CITATION

Taffy Thomas

Gold Award - E.F.D.S.S. Sunday 19th December 2010 Cecil Sharp House

To stand four-square to crisis and to face a daunting future with the inevitable day to day call for courage, patience, and tenacity would put most people completely off – but Chrissie Thomas is made of sterner stuff – she **married** it**!**

Sorry! Wrong Citation! That one was truly deserved! This is Taffy's! How like him to choose a snowstorm in which to dig for gold!

We could ask, 'When did Taffy burst in upon the folk world?' but actually, by a very short head, it was the folk world that burst in on a school boy when he 'went along out of interest' to his school's Folk Club way back in the 60's. He sang a song and the fact that it was the only occasion that the girls at the High School and the lads at the Grammar got together had nothing to do with it at all! But, by way of his association with the Yetties, and with such as Peter Dashwood, the Wessex Morris Men, Bill Rutter, Halsway Manor, and the Sidmouth Festival Taffy quickly became a mover and a shaker. He founded his school's 'Blue Dragon Morris', and appointed himself as the fool, which, in due time, led on to his establishment of the 'Company of Fools'. When Taffy's schooling ended The Dudley College of Education found itself the parent of 'The Painters Morris' – and he was well and truly launched.

I have read a good many citations for the Gold Award and stand in awe of the extraordinary scholarship and erudition of previous recipients of the Society's Gold Award. Why they should now want to give it to Taffy, whom most of us associate with near-disaster, remains an unresolved mystery – but what **is** certain is that with all his knowledge of, and love for, the traditional customs and folk activities of the past Taffy also found in himself an insatiable desire both to entertain **and** to include and involve others.

Add 'near disaster' to 'come all ye' and what will you get? Who remembers Beacons, Barrels, and Bangs with the Ottery flaming tar barrels rampaging down the hill at the SIdmouth Arena – and up on the opposite side – with a couple of thousand astonished festival-goers seated and stunned on every side? I cannot remember the exact wording in the next morning's Newsletter but it amounted to Bill Rutter's saying, 'Alright Taffy, you've made your point, don't you ever – ever – **ever** do that again!' (*Gold*? *I'd have locked him in the vestry)!*

And who was there when, despite Bill's dire warning, the time came to say farewell to his wonderful leadership of the SIdmouth Festival – and Taffy offered to mount a suitable farewell ceremony? And Bill, making the only serious misjudgement of his entire career, accepted! Arthritic and walking quite badly, Bill was elevated onto a small stage in mid-arena. He needed a fair degree of help even to get up the steps – but there he stood, resplendent, revered, and commanding. Paper screens were lifted into position on all four sides of the podium, and Taffy went into his 'Fire-blowing' act - and the sheer folly of it all became tragically apparent as, veering too close to the podium, the paper screens went up

in flames – taking Bill to his last resting place – burnt, presumably, to a cinder *(I wouldn't even give Taffy **bronze** for that!)* – and, sure enough, as the smoke cleared, only Bill's walking stick remained as a poignant memory of good times past. '*We appear to have lost Bill Rutter'.....* from Taffy, not sounding much like an apology ..... '*You'll never get rid of me that easily'* .....from Bill in the darkness – and the spotlight switched to the very top of the Arena bank to reveal his re-incarnation!

'The Magic Lantern Folk Theatre' with its 'Shadow Puppetry' had followed 'The Company of Fools' and, all the time, Taffy was adding constantly to his skills and presentations – calling the dance - presenting folk events – compere to the International Dance Concerts up at the Sidmouth Arena (*I wonder - this is a pretty daft question –Taffy, could you still introduce the flag-throwers from Florence*?)

'The End of the Pier Show' – and 'The Fifties Night' were typical innovations. Who was there when Taffy arrived on a motorbike! (*Is the Chief Executive or the Chairman here? Could you please tell us why you get a gold award for services to Folk by arriving on stage on a motorbike?)*

Then came 'The Fabulous Salami Brothers' with its 'Foreign Legionnaires' and cries for mercy from an audience in advanced pain as uncontrolled laughter became life-threatening.

Taffy was at full throttle when, in 1984, in came the fool-hardy wife to be (*I hope you realise it! That's the one for gold – do we have any others stashed away somewhere?*). With Chrissie, folk opera and other performances – notably up at the 'Whitby Folk Festival' – figured among the huge delights that followed - not only for the folk world but for the world at large.

And the list of achievements could have gone on and on *(it **could** even have opened up the possible entitlement to a gold award!)* but in 1985.....

Taffy, an undoubted king among folk entertainers was cruelly struck down. A massive, **massive** stroke.....and Taffy was stopped in his tracks.

