propagandists sought to articulate.[10]

Despite the need to strike a neutral tone, within the culture of documentary making itself during the war the progressive social purpose of film was still pronounced though the notion f fighting a people's war. This tenor can be seen in many articles written for the specialist journal for the movement in wartime, *Documentary News Letter*. This publication offers a vital window into how Dylan's films, among many others, were seen within their historical setting, and professional context, and will be drawn on later to make assessments of just how well his work functioned in their intended primary purpose of being anti-fascist media.

One essay in *Documentary News Letter*, by the leading light of the Documentary Film Movement John Grierson, from 1942 typifies this continued radical tone. Highlighting the movement's pre-war goal of instilling a radical vision of social change in the mind of the British public, he stresses that the conditions of 'total war may yet appear as the dreadful period of forced apprenticeship in which we learned what we had hitherto refused to learn, how to order the vast new forces of human and material energies to decent human ends.'[11] To summarise, with his emergence as a script writer, we find that Dylan, the instinctual left-wing anti-fascist, was writing for an avant-garde film movement, though one constrained by the need to deliver the propaganda messages of the state in wartime.

With this contextual backcloth established, we can turn to the films themselves. To begin with an early production from 1942, *New Towns for Old*, here we find Thomas telling the wartime story of a town called Smokedale. The film shows how this fictional town had begun to develop new housing projects before the war and, now that German bombing had helped slum clearance, Smokedale could now develop radical new plans for its future. The film depicts scale models of the project for the town's reconstruction, highlighting their modern qualities, while commentary stresses the need to grasp the unique opportunity to radically restructure the town created by the war. Two central figures discuss this project of reconstruction, emotively linking Smokedale's regeneration to a new future for its children. With the narrative of war-as-progress strongly developed, the film ends with a scene evocative of the Field Marshal Kitchener posters from the First World War: one of the figures points to the camera and tells the audience that they are responsible for the processes of reconstruction, not elite politicians. To further evoke this people's war theme, they are given regional, Yorkshire accents.

Easy to dismiss as a piece of workmanlike propaganda, *New Towns for Old* was clearly a success within its historical situation – and this after all was where it was supposed to have an impact. Highlighting this success, a review in *Documentary News Letter* shows how the film struck the correct tone for the wartime situation:

> Sensibly enough, the film aims not at the detailing of expert opinion but rather at making the citizenry conscious of their own responsibility as regards planning as well as the difficulties involved. The style adopted is pleasant. It consists of dialogue between two men as they walk through the various areas of 'Smokedale' and discuss the things they see. One of the men takes the lead and is virtually the commentator; as he has a particularly attractive Yorkshire accent, everything he says gets home with a punch – notably at the end of the film, when he turns abruptly to the audience and points out that the realisation of the ideas of the planners rests entirely in their own hands.

There was more about the success of the film than just Dylan's script, but this was also a crucial to developing the film. Interestingly, all reviews in *Documentary News Letter* concluded with a sentence outlining the propaganda value of the reviewed film. In this case, *New Towns for Old* was summarised as being 'Very good for the Home Front, particularly since the film makes it clear that plans for the future are bound up with the war effort which we are all engaged in here and now.' [12]

A similar theme of post-war reconstruction was developed in the later film *A City Reborn*, which focused on the reconstruction of Coventry though the lens of a returning soldier wanting to start a family. Once again evoking the war-as-progress ideal, conservative attitudes towards change were represented, and critically dismissed, in a scripted pub discussion. Arnold, an older figure criticises prefabricated houses while others challenge this perspective. The latter view is augmented by a running commentary that stresses the need for new houses to replace pre-war slums. Again, this goal would only be achieved through planning and developing a unifying vision of the future. Such films, easy to dismiss as artless and dated, were deemed in the context for which Dylan wrote them as important cultural resources for the anti-fascist and essentially progressive nature of Britain's war effort.

