

## BULMER-THOMAS, IVOR (1905—1993), Labour, later Conservative, politician and writer

**Name:** Ivor Bulmer-Thomas

**Date of birth:** 1905

**Date of death:** 1993

**Spouse:** Margaret Joan Bulmer-Thomas (née Bulmer)

**Spouse:** Dilys Thomas (née Jones)

**Parent:** Zipporah Thomas (née Jones)

**Parent:** Alfred Ernest Thomas

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** Labour, later Conservative, politician and writer

**Area of activity:** Literature and Writing; Politics, Government and Political Movements

**Author:** John Graham Jones

He was born in notably humble circumstances at Cwmbarn on 30 November 1905, the son of Alfred Ernest Thomas (1876—1918), a local brick drawer, and his wife Zipporah Jones (died 1954), a domestic servant. He added 'Bulmer' (his second wife's maiden name) to his surname by deed poll in 1952. He was educated at Jones's West Monmouth School, Pontypool, St John's College, Oxford (where he was a Scholar), graduating with a first in mathematical moderations in 1925 and a first in literae humaniores in 1928, and Magdalen College, Oxford (Senior Demy in theology). He was Liddon Student in 1928, Ellerton Essayist in 1929 and Junior Denyer and Johnson Scholar in 1930. He graduated MA (Oxon.) in 1930 and became Hon. Fellow of St John's College in 1985. While at Oxford he was also a Cross Country and Athletics Blue, and in 1926 he was a Welsh International Cross—Country runner. Only an injury prevented him from being selected for the 880 yards in the 1928 Olympic Games.

Thomas was appointed Gladstone Research Scholar at St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, 1929—30, before serving as a member of the editorial staff of *The Times*, 1930—37, where he wrote occasional leader columns, a large number of articles on sporting and scientific subjects, and later drafted obituaries. A number of important obituaries published in *The Times* were his work, at least in substantial part, including that of Bertrand Russell. He then became Chief Leader Writer of the *News Chronicle*, 1937—39. He had published the first of his thirteen books *Our Lord Birkenhead*, a brisk and entertaining biography, in 1930, and he published a biography of Lord Gladstone of Hawarden, the son of the famous Prime Minister, in 1936 based on research undertaken while at Hawarden. In 1938 he published his *Top Sawyer*, the still highly regarded biography of [David Davies](#) of Llandinam (1818—1890). In 1930 he had also published *Coal in the New Era*, his first publication to deal with current affairs. During World War II he served in the army, initially with the Royal Fusiliers, 1939—40, and then attaining the rank of Captain in the Royal Norfolk Regiment in 1941, serving until the end of hostilities.

He stood as the Labour candidate against [Sir John Simon](#) (the leader of the National Liberal group of MPs known as Simonites) in the Spen Valley constituency of the West Riding of Yorkshire in the general election of 1935, narrowly missing election to parliament by just 600 votes. He won applause for having given the generally unpopular, aloof [Simon](#) a bad fright in the election. He was then, under the terms of the wartime electoral truce, elected unopposed as the Labour MP for the Keighley division of the West Riding of Yorkshire in 1942, and was easily re—elected there in the general election of July 1945. Thomas's knowledge of Italian quickly led to his appointment within [Hugh Dalton](#)'s Ministry of Economic Warfare where he was responsible for feeding propaganda into Mussolini's Italy. In 1942 he published his *Warfare by Words* and in 1946 *The Problem of Italy*. He was able to speak and read fluently six languages.

As a MP, Thomas served as Parliamentary Secretary for Civil Aviation under Attlee, 1945—46, and then as Under—secretary for the Colonies, 1946—47. He had steered the highly controversial Civil Aviation Bill through the Commons in 1946, and in 1947 became a delegate to the General Assembly of the United Nations. But, having travelled widely to all corners of the globe, he was summarily dropped from the government in a re—shuffle at the end of 1947. Highly disillusioned with Socialism by this time, he resigned from the Labour Party in October 1948 during the debate on the King's Speech, then joining the Conservative Party in January 1949. He published his *The Socialist Tragedy* later in the same year. He unsuccessfully contested Newport as the Conservative candidate in the general election of 1950. This election marked the end of his career as an active politician. He published his important two—volume *The Growth of the Party System* in 1965, a work the reception of which was very mixed. He joined the SDP in 1981.

Although his upbringing was that of a strict Baptist, Bulmer—Thomas served as a member of the House of Laity of the Church Assembly, 1950—85. Subsequently, he was acting—deputy editor of the *Daily Telegraph* in 1953—54. Other offices included the chair of the executive of the Historic Churches Preservation Trust, hon. Director of the Friends of Friendless Churches, and secretary and later chairman of the Ancient Monuments Society for thirty—five years. Bulmer—Thomas 80th birthday was marked by the publication of a Festschrift edited by the secretary of the Ancient Monuments Society — a

full, well deserved tribute to the diversity and catholicity of his interests. He was also vice—president of the Church Union and served as chairman of the Redundant Churches Fund, 1969—76. He remained a member of the General Synod of the Church of England until his 82nd birthday. He was elected FSA in 1970, and was appointed CBE in 1984. Throughout his life he contributed regular articles and columns to learned journals and to various newspapers, notably reviews to the Times Literary Supplement. He also took a continuing interest in Greek mathematics and throughout his life wrote learned articles on this subject. As a result, the University of Warwick awarded him the degree of D.Sc honoris causa in 1979. He was also awarded the honorary degree of D.Litt. by the University of Wales. He was a real workaholic who needed just four or five hours sleep each night.

He married, firstly, on 5 April 1932, Dilys (born 1910), the daughter of Dr W. Llewelyn Jones of Merthyr Tydfil, but she died in childbirth on 16 August 1938. He was predictably distraught and published his emotions as *Dilysia - a threnody* in 1938 (re-printed in 1987). They had one son. He married, secondly, 26 December 1940, at Hereford Cathedral, Margaret Joan, the daughter of E. F. Bulmer of Adam's Hill, Hereford. They had three children. He lived at 12 Edwardes Square, London. He died suddenly of a heart attack on 7 October 1993 having continued working until literally within minutes of his death. His ashes were interred on 22 October 1993.

## Author

Dr John Graham Jones

## Sources

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## Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Ivor Bulmer-Thomas](#) 

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