

THE ANGLICAN PACIFIST FELLOWSHIP
(A Registered Charity)

believes that profession of faith in Jesus Christ requires the repudiation of all war. We seek to witness to this belief within the Anglican Communion at all levels from parish to Lambeth Conference. Information from APF, 11 Weavers End, Hanslope, Milton Keynes MK19 7PA

B/APF/21/7/95

No Organist?

'200 Hymns' cassettes with the Choir and Organ of Lincoln Cathedral have been specially produced to lead congregations. Ask for our free catalogue today.

10% discount on your first order.

CANTORIS RECORDS

Exchequer Gate, Lincoln LN2 1PZ
Telephone: 01522 536981
Fax: 01522 560550

What could be better than her own home?



Right now, nothing

Your own home is where you are independent. You have dignity, choice and memories.

Which makes 'right now' the perfect time to start thinking positively about the future. Not when weakening health makes decisions urgent or stressful, but now while you can discuss with your family and friends what the next secure move should be.

Later, Trinity Care

Trinity Care Christian nursing homes are a natural and secure extension to people's lives. They are beautifully run, their values are Christian and the staff are there to serve the whole person, respecting all of her - or his - needs. **What could be better than your own home? One day, Trinity Care.**

Meanwhile call **0115 9455485** for your copy of our video or booklet and an appointment to visit quite informally your nearest Trinity Care nursing home.