In one way or another, depictions of men tended to dominate these propaganda films, though not always. While *New Towns for Old* and *A City Reborn* focused on the role of men planning a new future for Britain's cities, women's wartime experiences defined *Balloon Site 568*. Examining the process of recruitment to the Women's Auxiliary Air Service, this film took a commonplace scenario and set out an essentially warming story of women making friends, signing songs, and working hard at an important wartime job. The film was again seen as important in its historical context, in particular as it updated an earlier film concerning barrage balloons, *Squadron 992*, made during the phoney war period that was deemed to have dated quickly. Thomas's film reworked this significant theme of recruiting women to such roles, refreshing a central enlisting message. Its propaganda value, according to *Documentary News Letter* was as follows:

> A job, which the film admits must at times be hard, even depressing, is shown to be an inviting one. Burdensome military discipline is not to be seen – but the girls drop their sing-song in the recreation hut quickly enough when an operational order comes through. The film should bring recruits to the Service ... We have moved a little since *Squadron 992* so pleasantly mirrored our then conception of total war.[13]

As with *New Towns for Old*, it is easy to dismiss the film's script as being essentially functional, and emphasises positive aspects of warfare in a down-to-earth manner. Yet this was crucial to the brief. Moreover, judged alongside the aesthetic standards of the Documentary Film Movement more generally, this is perhaps unsurprising either. Before the war too, this was a tradition that actively cultivated realism and authenticity over escapist flourishes. Moreover, here again the

MoI's people's war theme is clearly present, again with regional accents and working classes strongly featured.

The theme of the Empire being at war was a further crucial issue for the commissioners of these anti-fascist films. We also get a clear sense of how Thomas followed the line regarding positive representations of Empire from a key article in *Documentary News Letter*. Typifying the vision to be cultivated for the wider Commonwealth by propaganda film, this essay described how the Empire ought to be depicted as follows:

> (a) The colonies, largely inhabited by 'backward' races ruled completely by us under the official principle of Trusteeship – i.e. benevolent rulership until the developments arising from improved education and social conditions enable them to become self governing, (**b**) the Dominions, largely new areas of the world colonised from Europe, completely independent, with their own Governments, laws and electoral systems; (**c**) India, Burma and Ceylon, where the issue of independence (i.e. Dominion status) is one of the major problems faced by Britain today.[14]

When we turn to Dylan's film *Battle for Freedom*, from 1942 and designed to show how the Empire was pulling together in wartime, we find that it chimes with these themes when setting out the Commonwealth at war. African Colonies are presented as less capable, though clearly progressing under the positive stewardship of British rule; as the script stresses, in the future, 'they may achieve full independence and self-government'. Meanwhile, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are heralded as paragons of freedom, the creations of the benevolent British Empire, which produced these democratic new nations. Finally, the war with Japan was presented as an existential battle for India's future freedom. As the script stresses: 'a successful Japanese invasion would mean slavery – would mean that the certainty of the British promise of India's independence would vanish like smoke.'[15] So Thomas' propagandistic representations of Empire chime with this wider them within the wartime media message.

Stressing the positive virtues of government policy can also be seen in *C.E.M.A.*, detailing the work of the newly established Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. On one level, it is yet another workmanlike script that allows for the people's war theme to be strongly developed by Thomas: *C.E.M.A.* sets out a number of regional scenes populated predominantly by the working classes engaging with and enjoying high art, including classical music and theatre. But it also connected with overarching themes of British wartime propaganda, and we can also detect the theme of celebrating democratic freedom in the film: the cultural

dynamism that the war is bringing out in the British is the antithesis of the totalitarian enemy. Moreover, *Documentary News Letter* praised film for its innovative qualities.[16] The idea of culture responding positively to the war was also developed in the film *Wales – Green Mountain, Black Mountain*, a production extolling the cultural virtues of Wales in wartime. Curiously, Thomas' script was seen as problematic by the British Council, who had commissioned the film for use oversees, because they felt it stressed too strongly Wales' unemployment problems before the war. It was eventually released by the MoI's Welsh Office.[17]

As we can see, then, although offering a functional aesthetic, within their specific historical situation these films were successful examples of wartime anti-fascist propaganda. Although defined by a now dated aesthetic, as historical documents they reveal and typify major themes in the wider Documentary Film Movement during the war. However, not all of Thomas' scripts were so pedestrian. Humour is also often associated with Thomas' writing, and *These Are The Men* was most certainly the funniest of his films. The film's publicity synopsis reads: 'A powerful denunciation of the Nazi leadership for their crimes in "setting man against man", visually based on imaginative re-use of Nazi propaganda, especially "Triumph of the Will".[18] Drawing on Riefenstahl's film was nothing new among British wartime propagandists, and *Triumph of the Will* was often a go-to film used when filmmakers wanted to depict and parody the Nazi regime. Interestingly, the voiceover for *These Are The Men* employs verse rather than a prose script, and it essentially contrasts the virtues of the allies with the evils of Nazi leaders.

