

“A rugger-playing Hamlet:” Richard Burton as sports hero

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When the actor Richard Burton died in 1984 he was obituarised by *The Times* of London as having “promised an unachieved greatness.” It is arguable that for all his fame on stage and screen, what Burton really sought was celebrity as a sports star. “I would rather,” he confessed, “have played (rugby) for Wales at Cardiff Arms Park than Hamlet at the Old Vic.” The reviewer who once referred to him as “a rugger-playing Hamlet” was closer to the truth than he knew, for Burton’s potential as a rugby star was identified early by the legendary Welsh three-quarter-back Bleddyn Williams, whose accolade might have been compared, in a different environment, to one from, say, Jackie Robinson.

Burton came from rough, tough mining stock whose scars he bore in his ravaged, pock-marked face. He always felt guilty about “not doing real man’s work.” Physical masculinity was a crucial self-defining element in the construction of the only Prince Hal in the history of the English theatre to have the stocky Physique of a rugby player and the bandy legs of a coal miner. The twelfth of thirteen children born to, in his words “a fanatically rugby-conscious family” in a mining village in Wales, he saw himself as one of the authentic voices of the neighbouring and famous Rhondda Valley, the paradigm of all Welsh industrial communities. Once the greatest single coal-exporting region in the world, famed for its industrial militancy, its intense muscularity and internationally-renowned sportsmen, whether rugby players or world champion boxers like Jimmy Wilde and the ex-miner Tommy Farr who took Joe Louis all the way at Madison Square Garden in 1937, the Rhondda’s political, cultural and sporting ethos has evoked a cornucopia of literacy and filmic clichés like *How Green Was My Valley* Burton’s father and brothers

were colliers in a culture in which there was an intimate relationship between work, sport and physique. Miners lived on close terms with their bodies, and as an actor Burton too developed that total body awareness that was needed just as much in his own very different profession. But he knew that he was only “the-soft-cover, paperback edition” of the “hard volumes” represented by the other men in his family.

While, therefore, there were deep cultural roots to that brooding physicality which so captivated his admirers, acting for Richard Burton could never be totally fulfilling. The specialist in sensitive self-disgust that is Burton’s portrayal of George in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolfe* came out of the familiarity with a specific physical and cultural territory of one who was always uneasy at not doing a man’s work. Richard Burton, I suggest, would have preferred to be remembered as one of those sporting heroes he so admired who enact in performance the fantasy, the competitive urge, the desire for completion that all peoples possess and which in Wales, for a complex of social and cultural reasons, are mostly challenged through rugby football.