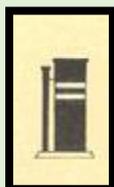


# Evan Thomas, Radcliffe and Company Limited

A Review of an acclaimed Welsh Ship Owner

By

Geoff Walker



Perhaps one of the better-known Cardiff based steamship companies of the late 1800s, established in 1882, by a Ceredigion sea captain, Evan Thomas, together with a businessman, Henry Radcliffe from Merthyr Tydfil which was a major Welsh industrial town of the period. Thomas was the son of Hezekiah Thomas who owned a 47-ton ketch, **Pheasant**, and part-owner in several other vessels. Capt. Evan

Thomas, once having obtained his master's certificate and after serving eight years as Master in Steamship, tramping to the Baltic, Mediterranean, Black Sea, and United States, set up a new ship-owning company in Cardiff, with his cofounding partner. Evan Thomas commanded **Gwenllian Thomas**, the first ship bought by Evan Thomas, Radcliffe, and Company. The new venture eventually developed into one of the more prosperous tramp companies of the era, as well as one of the longest lasting Welsh shipping concerns.

Like most Cardiff steamship companies, it relied heavily on cargoes of Welsh steaming coal. Exportation of coal from Cardiff, which had become the largest coaling port in the World, reached its zenith just prior to the outbreak of WW1.

In 1884 Evan Thomas gave up his seagoing days to concentrate on his recently established company, but unfortunately died at the young age of 59 in November 1891. The company he had established less than ten years previously, owned 15 bottoms, all steamships by this time.

Upon the passing of Evan Thomas, Henry Radcliffe took into partnership his younger brother Daniel, to assist in the management of the company. Alas, Henry Radcliffe died in 1921 at the age of 66, at which time, chairmanship of the company passed to his brother Daniel.

Daniel Radcliffe of Tal-y-werydd, Cardiff, joined the company at the age of 24 in 1892 having previously worked for well-known Cardiff shipowners **J. H. Anning** and the **Turnbull Brothers**. On joining the company, he enhanced the rapid growth with the result that in 1900 the steamship company owned a total of 24 ships.

Daniel Radcliffe died in March 1933.

The Black Sea Trading pattern was usual for Cardiff ship owners around these times and followed by almost all the **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe** ships, with little variation until 1912–13 when there was a decline in the trade. Gradually the Black Sea trade slowed and Evan Thomas, Radcliffe, as with the majority, of other Cardiff shipowners, had to look elsewhere for their business opportunities. The Black Sea trade in its heyday was a very lucrative business and the carriage of coal from South Wales ports of Cardiff or Barry, outwards, and with return cargoes of grain from southern Russia provided the foundation for the success for **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe and Company**. His ships rarely sailed empty in ballast, except for short positioning voyages from the points of discharge of coal to the Black Sea, and from continental ports to Cardiff or Barry. The Black Sea trade remained robust until the early years of the First World War, but as the decline in the trade started so did their ships make more frequent appearances in America and south east Asia.

Typical of a widening voyage scenario, for example, was that of their **SS Washington**, from its construction in 1907 until December 1912, she was engaged exclusively with the carriage of coal from South Wales to the Mediterranean and the carriage of grain from the Black Sea ports to Hamburg, Rotterdam, and Marseille. But then in December 1912, she sailed from Barry with a cargo of coal to Rio de Janeiro, returning from Bahía Blanca to London with grain and left on another voyage from Barry to Rio de Janeiro returning to Rotterdam with general cargo from New Orleans. She then returned to the Black Sea trade for another five consecutive voyages before sailing in ballast after unloading coal at Taranto, for Pondicherry, returning with a cargo of ground nuts for Marseille. This was followed by a voyage across the Atlantic to New Orleans, returning to Marseille in February 1914 with a cargo of wheat. This expansion of trade was across the entire fleet. **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe** ships were now becoming truly global tramp ships.