Evoking the core people's war theme once more, a voice with a unifying statement of an 'us' fighting an enemy in wartime. This begins as follows:

> *Who are we?* We are the makers the workers the bakers
> Making and baking bread all over the earth in every town and village,
> In country quiet, in the ruins and wounds of a bombed street
> With the wounded crying outside for mercy of death in the city,
> Through war and pestilence and earthquake
> Baking the bread to feed the hunger of history.

This opening section concludes by asking who is to blame for working people enduring the crisis of warfare. Now the imagery switches away from shots of British bakers, workers, factories, and so forth, and draws on *Triumph of the Will*. Soon the images settle on Hitler addressing a large crowd, delivering an impassioned speech, with typically histrionic performance to go with it. Hitler's voice was quickly dimmed as a translator was faded in. The conceit here was that, rather

than offering Hitler's speech in English, Thomas' words represent the Führer confessing to various sociopathic tendencies, while also mimicking Hitler's flamboyant oratorical style:

> I was born of poor parents.
> I grew into a discontented and neurotic child.
> My lungs were bad, my mother spoiled me and secured my exemption from military service.
> Consider my triumphant path to power:
> (The crowd roars)
> I took up art.
> I gave it up because I was incompetent.
> I became a bricklayer's labourer,
> A housepainter,
> A paperhanger,
> A pedlar of pictures,
> A lance-corporal,
> A spy on socialists and communists,
> A hater of Jews and Trade Unions,
> A political prisoner,
> But my work was known.
> Patriotic industrial magnates financed me.
> Röhm and others supported me.
> Later I betrayed and murdered Röhm and others.
> They had fulfilled their purpose.[19]

An ability to parody contemporary poets came easy to Thomas, and so here we see this skill transferred to a populist mockery of Nazism. This approach is repeated for other leading Nazis: Goebbels admits to being a failed writer who took out these frustrations on Jews; Göring confesses to being a drug addict and being confined to a lunatic asylum, twice; Streicher divulges his love for animals and torturing Jews; and Hess declares he was wrong to pursue peace by flying to England in 1941. *Documentary News Letter* was particularly keen to emphasise how 'Dylan Thomas' verse frequently cuts like a knife into the pompously bestial affections of this race of supermen.'[20] Out of all the films, this is probably one of the few that genuinely still connects with an audience, primarily because of Dylan's use of humour.

Not all scripts made their way to finished films either, and within this wider body of texts we can again see attempts at greater innovation, though still operating within the confines of propaganda. The clearest example of this, and in terms of its structure highly significant for later Thomas work, was *The Unconquerable People*. Written in 1944 and based on the theme of resistance across Europe, the script is the first clear attempt by Thomas to narrate with numbered voices, a central quality of *Under Milk Wood*. The surviving draft of the film uses four voices to celebrate heroism and bravery among resistance figures, highlighting the pan-European nature of the movement, and strongly contrasting heroic resisters with venal collaborators. Letters to Taylor reveal that Thomas was also willing to radically alter the script, and remove more overtly literary phrases, in order to help the film reach production. So here again one sees Thomas doing more than simply turning in copy useful to propagandist. Its themes develop a wider sense of anti-fascist resistance, and its structure demonstrates Thomas playing with form too.

