

## BURTON, PHILIP HENRY (1904 - 1995), teacher, writer, radio producer and theatre director

**Name:** Philip Henry Burton  
**Date of birth:** 1904  
**Date of death:** 1995  
**Parent:** Henry Burton  
**Parent:** Emma Matilda Burton (née Mears)  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** teacher, writer, radio producer and theatre director  
**Area of activity:** Education; Literature and Writing; Performing Arts  
**Author:** Angela V. John

P. H. Burton was born in Mountain Ash, Glamorgan on 30 November 1904. His parents were Emma Matilda Burton (née Mears, died 1934) and her second husband, Henry Burton (died 1919), a collier, originally from a middle class Staffordshire family. His mother, a nurse, had moved from Somerset to Mountain Ash as a child. Her son William Wilson (from her first marriage to a Scots collier working in Mountain Ash) lived with the Burtons in Arnold Street and was eighteen years older than his half-brother Philip. Philip Burton's own destiny might well have been the coalmine.

Burton attended Caegarw Elementary School then Mountain Ash Intermediate School where he flourished. His father was killed in a colliery accident when he was just fourteen and he and his mother had to survive on her weekly widow's pension of thirty shillings (£1.50). Fortunately, his choirmaster at St. Margaret's Church recognised the family's precarious financial position and the youth's potential. He was also a headmaster and encouraged Burton to study, and guaranteed a bank loan. This, along with a university scholarship (won when Burton was sixteen), enabled him to study Mathematics and History at University College, Cardiff.

Burton possessed, from an early age, what he called 'theatre addiction.' A precocious youngster - he had memorised the whole of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* by the age of ten - he relished the cultural offerings in the south Wales valleys, attending whenever possible, Mountain Ash's Empire Theatre and Nixon's Workmen's Institute, devouring melodrama, Shakespeare and whatever performances came his way. Once in Cardiff, the student spent much of his time in the theatre and reading literature. He graduated with a third class degree in Mathematics, an Upper Second in History, and a lot of debt.

His unusual combination of subjects nevertheless helped to secure him a post as a schoolmaster at one of Port Talbot's two grammar schools. Appointed in 1925 to teach Mathematics, Latin and Games at Port Talbot Secondary School, he soon switched to teaching English. He stayed at the school until 1945, becoming head of English and the Senior Master.

It was here that P. H. Burton taught another collier's son, **Richard Jenkins**, born in the year that Burton began teaching. Burton produced school plays such as Bernard Shaw's *The Apple Cart*. This 1941 production typifies the teacher's prescience: it was one of the first amateur productions of the play in Britain and it included **Richard Jenkins** who would become the legendary global superstar **Richard Burton**.

He was not, however, P. H. Burton's first or only protégé. For example, Burton nurtured the talent of Thomas Owen Jones (1914-1942), another collier's son. He won a scholarship to RADA then worked with the leading Shakespearean actors of the day at London's Old Vic Theatre before dying, aged just twenty-eight, in the Second World War.

Although untrained, numerous former pupils have recalled the 'almost magnetic' quality of Burton's teaching, the excitement and enthusiasm generated by being in his classroom and participating in school plays. He was exacting, but he got results. Some became professional actors. Others took up the more secure profession of teaching but carried on with amateur dramatics. Ruth Bidgood (née Jones) became a respected poet.

In 1937 Burton began writing the first of more than a hundred radio scripts. The BBC was developing a distinct Welsh region with its own wavelength. Working with its features producer, **T. Rowland Hughes**, Burton divided his time between teaching in Port Talbot and writing for the BBC in Cardiff. His pupils were beneficiaries. He selected the most promising for parts in *Children's Hour* plays and features and dramas he had penned.

He also taught a Workers' Educational Association class and helped to run a YMCA Drama Society. In 1934, *Granton Street*, a play written by Burton and set in a mining community based on Mountain Ash, was performed in Port Talbot. Burton played the coal owner. Six years later came a sequel: *White Collar*. The BBC broadcast both plays. In 2017 *Granton Street* was revived on the south Wales stage by the Fluellen Theatre Company. The production included a performance at the Port Talbot school where Burton had taught.

During the war Burton was a part-time Flight Lieutenant in the local Air Training Corps (ATC), for which he received an MBE (Mil). He also coached **Richard Jenkins**, spending long hours up Margam Mountain, helping to shape his distinctive voice and cultivate a stage presence. The teenager became his ward and changed his surname by deed poll to Burton. The budding actor appeared in school plays such as *Pygmalion*, and had the lead part in Burton's production of *Close Quarters*, a mystery drama for the ATC, performed at Port Talbot's YMCA.

Philip Burton gave up school teaching in 1945, succeeding the ailing **Rowland Hughes** as the BBC English language features producer in Cardiff. He described this as 'the watershed of my life'. He produced work by Rhys Davies who became a good friend. In 1947 Burton commissioned **Dylan Thomas's** *Return Journey*, adding five minutes to the script himself in order to meet the requisite broadcast time. He later played the Reverend Eli Jenkins in the iconic 1954 BBC recording of *Under Milk Wood* with its all-Welsh cast, and **Richard Burton** as First Voice.

Burton moved to London in 1949, spending two years as Chief Instructor at the BBC Staff Training School. He organised short courses for radio and ran television's first training course. He then worked as a freelancer. He encouraged and advised **Richard Burton** in his burgeoning stage career, and continued to write plays, even venturing into the novel world of television. He provided the initial dozen scripts for the children's serial, *The Apleyards*.