Another distinctive example of this emerging trend was their **SS Llangorse**, which was employed exclusively on the standard Black Sea coal and grain trade from 1907 to 1912; she then crossed the Atlantic to Baltimore returning to Hamburg with grain. There followed six more voyages to the Black Sea after which the ship visited Galveston, La Plata, Buenos Aires, Philadelphia, Rosario, San Nicholas and Aguilas, being employed in the transport of grain and iron ore, to Naples, Barcelona, Glasgow, Genoa, and Avonmouth. Gradually, the trans-Atlantic trade was becoming more and more important in the activities of Cardiff shipowners, such as **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe and Company**.

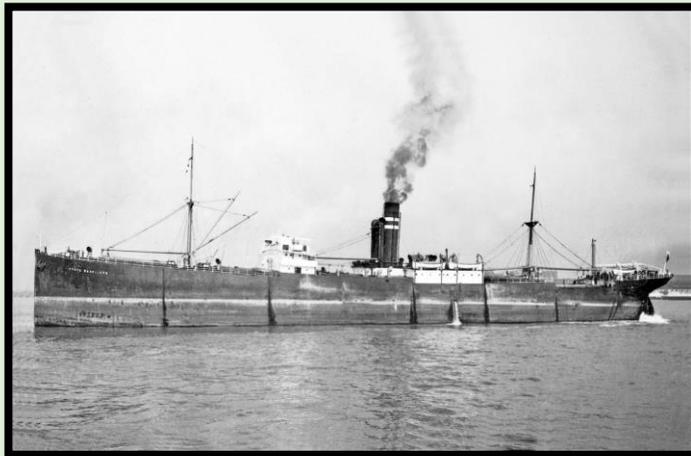
By 1914, the Company was the largest shipping firm in Cardiff with 28 vessels. At one point, the company had as many as 31 single-ship companies registered under its name,

Although compensation was received from the Government for the ships lost during WW1, **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe**, did not immediately enter the post-war spree of purchasing costly new tonnage, like many other ship owners. By 1919, the company owned only 9 ships, with a total gross tonnage of about 41,254. The company acquired only one additional ship, **Ethel Radcliffe**, in 1920, as a token replacement for the 20 ships lost during the war years. This was likely due to the shipping slump of the 1920s, which, because of its austerity and sound management, the company was able to endure the bearish market conditions.



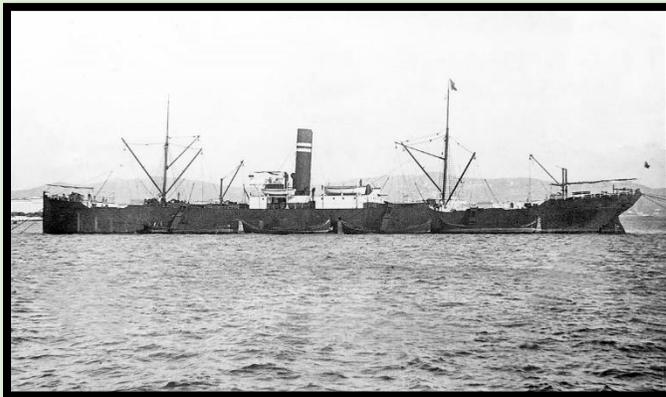
The 4,680grt **Peterston** was built in 1925 by Bartram & Sons at South Dock. In 1948 she was sold to Gowan Shipping of London and renamed **Burhaven** and in 1950 she moved to Newton SS Co. as Andrew T. In 1953 she was sold to Shamrock Shipping of Belfast and renamed Raloo and the following year she joined Costa Rican company Paraporti Cia Naviera as Paraporti. On 27th July 1959 she arrived at Antwerp for demolition.

Image: Unknown photographer



A classic looking steamship of the day, the 5,673grt **Ethel Radcliffe** was built in 1920 by Craig, Taylor & Co. at Stockton. On 17th April 1941 she was torpedoed off Great Yarmouth and beached while on a voyage from Saint Johns, NB to London with a cargo of wheat. Earlier voyages had been cargo of coal for Port Said, Mauritius to London with a cargo of sugar, then to Norfolk, Virginia in ballast to return to Immingham, with a cargo of coal. This indicates the widening trading patterns of the company.