We can see this quality again in Thomas' most ambitious effort, *Our Country*. Set in wartime Britain, the predominantly verse commentary has some components that are potentially embryonic forms of later ideas. Contemporary reception of the film, meanwhile, was mixed. Damning it with faint praise, *The Times* suggested that *Our Country* failed as an accurate record of the country at war, but offered a 'lovely' portrait of the British people, continuing:

> A sailor returns home on leave after two years of travels over the land, and is fortunate that he possesses a mouth-organ, since much of his time is spent with people who specialise in singing and dancing. That is all very well, and certainly it is implied that they have done a hard day's work, but of the strain of living from day to day, of queues, of the hardships inflicted on the millions of middle-aged women, who should occupy a conspicuous place in the foreground of any account of England in the last five or six years, there is no mention. What is more, the commentary consists of free verse written by Mr. Dylan Thomas, which may be good – a few lines suggests it is – but which is recited with such a monotonous emphasis that it soon ... becomes a barrier between spectator and screen.[21]

This review also offers us a succinct summary of the plot. The sailor's journey again picks up on a key theme in many of these films and evoking a sense of unity among the peoples of Britain. As a survey of the British Isles at war, sections of the verse also try to develop senses of place – a central development in Dylan's later poetry. Meanwhile, although still stressing the propaganda message, parts of the commentary do develop greater emotive power when compared to earlier

wartime scripts. As Ackerman has shown, there is also a clear connection between the mood of this script and the tenor expressed in his war poems of this period, "Among Those Killed in a Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred", "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London", and "Ceremony after a Fire Raid". Indeed, the latter written at the same time as *Our Country*. Thus Thomas' own recollections of London's war experiences were transformed into film and poetry alike. As responses to the impact of the Nazi war efforts, these poems too can be set within a sense of an anti-fascist culture.

Several lines throughout the script evoke turns of phrase later found in *Under Milk Wood*. We can see this not only the opening line, 'To begin with a city', later rephrased as 'To begin at the beginning' in *Under Milk Wood*, but later too. For example, in the use of 'dumb':

Our Country: Of the dumb heroic streets.

Under Milk Wood: Of the dumb found town.

And 'only':

Our Country: Only the fruit-loving birds flew over the treetops.

Under Milk Wood: Only your eyes are unclosed to see the black and folded town fast, and slow, asleep.

Whatever this might tell us about the impact of the film scripts on Dylan's poetry, this does all suggest that, at the very least, here Thomas was clearly taking the poetic voice developed in his films more seriously. This is also revealed in a letter from Dylan to Taylor regarding the premiere of *Our Country*. Dylan argued against the idea of having a printed programme developed that would reproduce the verse in printed form. He felt cuts to the film had destroyed some of the continuity of its verse, and also this could suggest a level of pretentiousness that he did not want to cultivate. For Thomas, 'Heard spoken to a beautiful picture, the words gain a sense and authority which the printed word denies them.'[22] Nevertheless, adverts for the film, such as those in *Documentary News Letter*, did reproduce sections of the script. Moreover, unlike *The Times*, some reviewers were inclined to agree with the idea that there was poetic worth in the film's script. Edgar Ansley's *Spectator* review offers an example of contemporary praise of its poetic qualities: '*Our Country* breaks free from the bonds of narrative continuity and surface-skimming clichés of

normal commentary and plunges into visual impression and poetry ... [it] represents the most exciting and provocative film ... for many a long day.'[23]

More negative reviews greeted Thomas' final propaganda film though, *A Soldier Comes Home*. Dealing with the complex emotional situation created by a solder's temporary return to his wife and son, this is probably Dylan's weakest filmed script. Importantly, it was deemed to have failed to develop its characters in a convincing and sensitive manner, and notably was not successful in linking the scenario to important wider themes, such as people's war or war-as-progress. Moreover, it only clumsily dramatises the psychological readjustment to civilian life after fighting. As *Documentary News Letter* stressed, 'the basic idea was obviously never worked out and what might have been a useful film turns out to be an emotionally muddled rough sketch of a film yet to be made'.[24] While this final film may have been less well received, Dylan himself was now moving on too, though, as we will see, the war and its impact left a lasting impression on Dylan.

To summarise, throughout these films the sense of a non-fascist 'us' fighting a fascist 'them' defined the scripts. Moreover, as his engagement with this milieu developed, there is clear progression. While initially limiting his work to the utilitarian strictures of the Documentary Film Movement style, and conforming to the careful propaganda messages on themes such as war-as-progress, people's war, and the role of Empire, in later films Dylan delivered a more variegated set of messages. Moreover, the contract with Strand Films gave Thomas a chance to progress his other writing projects during and after the war. This ranged from cultivating a new poetic voice, to delivering popular broadcasts for the BBC, to developing new ideas for non-propaganda scripted work after the war, such as *The Doctor and the Devils* and, later on. *Under Milk Wood*.