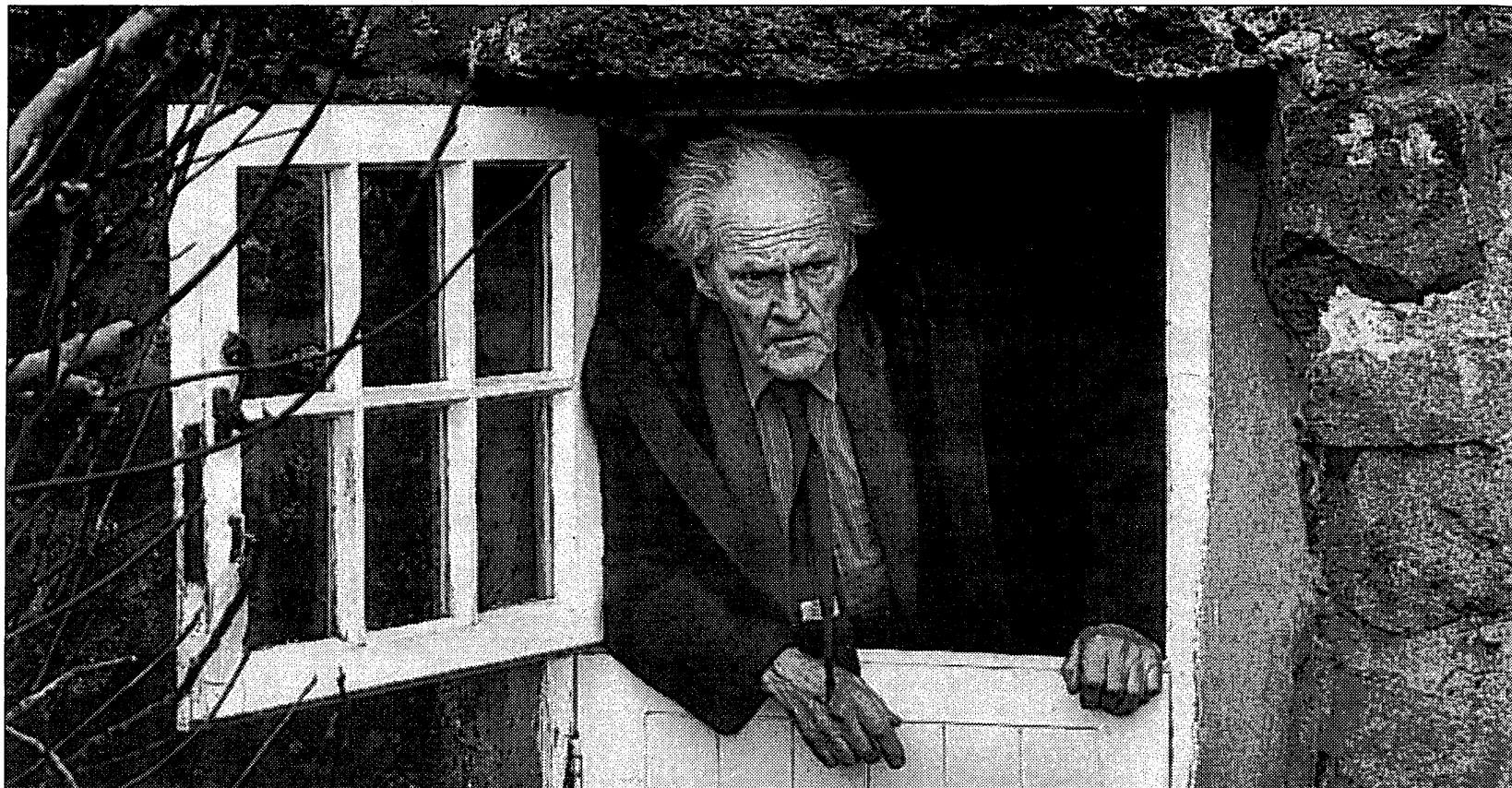


SETTLE ON **Trinity Care**

Ask about a branch near you

Cheshire, Shropshire,
Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire,
Hampshire, Somerset

Trinity Care plc
15 Musters Road, West Bridgford,
Nottingham Tel: 0115 945 5485



R. S. Thomas, priest and poet, at home in north Wales: "I'm not all that interested in human beings, really." Photo *The Independent*/Howard Barlow

'Waiting for the God to speak'

Martin Wroe talks to the fierce old Anglican clergyman nominated this month for a Nobel Prize for Literature, about his life, his poetry, and his fragile hold on faith

THE DOOR of the whitewashed cottage overlooking the sea creaked open, and the mean, towering countenance of the finest living poet in Wales peered fiercely out. The Revd R. S. Thomas was about to take his afternoon constitutional over the bleak Lleyen peninsula in north Wales.

He was not in a good mood. He had forgotten his appointment with the English-speaking journalist who had travelled several hundred miles to find him — and had spent a year persuading him to agree to it. For most of the year, R. S. Thomas had not spoken English, on principle. Nor had he seen any journalists.

For a few tense seconds the day hung in the balance. Then the priest in the poet woa out. The recluse put away reclusion for a couple of hours, and reluctantly admitted the outsider. There is no doubting his poetic genius, but R. S. Thomas can be a bad-tempered old bugger. Maybe there's a connection.

The most surprising thing about last week's news that this ancient Welsh Anglican clergyman had been nominated for the 1996 Nobel Prize for Literature, was that he had let the proposers — a group of literati led by Lord Gowrie of the Arts Council — do it at all.

In fact, he refused to be nominated at first; but when Kevin Thomas of the Welsh Academy agreed that, if he won, he could make his acceptance speech in Welsh, he reluctantly went along with it. He is disdainful of public acclaim or critical praise.

At 83, Thomas rarely gives interviews. In fact, he rarely bothers much with anyone except a few locals, and then only to keep up his Welsh. So he says, anyway. But he still writes — in English — every day, dodging the tricks of failing memory, daring to go for originality even when he can't exactly remember whether he was original this way before.

"I don't normally reread my work," he says, sitting in the cold, sparse bedroom where he has agreed to conduct the proceedings. "But sometimes you have to look back, and you get a jolt when you see something you thought you'd come up with the other day, which you'd already said 20 years ago."

It's a risk one has to take after seven decades of writing. He can't stop now. The man Kingsley Amis described as "one of the half-dozen best poets now writing in English" says poetry is not an occupation you can easily retire from. He turns out hundreds of poems annually, but counts himself lucky if half a dozen are any good.

The trouble, he says, is arthritis: his technique as a lyric poet is quite good, but the muse gets a bit arthritic. "It's no good exercising your technique on boring ideas or dead language."