Image: John B. Hill collection



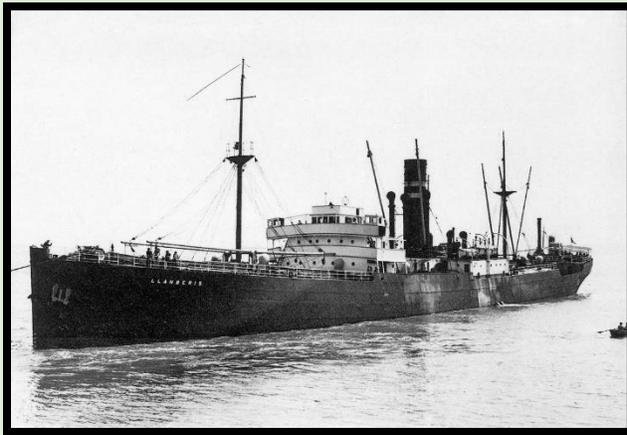
Left, the 3,840grt **Llanover** was built in 1899 by Richardson Duck at Thornaby. In 1913 she was renamed **Paddington** then in 1916 the company renamed her **Iolo**. On 17th February 1917 she was torpedoed and sunk by U-60 SW of Fastnet, while on a voyage from Cardiff to La Spezia with a cargo of coal. Two crew members were killed.

Image: John B. Hill collection

In 1919 and 1920 many of Evan Thomas, Radcliffe's ships were time chartered to other companies, but 1921 saw the slump really taking a toll, with the result being that many of the company's ships were laid up for extended periods because no cargoes were available for them. Despite this, some of the Evan Thomas, Radcliffe ships were fully occupied in the first few years of the 1920s, although substantial losses were made on many of the voyages, signaling the conclusion of the golden era. The annual reports of the various single ship companies that made up **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe & Company** reflect

the general gloom and depression that seemed to have prevailed among the Cardiff shipowners in the early twenties. The Great Depression that started between 1929 - 1933 caused a worldwide slump in merchant shipping.

However, a few years later, trade began to recover, and the company invested in two new ships from Bartram & Sons of Sunderland: the sister ships **Llanashe** launched in 1936 and **Llandaff** launched in 1937. Unusually for steamships built in the 1930s, **Llanashe** and **Llandaff** each had a compound engine. Triple-expansion engines had largely superseded compound engines in the 1860s. But in **Llanashe** and **Llandaff** the compound engine was combined with an exhaust steam turbine, to achieve a triple stage of steam expansion and hence provide better economy.



The 5,055grt **Llanberis** was built in 1928 by Hawthorn Leslie at Hebburn. In 1950 she was sold to Cia Maritima Las Perlas SA and renamed Theoskepasti and in 1956 she joined Cia Latina De Navigazione as Valiente. In 1960 she moved to Cie Miniere et Metallurgique SA and was renamed Kettara IV and on 25th July 1960 she arrived at Yokosuka to be broken up by Arika Shoten.

Image: John B. Hill collection

For Evan Thomas, Radcliffe WW2 caused the loss of 11 ships, which left the company with a greatly reduced fleet, for only five of their ships survived the war. They were, **Peterston, Flimston, Llandaff, Llanberis, and Llangollen.**

With the great reduction in the fleet size due to war losses, the company was forced to look elsewhere for extra tonnage, but it was almost impossible to acquire new UK built ships in the immediate post war years. Hence, **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe** acquired 6 Canadian "**Fort**" type ships together with the Liberty ship **Samskern**, a ship provided to the MOWT (Ministry of War Transport) under the Anglo-American Lend-Lease system, at a charter rate of a dollar a year.

The years that followed 1945 became a period of company reconstruction, and rebuilding, but **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe**, in common with virtually all other South Wales shipowners, never repeated the prosperity of the period before the First World War. Cardiff and Barry saw a gradual decline in the fortunes of its docks, as coal exports diminished. Cardiff was, above all, a coal exporting port and it was on this that its fortunes had been built. Many of the Cardiff tramp steamers had been built and operated on the strength of the coal trade, as was the case with those ships owned by **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe**, most of which had been designed mainly for transporting coal. The company had to seek alternative cargoes and with the change of ownership to the **Evans and Reid group**, as a fully integrated company within the group, following some years in collaboration with Evans and Reid, the Radcliffe fleet became mainly an oil tanker fleet.