But as he did so, Dylan was indelibly marked by the nature of the war, and the murderous extremes of the Nazi regime. Interviews of people connected to Dylan conducted by Colin Edwards help to reveal this impact, showing how the full, genocidal nature of the Nazi regime came to be understood by Dylan. Elizabeth Ruby Milton recalled the way Dylan only slowly became aware of the Holocaust as follows:

> … at the beginning, nobody knew, nobody would believe that these things were happening … we used to discuss if it really was happening. And one or two Jewish people were coming in … artists, sculptures … into London, coming away from persecution … and there were a lot of German artists in London … so there was this

> conflict. You either had to believe German artists or have sympathy with the Jews … nobody wanted to believe. Especially somebody as emotional as Dylan. (70 – 1)

She then goes on to explain how a sense of disbelief, manifest in cynicism, were strategies that Dylan used to help fend off the full extent of the regime. He even joked about how Jews went willingly to their deaths, though this suggests a coming to terms with a situation that was beyond imagination, rather than anything of a genuinely mocking nature. Meanwhile, on the way the Holocaust became refracted into Dylan's post-war life, Mably Owen adds:

> He had an enormous compassion for people. One of the things that affected him most, of course, was the War – and the suffering. And especially the extermination of the Jews and the horrors and the cruelties. He really was shocked by that. I think the war made a tremendously deep impression on him, but his politics were an expression of his immense and enormous and all-embracing compassion for mankind.

And continued 'he talked a lot about the suffering of the Jews, which seemed to have entered very, very deeply into his feelings and into his imagination.'

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[1] Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003) ch. 13.
[2] Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: The Biography New Edition* (London: J. M. Dent, 1999) p. 183.
[3] John Ackerman, *Dyan Thomas: His Life and Work* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1991) p. 31.
[4] Victor Golightly, '"Writing with dreams and blood": Dylan Thomas, Marxism and 1930s Swansea', available online at: http://www.dylanthomasboathouse.com/download/essay1.pdf [last accessed: 24/09/2010].
[5] Dylan Thomas in Paul Ferris (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: The Collected Letters. New Edition* (London: J. M. Dent, 2000) p. 192.
[6] Constantine Fitzgibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (London: J. M. Dent, 1965) ch. 10.
[7] Thomas in *Collected Letters*, p. 464.
[8] Caitlin Thomas with George Tremlett, *Caitlin: A Warring Absence* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986) p. 79.
[9] Anthony Algate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2007) ch.1.
[10] Nicholas Reeves, *The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality?* (London: Cassell, 1999) ch. 4.
[11] John Grierson, 'The Documentary Idea, 1942', *Documentary News Letter* 3:6 (1942) 83 – 86, this quote p. 85.
[12] *Documentary News Letter* 3:6 (1942) p. 94.
[13] *Documentary News Letter* 3:7 (1942) p. 100.
[14] 'The Empire and Propaganda', *Documentary News Letter* 2:12 (1941) p. 223.
[15] Dylan Thomas, 'Battle for Freedom' in John Ackerman (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: The Complete Screenplays* (New York: Applause Books, 1995) pp. 32 – 37.
[16] *Documentary News Letter*, 3:9 (1942) p. 125.
[17] Ferris, *Dylan Thomas* p. 183.
[18] Ackerman, *The Complete Screenplays*, p.38.
[19] Thomas, 'These Are The Men' in Ackerman, *The Complete Screenplays*, pp. 39 – 44.
[20] *Documentary News Letter* 4:3 (1943) pp. 145 - 6.
[21] *The Times*, Issue 50179, col b, (Jun 27, 1945), p. 6.
[22] Thomas in *Collected Letters*, p. 587 - 8.
[23] Reproduced in Ackerman, *The Complete Screenplays* p. 63.
[24] *Documentary News Letter*, Issue 51 (1945) p. 8.