

Death of a poet: new light is shed on an old mystery

When Dylan Thomas died in New York on 9 November 1953 he was in deep coma that had been attributed to his admitted consumption of 18 whiskeys four days previously. Dylan had for years been a hopeless alcoholic and had also been taking sleeping drugs and corticosteroids, so that his death in hospital was ascribed to the massive alcohol overdose.

Since then questions have been raised in literary circles over whether Dylan should be blamed for his untimely end, at the age of 39, or whether medical negligence may have played some part. According to a new book, 'Dylan remembered, Volume 2: 1935–1953' by David N. Thomas (Seren, 2004), research has revealed that Dylan might well have been saved if his admission to hospital had not been delayed some two hours, resulting in irreversible brain damage.

It is strange that the hospital where Dylan died consistently refused to divulge his medical notes, but that a summary of them was discovered by chance at Texas University. Death was attributed to brain damage following severe bronchitis and pneumonia, which were not properly recognised by the New York doctor involved at the time.

It is probable that penicillin, which was available in New York at the relevant time, would have saved Dylan's life, but the delay was fatal. His brain, it seems, was severely



damaged by the time he was moved from his hotel into the nearby hospital. What is known of the post-mortem evidence suggests such.

The common belief that Dylan Thomas drank himself to death in 1953 therefore appears erroneous. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that alcohol lay at the root of his misfortunes.

Turning on the heat: who is to blame?

In *Nature* for 2 December 2004 a group from the universities of Oxford and Reading has examined the question of how far human activities contributed to the European heatwave of 2003. This was the hottest summer in Europe since about AD1500, and an unusually large number of deaths were attributed to it in France, Germany and Italy.

The question has arisen whether the 2003 heatwave can be accepted as sound evidence of the influence of human activities on the climate. Although it is not possible to attribute such an individual phenomenon to definable changes in atmospheric composition, it is feasible to estimate the probability of future occurrences of the same significance. Two sets of climate simulations since 1900 have been devised. The first relates to solar and volcanic activity, plus man-made influences such as increases in atmospheric greenhouse gases. The second analyses natural factors alone.

Emission targets will take decades to have any discernible effect, and it will be necessary to work out who will have to pay the costs of adaptation and compensation. The immediate cause of the 2003 heatwave was a persistent anticyclone over north-west Europe that cannot be attributed to greenhouse gas emissions. However, it is calculated that human influence has increased by a factor of four the chance of an anticyclone causing a future heatwave, principally through gas emissions. In France in 2003 some 14,000 deaths were attributable to heat, and in some cases there may be grounds for claiming compensation against those responsible for the emissions.

Risks to property may offer yet another factor for claiming compensation. This year eight states in the US and New York City filed lawsuits against five US power companies for their contribution to climate change. Whether emitters should have foreseen damage and how much was attributable to negligence has become a tricky legal battleground. It seems that regulation and litigation over climate change will present intertwining problems for the future residents of the world.

Small is beautiful for early people of Indonesia

Every year we seem to come across new evidence concerning the origins of humans and necessity for renaming some of the strange ancestors and distant cousins that emerge from the mists of time. In *Nature* for 28 October 2004 and *Science* for 29 October 2004 there are accounts of the discovery of a race of diminutive humans only about a metre tall and possessing a brain the size of a grapefruit, similar to that of a small chimpanzee.

The remains were discovered in 2003 in the Liang Bua cave on the Indonesian island of Flores, and have elicited much comment from archaeo-anthropologists. The remains are of an adult skull and partial skeleton belonging to an incredibly small woman and were associated with isolated bones of several other small individuals. The bones date from much the same period as the remains of modern humans found in nearby islands, between 95,000 and 13,000 years before our time.

Anthropologists have given the name *Homo floresiensis* to the diminutive folk, and

have found stone tools and the bones of Komodo dragons and an extinct elephant called *Stegodon* with their remains, an indication of their food habit. From the same island stone tools attributed to the much older *Homo erectus* have been recovered.

Radiocarbon dates from charcoal in the local soil have indicated that the new skeleton dates back 18,000 years, but the bones are markedly different from those of modern humans. The skull resembles that of *H erectus* apart from its volume, which is only large enough for a brain capacity of 380cm³. This is only half that of the Java man, *H erectus*.

No evidence was found to suggest a pathological basis for the midget size. Bones of other individuals found locally were similarly tiny.

It is hypothesised that *H floresiensis* was descended from *H erectus*, the shrinking in size being the result of thousands of years of isolation on the islands, as has been observed with other island mammals. It is thought that the Flores people became extinct some 12,000 years ago.

Bring back the taboo

"Today our civilisation is relapsing into a state far more primitive, far more irrational, than any taboo-ridden society now known — for lack of any effective taboos. If Western man could establish an inviolate taboo against random extermination, our society would enjoy a far more effective safeguard against both private violence and still impending nuclear horrors than the United Nations or the fallible mechanisms of Fail-Safe."
— Lewis Mumford: 'The myth of the machine' (1967).

And I quote . . .