In 1946 the company had only five ships of its own: **Llanberis (built 1928)**; **Llangollen (built 1928)**; **Peterston (built 1925)**; **Flimston (built 1925)** and **Llandaff (built 1937)**. It was operating another eight standard ships on behalf of the Ministry of Transport or on charter. The ownership structure of **Evan Thomas Radcliffe** was changed: The previous partners **Evan and Reid Group** assumed all shares in the shipping company. The ships were converted to meet the new requirements, and part of the shipping fleet was focused on oil transport and the acquisition of tankers from this time onwards, engaged in trading from the Persian Gulf and Sumatra to the European ports. The remaining dry-cargo ships in the fleet followed whatever other cargoes were available, seldom if ever returning to the Cardiff.

In 1950 and 1951 too, the pre-war ships **Llandaff** and **Llangollen** were sold which left the company with only one ship, the tanker **Llanishen** of 1945 with a new motor ship, **Llantrisant**, a freighter of 6,140 Gross tons being built by Bartram's. She was launched in 27 March 1952 and delivered to her owners in September 1952. She was in the fleet for five years as a worldwide trader. In 1957 she was sold to become **Lake Burnaby**.

In the early 1950s the company had few ships, so a number were chartered. After the delivery of **Llantrisant** in 1952, another new ship, the oil tanker **Llandaff** was built by Lithgows of Port Glasgow. She remained in the fleet until 1960, for much of the time being chartered to Anglo-Saxon Petroleum, but on in February 1960 she too was sold, to the Island Shipping Company of Bermuda.



Image: Unknown Photographer

The graceful looking **Llantrisant** following her sale in 1970 to become **Lake Burnaby**.

In 1957 Bartram's delivered a new motor ship, the freighter **Llantrisant**. The next year Swan Hunter at Wallsend delivered the oil tanker **Llanishen**. In 1960 the tanker **Hamilton**, built at Tamise, Belgium, was delivered on time charter and the Furness Shipbuilding Company of Haverton Hill delivered the tanker **Llangorse**. In October 1962 Bartrams delivered the freighter **Llanwern**.

By 1964–5 therefore, the **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe** fleet comprised five ships. By 1970 **Llanwern** and **Llantrisant** had been sold and in 1971 SA Boelwerf of Tamise, Belgium delivered **Stolt Llandaff**, the last ship to be built for the company. She was a specialized chemical tanker and remained as an **Evan**

**Thomas, Radcliffe** ship on charter to an associate company from the Stolt Corporation, until December 1981. With the sale of **Hamilton, Llangorse and Llanishen**, the **Stolt Llandaff** remained the sole ship in the fleet until 1980 when two small coastal ships, **Radcliffe Trader** and **Radcliffe Venturer**, were purchased.



Image: Unknown Photographer

The tanker **Hamilton** built for **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe** in 1960. Grt 20,495 tons. The vessel was on time charter top Shell New Zealand for some years, before being sold in 1970 and renamed **Feaso Sun**. The vessel is reported to have exploded and sunk in Manila Bay during 1978.

In 1981, with all ships sold off, the company attempted to operate two small coasters, but failed, and sold both vessels in 1983. **Evan Thomas, Radcliffe and Company Ltd.**, had remained active in ship owning until the 1980s, outstaying many other renowned Cardiff owners, but like most ship owners of their day, serious re-evaluation was required in order to meet changes within the industry **Evans and Reid Group**.



Images: Unknown Photographers

Above, **Radcliff Venture** sold 1983.

Above, **Radcliffe Trader** sold 1983.

Both coastal vessels were not commercially successful and were the last ships to be operated directly by Evan Thomas, Radcliffe & Co. Ltd., who subsequently withdrew from direct ship owning.



Image: Paul.T

The 1971, Belgium built **Stoldt Llandaff** of Grt 15,121 tons. Captured at Gladstone Docks in Liverpool. The last vessel to be built for the original **Evan Thomas, Radcliff and Company**. She relinquished the Stolt charter in December 1981.

End

References: Evan Thomas, Radcliffe corporate archives, and various online data available on Public Domains, from which some material has been sourced.

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