R. S. THOMAS has published 25 main collections of poetry since 1946; a 26th, *No Truce With the Furies*, arrives this month. A decade ago he published his autobiography, *Neb*, in Welsh, and steadfastly refuses to let it be translated. As a poet he is often overlooked because of his dog-collar, sneered out of the discussion because of his support for Welsh opposition to the occupying English, or forgotten because — well, he's dead, now, isn't he?

But he has not gone away, and the shine on his stark, taut verse has not dimmed. The land of his fathers, and another, stranger land of the spirit, have been the rich seams he has mined, riches most evident in *Collected Poems 1945-1990* (Dent).

He was born in Cardiff, raised in Liverpool and Holyhead, and recalls first writing doggerel as a schoolboy. He read classics at Cardiff, but didn't take poetry seriously until he was ordained in the Church in Wales in 1936. That was his mother's doing: his father, a sailor, was rarely at home, and his mother, herself educated in a convent school, pushed him towards the Church.

His own hold on faith has always been fragile: "It's like walking a trapeze. There are certain things I subscribe to. I believe in God, and that there is a will to good and beauty in the universe, rather than giving way to agnosticism or fatalism."

He was Rector of Manafon in Montgomeryshire from 1942; later

Vicar of Eglwysfach, then of St Hywyn's, Aberdaron, with Rhiw and Llanfaelrhys. He has always read or written poetry in the morning, gone walking in the afternoon, and visited in the evening.

HIS BELIEFS remain central to his verse, especially to recent collections like *Counterpoint* (1990) and *Mass for Hard Times* (1992). In his poetry, often bleak but blessed by hope, is a central idea that haunts him: the recurring image of a cross, sometimes untenanted, sometimes occupied.

*Imperishable,
Scarecrow, recipient of our cast-offs
shame us until what is a swear-word only becomes at last
the word that was in the beginning.*

For Thomas, life is based on sacrifice: "As humans, we can only maintain

ourselves by the sacrifice of another life . . . we kill for meat, we kill pests, we destroy flowers, all sorts of things, in the interests of cultivation. And this is the mystery

of the cross, the concept of God: that somewhere there is this necessity. In a world dominated by physics and mathematics, the cross remains contemporary."

It is a sign of hope in his work that the tenant of his cross is usually gone. He finds the image of the empty cross more provocative. "I don't take to Calvary so much, the day of the dead figure on the cross. There is a kind of hopelessness about it, that this is the end of the message from God, that he had ended up slain."

But, for Thomas, God often remains dumb. Perhaps the anger remains in his work because here, where the word became flesh, all Thomas can hear is God's silence.

A bishop called for an analysis of the bread and wine. I being no chemist play my recording of his silence over and over to myself only.

AS HE HAS FAILED to retire from poetry, so Thomas has also signally failed to retire from the Church, which he was supposed to have done in 1978. Even in his 80s he has sometimes been found on a Sunday morning in the pulpit of a little Welsh church, leading services, preaching, and administering the sacrament.

"It's just a joke," he says with his usual frankness. "The organist can't play, there are only about six people present, and the stuff that I'm having to read in the Bible has all been changed. I don't really approve of it. It's just to keep up this little Welsh congregation."

And there's the other idea that haunts him: the idea that the Welsh language might be more than a mere symbol of Welsh resistance to anglicisation. He is a pacifist himself, but famously refused to condemn arsonists who burned the Welsh homes of English incomers. He doesn't give a second thought to those who ask him how he squares his vocation with this. Actually, he doesn't think he was much good at being a priest, anyway. "I'm not all that interested in human beings, really."

He prefers to be alone with his thoughts and his God, walking the windswept country of Lleyen, the sea surging at its edges, a surgeon-poet in what he has called the laboratories of the spirit. That remote, cliff-top existence enriches his work, which one reviewer called an uncomfortable testament "to the long silences and brief illuminations of a life-long faith".

It doesn't bother him that he has never won the public in the way that another Welsh poet called Thomas did. Literary circles, he thinks, are prejudiced against religion.

He can't see what's unusual about writing poetry about God at the end of the second millennium. "Poetry has gradually fallen away, so that intellectuals read it for titillation; but they don't expect it to be dealing with really weighty matters. If poetry can't cope with what God means in the late 20th century, then it doesn't deserve to remain a major art form."