

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Swansea University
Unit of Assessment: 30 - History
Title of case study: Re-discovering Richard Burton: generating new creative representations and commemorations of a cultural icon
1. Summary of the impact

New research by historian Chris Williams at Swansea University has made a **contribution to economic prosperity** via the creative sector through the publication, in October 2012, of *The Richard Burton Diaries*. Using the critical resource of his private diaries, this volume, for the first time, presents and interprets the personal reflections of the actor and Hollywood screen legend, Richard Burton (1925-1984). **Sustained international press interest** in the months before and after publication, helped the book to become a global best-seller. As a result, Williams' edition has influenced public discourse, **generating new ways of thinking** about Burton's life and personality, prompting film and television companies to commission new drama and documentary programmes about the actor, and **influencing these creative outputs** by shaping the way Burton is portrayed in them. It has also **given momentum to a campaign to commemorate his career** with the installation of a Richard Burton 'star' on Hollywood Boulevard.

2. Underpinning research

a) Context

The surviving diaries of Richard Burton, written between 1940 and 1983, were deposited at the University Archives in Swansea in May 2005 by Burton's widow, Sally. Williams, appointed Professor of Welsh History at Swansea in 2005, had sole access to the diaries from the time of their deposit and was granted a period of leave from teaching duties for the academic year 2009-10 to undertake the research required to bring an authoritative edition of Burton's words into print. As well as a close reading of the diaries, Williams conducted interviews with family members, visited important locations in Burton's early life and studied the extensive catalogue of film, audio performances and interviews recorded with the actor over the course of his 30-year career. It is this research which underpins the extensive introduction and the detailed notation accompanying the diary entries, and which provides essential explanatory context, identifying hundreds of people and places mentioned by Burton, so that the widest possible readership can access and understand their content. It also enabled Williams to knit together the non-continuous diary entries. As one reviewer noted, the final volume is the result '*of more than two years of hard labor by editor Chris Williams melding the on-again, off-again diary*' (C1).

b) Nature of research insights:

As a leading historian of the culture and society of the Welsh coalfield in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Williams' research expertise, coupled with his unlimited access to the complete run of diaries, brought a perspective to Burton's life different from that of the actor's many biographers:

- i. Williams' expertise in Welsh industrial working-class culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enabled him to provide a particularly insightful edit of the schoolboy diary kept by Burton in 1940, and thus elucidate the least familiar period of Burton's life for a new audience.
- ii. Although previous biographers had access to the diaries, notably Melvyn Bragg, author of Burton's official biography, *Rich* (1988), the biographical format prevented extensive

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reproduction of Burton's own words. Williams' edition of the Diaries provides unfettered access to Burton's own 'voice' for the first time.

- iii. In his Diaries, Burton disengaged from and reflected on his public persona and professional life. The Burton who emerges from their pages is different from the man known to the public through his stage and screen appearances and through frenzied press interest in his relationship with Elizabeth Taylor. Although the Diaries document his lavish, alcohol-fuelled lifestyle, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, they also challenge these popular stereotypes by revealing a family-oriented, sometimes health-conscious, bookish, domestic side of Burton, much less familiar to the public.
 - iv. In editing the volume, Williams paid particular attention to identifying and explaining the many literary references in the Diaries. As such, he reveals for the first time, the extent of Burton's private reading regime and the scale of his intellectual aptitude and ambition. His appetite for works of fiction, poetry, biography, for languages and for grammar, was a constant feature of his life away from the public gaze. His scholarly habits and his desire for success as a writer is one of the strongest themes to emerge in the volume contrasting with more familiar stereotype of Burton as a member of the Hollywood jet-set.
- c) **Key researcher:** Professor Chris Williams; appointed to Swansea University as Professor of Welsh History (2005); director of its Richard Burton Centre for the Study of Wales (2009-2010); director of the Research Institute for Arts and Humanities (2010-2013).

3. References to the research

C. Williams (ed.), *The Richard Burton Diaries* (Yale University Press).

Hardback edition: 2012, ISBN: 9780300180107, pp.704;

Paperback edition: 2013, ISBN: 9780300197280, pp.704.

The volume was subject to Yale University Press' peer review structures for editions, involving internal and external review of both text and editorial matter prior to publication.

4. Details of the impact

i. International press coverage

The hardback edition of *The Richard Burton Diaries* was published in October 2012 and engaged a global audience. It generated extensive pre-launch publicity amounting to 120 items of press coverage from 1 Aug – 8 Oct 2012 including articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Hindustan Times*, and *Le Figaro* (C2). On publication Williams fronted a series of international 'launch' events beginning at the Cheltenham Literary Festival (13 Oct) before an audience of 800. In the US, the volume was launched at New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (16 Oct) and the British Consul General's Residence in Los Angeles (18 Oct) (C3). Press coverage was sustained with launch events in Singapore (7-9 Nov), Vancouver (21 Feb 2013) and Toronto (23 Feb), and by the publication of the paperback edition (May 2013).