In 1939 the Guild of Graduates of the University of Wales had awarded Burton a six-month travelling scholarship. He had spent his sabbatical savouring schools and theatres across the United States and marvelling at its size: 'To one brought up in a narrow Welsh valley' he wrote, it was like 'a street ant setting out to climb the Empire State Building.' Had it not been for the urgent need to travel home because war was imminent, he might never have done so. He visited the States five more times post war, then, on his seventh visit in 1954, decided to stay. He would remain there for the rest of his life. Ten years later he became an American citizen.

In some ways, the demanding schoolmaster who had told his pupils that unless they had read the entire *Bible* twice, they could not consider themselves educated, seemed an unlikely figure to emigrate to New York at the age of fifty. Yet his career had already demonstrated that he was adaptable. He was a bachelor, the now famous actor he saw as his son was in America, and P. H. Burton had a lifelong love of performance.

Burton's first few years in the United States demonstrated how versatile - and brave - he needed to be. He briefly tried film production despite never being drawn to the cinema and resolutely declaring 'I'm not a film man.' He travelled across the country in a long-distance truck conveying precious paintings for exhibition. More appropriately, he began lecturing on Shakespeare and directing plays on and off Broadway, with varying success. They included a triumphant production of Sean O'Casey's *Purple Dust*. It ran for a year in Greenwich Village.

When Moss Hart, the director of the musical *Camelot* (starring **Richard Burton**), suffered a heart attack prior to its opening on Broadway in 1960, it was P. H. Burton who rescued the show by unofficially taking over rehearsals at the eleventh hour. The press dubbed him the 'Back stage brains of Broadway.'

Burton relished being in the heartland of musical theatre. From 1962-9 he was the first director of a musical theatre academy in New York. Initially a commercial venture, financial difficulties resulted in it becoming a not-for-profit organisation called the American Musical and Dramatic Academy (AMDA). Burton was also its president and worked hard fund-raising. The consummate teacher flourished once more through working with talented young people. He taught at AMDA until 1970, focusing especially on dramatic literature, rhetoric and verse speaking. He also became the executive vice-president of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers of New York. The *Western Mail* commented how the Port Talbot schoolmaster was 'exercising astonishing influence upon show business in the United States.'

Burton's friends included Noel Coward, Dorothy Parker, Sammy Davis Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. He had become estranged from **Richard Burton** when the actor became involved with Elizabeth Taylor. Burton had been especially close to **Richard's** wife Sybil and their two daughters. However, the bond between the teacher and former pupil proved indissoluble and, after two years, they were reconciled when he helped **Richard Burton** in his role of Hamlet in Toronto prior to the New York opening. He soon came to appreciate Elizabeth Taylor. After the actor's death he published a book entitled *Richard & Philip: The Burtons* (1992). Her Foreword declared 'Without Philip Burton there never would have been a **Richard Burton**.'

Writing, lecturing and directing dominated P. H. Burton's time. He directed plays beyond New York and ventured on to the lecture circuit with Christian Alderson, a former AMDA student. Burton's powerful lecture-recitals provided a neat fusion of his skills and passions, taking his love of literature, and of Shakespeare in particular, across America to a multitude of venues and audiences.

His reputation as a Shakespearean expert was cemented by publications. *You, My Brother* (1973) was a long novel that told the story of William Shakespeare's younger brother Ned but his most accomplished work was *The Sole Voice: Character Portraits from Shakespeare* (1970). He also wrote *Early Doors. My Life and the Theatre* (1969), calling it 'the theatrical autobiography of a stage-struck man.'

In 1964, returning from a lecture in Mexico City en route to another in Miami, Burton briefly visited the Florida Keys. Before long he was wintering and writing in Key West with summers back east. Two heart attacks in quick succession helped to hasten the decision to move full-time to Key West's relaxed and warm climate. Christian Alderson found and oversaw the restoration of a home on Angela Street.

Although he now no longer returned to Wales for holidays, Burton remained in touch with friends such as his erstwhile BBC colleague, Aneurin Talfan Davies, and many of his old pupils in Wales and beyond, writing long letters in his neat, precise hand. **Richard Burton** visited him though the actor died more than a decade before his teacher. Aged eighty-eight, P. H. Burton was the subject of an HTV documentary. The narrator was Brinley Jenkins, a former pupil who had become a seasoned BBC actor in Welsh and English. Burton continued to give lecture recitals, wrote more (unpublished) fiction, and played an active part in his local church. He had a library of more than 5,000 books and enjoyed early morning walks.

In 1993 Burton moved to an Episcopalian nursing/retirement home in Davenport, Florida. He died of a stroke in the Heart of Florida Hospital, Haines City on 28 January 1995, aged ninety. Although consistent in his devotion to Shakespearean drama, this talented man had reinvented himself several times in different places. It perhaps explains why his achievements have not been fully recognised. Fittingly, he stipulated that his ashes should be divided between three locations: New York Harbour, Stratford-upon-Avon and Mountain Ash.

## Author

Angela V. John

## Sources

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Personal information and interviews

## Further reading

Wikipedia Article: **Philip Burton (theatre director)**

## Additional Links

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**Published date:** 2018-10-01

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John, A. V., (2018). BURTON, PHILIP HENRY (1904 - 1995), teacher, writer, radio producer and theatre director. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 18 Aug 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s12-BURT-HEN-1904>

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