

My granddad tried to kill Dylan Thomas

*A new film tells the explosive story of the poet's tangled
love life. Its producer talks to Sheila Johnston
about her intimate connection with the drama*

On March 6 1945, shortly after the pubs had closed, William Killick stalked up to the cliff-top bungalow near New Quay, South Wales, where Dylan Thomas was partying with friends and fired a machine gun through the window. Then, just for good measure, he went inside and let off another round before threatening to blow up the whole caboodle with a hand grenade. He was charged with attempted murder.

Killick had good reason to feel aggrieved. He had just returned from 18 months' service behind enemy lines in Greece with the Special Operations Executive to find tongues wagging about an affair between his wife, Vera, and Thomas, with whom she had grown up. To add insult to injury, his bank account was empty: plundered to support the Thomases' rackets lifestyle. "It's understandable when you come back from war and suddenly all your money's gone while you were bleeding for your country," says Rebekah Gilbertson, who should know: William and Vera were her grandparents.

Her family rarely mentioned the scandal: "There was always a sort of mystery around it. I was told once that they had agreed, the four of them, not to talk about it. And my grandfather felt he had five daughters and didn't want to be considered as the person who tried to kill Dylan Thomas."

But now the silence is about to be broken resoundingly: Gilbertson has just produced her first film, *The Edge of Love*, which tells that story. Directed by John Maybury, it is a high-profile movie (it opens the Edinburgh Film Festival next week), with a high-profile cast: Keira Knightley and Cillian Murphy as the Killicks, Matthew Rhys and Sienna Miller as Thomas and his wife, Caitlin.

Was Vera having a fling? According to Robin Sheldon, who lodged with the Killicks in the Sixties, she asserted then: "I never did, boyo, I never did. I knew him

too well." Gilbertson, on the other hand, concedes that "although they all denied it, local people at the time suspected a *ménage à trois*. And my grandfather did say to certain people that he suspected it as well.

"We made the decision for the film to explore the idea that, when you are lonely and you've got your childhood friend there, someone you feel safe with, you may become vulnerable. And young people then lived for the day. There was a war on and they didn't know whether they, or their loved ones, would be alive or dead tomorrow. But we purposefully kept it a grey area. We don't show anything.

"Caitlin has said that, in the biographies of Dylan, it was always about the drink and the dark side. They never captured the great fun that they had. For Vera, it was one of the best times of her life. They had this real freedom – they were like hippies before the hippies were invented."

However, Gilbertson insists on one point: there was no lesbian liaison between Vera and Caitlin. "They* sort of dance around each other because they both want Dylan's



They were like hippies before the hippies were invented



Living for the day: Keira Knightley in *The Edge of Love* and (left) Rebekah Gilbertson

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attention and he wants the attention of them both. So they bond and become very close, and the story is about how the men in their lives pull them apart. Vera decides she doesn't want to stay in the playpen with Dylan and Caitlin. She chooses William: they have a future together and he makes her feel real. Sometimes with the closest friendships in your life, you just have to go your different ways because it's the healthy thing to do. But my grandmother always referred to Caitlin as Catty and had this real warmth for her."

Gilbertson, who turns 35 on Friday, has worn many hats in her short career: she has painted scenery at the Royal Opera House, helped Martin Bell in his campaign to become an Independent MP and built refugee shelters in Zimbabwe. Her encounters with landmine victims there led her to publish a fundraising book, *Handlines*, of celebrity handprints and footprints.

It's another connection with her grandfather, who was acquitted of the attempted murder charge, apparently after the intervention of a sympathetic judge, himself an ex-army officer. "He laid landmines in Greece and then would have to go back and dig them up so they

wouldn't harm civilians, and so he was terribly proud of my book. He was like an oak tree, always there for me. We used to rake the leaves together and, every time I smell a bonfire now, I think of him. I adored both my grandparents and, in an odd way, this film started off as a love letter to them."

She applauds Murphy's darkly smouldering performance: "He gives William dignity and integrity." But I wondered what she thought of Knightley's comment that Vera starts out as a confident, spirited woman and ends up broken. "Perhaps Keira felt the life was sucked out of Vera then because the fun and games were stopping. But I remember my grandmother as very stimulating. She was always reading, she loved young people and she loved ideas."

Gilbertson's family and the Thomases' daughter, Aeronwy, have yet to see *The Edge of Love*. "I'm sure they will find it strange. I was not interested in making a biopic or a documentary, but in taking four young people with the background of a global war and seeing the push and pull of their emotions. And I've been living with this for so long that they're not my grandparents any more. They're just two characters that we've developed."

A TURBULENT TRAIL TO THE BIG SCREEN

The life of Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) and his turbulent marriage seem the stuff of high drama, yet many attempts to bring them to the screen have fallen by the wayside.

One casualty in 1991 was to star Gary Oldman and his then wife Uma Thurman, but

founded due to Oldman's "nervous exhaustion" after filming Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (not to mention his own marital difficulties).

Two more recent projects, both on the back burner, are a film backed by Pierce Brosnan and starring Michael Sheen and Miranda Richardson, and another developed by Mick Jagger's production company for Dougray Scott and Emily Watson.

Yet another awaiting the green light focuses on Thomas's late-life sojourn in the Chelsea Hotel. The director, Mick Davis, has described it as being about Dylan "freaking out and constantly seeing things and going back in flashes to his life". It would star Kevin McKidd, Kelly Reilly as Caitlin and Famke Janssen as one of Dylan's mistresses.

One film that did see the light of day had nothing to do with Dylan's marriage. In 1990, Anthony Hopkins directed *Dylan Thomas: Return Journey*, in which Bob Kingdom - who bears a startling resemblance to the older poet - portrays him on tour in the Fifties giving his one-man shows. **SJ**