Williams used the publicity surrounding the launch events not only to encourage sales of the Diaries, but also to draw public attention to the new perspective on Burton promoted in the volume. He gave a live interview on NBC's 'Today' show (16 Oct) with viewing figures of 5 million and recorded 14 telephone interviews about the Diaries for US radio programmes (27 Nov) including the Jim Bohannon show which was syndicated across 300 US radio stations (C4). Between 13 October 2012 and 12 April 2013 he gave a total of 16 talks, lectures and presentations about the

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Diaries to public audiences, focusing particularly on what they reveal about Burton's literary interests and aspirations. His activities were noted in the Welsh Assembly as significant not only in enhancing Burton's reputation and legacy, but in helping 'to raise the profile of Wales abroad' (C5).

ii. Economic impact on the creative sector

As a result of this sustained publicity, sales of the Diaries had exceeded 50,000 by September 2013 (38,626 hardback; 9,500 paperback; 5,800 e-book) with a cumulative recommended retail price of over £1,100,000, making it 'Yale University Press' best-selling title of 2012' (C6). With this level of public interest in Burton's life and career so plainly demonstrated, a number of film and television companies commissioned new programmes about the actor. A new biopic entitled 'Burton and Taylor', was written and produced by BBC4. As one national newspaper television reviewer noted, '*With the release last year of Burton's candid, vivid diaries, it's a story that was begging to be told on screen*' (C7). First broadcast on 22 July 2013 it attracted 1.26 million viewers. A 30-minute BBC Wales documentary, 'The Richard Burton Diaries', was produced in consultation with Williams who provided the producer with access to the manuscript of the Diaries prior to its publication. It was first screened on BBC1 Wales on 12 Nov. 2012, attracting an audience of 97,000, and BBC4 schedulers also took the opportunity to repeat the BBC Wales documentary immediately after the 'Burton and Taylor' biopic on 22 July when it attracted 611,500 viewers, and again on 23 and 26 July, to viewing audiences of 121,000 and 141,600 respectively (C8). The week in which the biopic and the documentary were screened saw a spike in sales of the book, which entered the Amazon top 100. With the paperback edition only in print since May 2013, and with and the sale of rights for a German translation to Haffmans and Tolkemitt for publication on 16 Oct. 2013, the buoyant retail performance of this title in the publishing sector is set to continue.

iii. Generating new thinking and influencing creative practice

The new and more nuanced view of Richard Burton's life and career to emerge from Williams' editing of the Diaries, has influenced the way Burton has been portrayed, written about and remembered. Dozens of press reviews of the hardback edition have appeared since October 2012 in which reviewers acknowledge that they offer a new slant on Burton. The *New York Times* Book Review noted the more studious side of his character as a feature '*of real interest in that Burton was almost as good a writer as an actor, read as many as three books a day ... bought countless books on every conceivable subject.*' In *The Times*, meanwhile, the reviewer wrote that Williams' edition of the Diaries revealed Burton as '*someone who is reflective and thoughtful and someone who engaged intellectually with the world around him*' (C9).

These new perspectives, revealed in the Diaries by Williams' research, and subsequently in his public talks on the subject, have fed directly into recent depictions of Burton. The actor who played Burton in the BBC4 biopic, '*immersed himself in Richard Burton's recently published diaries*' in preparation for the role (C10), and reviews of the drama attributed its relatively sympathetic portrayal of Burton to, among other things, the availability of the Diaries, providing access to Burton's own perspective on events (C11).

iv. Commemorating Burton

Initiatives to commemorate and celebrate Burton's career were also boosted by the publication of, and press interest in, the Diaries. One Assembly Member, addressing the National Assembly for Wales on 23 October 2012, predicted that the publication of the Diaries, and the associated US publicity, '*will enhance the campaign to get a star for Richard Burton on the Hollywood walk of fame*' (see C5). This campaign was run by the Cardiff-based *Western Mail* newspaper, and its co-ordinator noted the timely impetus provided by Williams' edition of the Diaries which, '*placed*

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Burton and his work at the forefront of peoples' minds once more' and 'brought the man and his stories to a whole new generation of fans' (C12). The campaign reached a successful conclusion on 1 March 2013, just five months after the Diaries' launch, when the Burton 'star' was unveiled next to that of Elizabeth Taylor on Hollywood Boulevard.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

(C1) Extract from review in *Buffalo News*,

<http://www.buffalonews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?aid=/20121014/life/121019709/1058>

(C2) *Le Figaro* article: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2012/08/15/03005-20120815ARTFIG00184-burton-taylor-chronique-d-un-amour-fou.php>; *Hindustan Times* article:

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/Europe/Burton-s-diaries-show-passion-for-Liz-Taylor/Article1-914145.aspx>; *Wall Street Journal* article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443507204578020473225736746.html?KEYWORDS=richard+burton>

(C3) Recording of the launch event at the Cheltenham Literary Festival,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beSBTrC0P28>. For details of the New York launch, see www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-19981591.

(C4)

<http://www.jimbotalk.net/show?action=guestArchives#a=1&year=2012&month=10&sort=desc&action=guestArchives&destinationpage=%2Fpg%2Fjsp%2Fcommunity%2Fguestarchivesinclude.jsp>

(C5) <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-chamber-fourth-assembly-rop.htm?act=dis&id=239807&ds=10%2F2012#11>

(C6) Quote from email dated 1 August 2013 from Yale University Press. Sales figures provided by Yale University Press via email on 1 Aug. and 10 Sept. 2013. Retail value calculated on hardback price of £25.00, paperback price of £12.99 and e-book (kindle edition) price of £11.69.

(C7) www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2374531

(C8) Audience figures for Burton and Taylor biopic: <http://www.barb.co.uk/viewing/weekly-top-30>. Figures for BBC Wales documentary provided by producer via email on 19 Aug. 2013.

(C9) Extracts from 41 reviews of *The Richard Burton Diaries* are available on the publisher's website, <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/reviews.asp?isbn=9780300197280>

(C10) www.radiotimes.com/news/2013-07-22/helena-bonham-carter-and-dominic-west-play-with-fire-as-taylor-and-burton

(C11) 'Front Row', BBC Radio 4, 22 July 2013.

(C12) Quotes from Media Wales Arts Editor via email on 3 Sept. 2013.