The golden career was halted and we expected that to be that – not just the loss of energy and co-ordination but the loss even of speech was, for Taffy, for Chrissie, actually for all of us, a true disaster.

Just because someone is extremely knowledgeable and talented doesn't necessarily mean that he or she is also stoic, courageous, determined, and persistent! But there was that light still in Taffy's eyes (and Chrissie noted it) - sheer bloody mindedness!

Taffy himself would not wish it to said that what has followed was 100% his own achievement, nor was it. The friendship of very many folk close around him and hundreds of others will have been an inspiration to him but there are those who stood out – Charlie Dean – his physio; Alison McMoreland (Alison Potts as was) – Speech Therapist, Alan Brown – Cardiologist, and, a year later when Taffy's battered body had become strong enough for

surgery, the staff at Wythenshaw Cardiology Dept., and an army of medicos around them. There came Singer/ Songwriter Jimmy Woodland - who organised Benefit Concerts - and there were the hoards who helped or joined in, and John Maxwell, who sold pebbles stolen from the beach in Sidmouth for £1 each! and, without doubt, he and we, **and** Taffy, all turn to acknowledge Chrissie – who is, to this day, the disciplinarian as well as the lover!. *(By the way, selling stolen property for compassionate reasons may well smack of Robin Hood but if Mr. Maxwell is here - and he ever dares to show his face in Sidmouth again - there's a notice on the Esplanade railings he ought to read!)*

None of those I name or the hundreds of other friends will want to take anything at all away from the astonishing courage and steely resolve which was to follow for no less than 14 years. Many of us will have had moments of insight into Taffy's subsequent return to mobility, clarity of speech, exuberance of personality – all of which laid a new foundation for his Storytelling – and, together with Taffy's phenomenal talents, those years justify our meeting together this evening to acknowledge and honour him. His story was already remarkable – it now becomes legendary. And John Pole is here to take up the story.....

1. Here comes Taffy Thomas in his coat full of tales
From England and Ireland, from Scotland and Wales...
He'll tell you a story at the drop of a hat,
He's the Storytelling Laureate and the very first at - that!

2. Now Taffy is happy to tell any story
Whether comical or tragical or magical or gory –
He'll always have a story that will chill thrill or cheer –
He's been Storytelling Laureate for almost a – year!

3. When you hear Taffy telling, you can see it all too -
He's a one-man *Magic Lantern* painting pictures for you...
When he puts on his story hat**,** tales dance to his call -
He's the Storytelling Laureate and the very first of - all!

4. When Taffy was one of the *Brothers Salami*
He did all sorts of stunts, both alarming and barmy –
He escaped by telling stories that **y**ou'll never forget...
He's the Storytelling Laureate and the very first as - yet!

5. He's given his heart to the art of the story,
And it wasn't for greed and it wasn't for glory...
He'll tell you a story sat in his Teller's Chair -
He's the Storytelling Laureate and the very first, so - there!

6. He's garnered a harvest of tales from old times
And picked a whole orchard of riddles and rhymes…
He's a storehouse of stories that will be told and retold –
So Happy Christmas, Taffy Laureate, you've just won a - **Gold**!

John Pole 2010.

It is true of Taffy Thomas that the education, the knowledge, and the scholarship, are all there but they are worn very lightly and are somewhat hidden by Taffy's quite extraordinary desire and capacity, not only to entertain but to do so as a teacher, and to draw in others both as companions on the way and as fellow performers – taking his place only **among** the very many who, in many different ways, for love of their nation's common life and history, tell, and re-tell, and revitalise, and carry forward into the future, the goodness of past times.

He, himself acknowledges that if he stands tall among us, and he does, it is simply because he is standing on the shoulders of those that have gone before – that is the essential nature of the folk tradition and Taffy is content to know that his shoulders have become the shoulders, already, that others **are** standing on.

Because I cannot improve on this ending to Taffy's citation I read the words of one, John Tams, who is not able himself to be with us this evening.

He says, "To paraphrase the life and times of Taffy Thomas it might read.....

'Against all odds" .... and they don't come odder!
On one occasion 25 years ago I swear I saw him in two different places at the same time.
For the most part he was just a blur.
Then he conked out. It was 'The Overseer's' way of telling him to slow down to super-sonic.
He has a passion for passion and never lets its tank drop below full.
He has bags of love- in fact he has so many bags of the stuff that though he gives it away freely he creates more wherever he goes.
He's a never-ending giver, a pioneer, a street giant, a beloved communicator of the highest order and, because of his stories but most particularly because of him – we all live happier ever after'.
Bravo my dear – you are truly cherished".

Canon David Slater