

THE FRIEND

Friends of the Books Council Newsletter

Welcome

These are just a few words of welcome for the Friends' first newsletter. It was our intention from the beginning to keep our members informed about the book trade in Wales, and we hope that members appreciate the quarterly mailings that they receive.

This 'newsletter' is another way for us to keep in touch with the members, and the committee is grateful to Lyn Lewis Dafis from Aberystwyth for taking on the task of editing. We hope that you will enjoy reading it, and that you will find it of interest.

ALUN CREUNANT DAVIES
Chair,
Friends of the Welsh Books Council

THE FRIENDS REMEMBER R.S. THOMAS

The late R. S. Thomas was the first to be invited to address the annual meeting of the Friends back in 1997. During the meeting, Professor M. Wynn Thomas had an opportunity to interview him about his life and work, and it is certain that every member of the Friends who were present that day remembers the occasion.

'It would come as no surprise to those who regarded R. S. Thomas as a bitter and sad man that, at the end of the meeting, he was presented with a fine copy of his favourite

poem, Siôn Cent's *cywydd*, "I wagedd ac oferedd byd" [To the vanity and futility of the world], said Professor Thomas. 'But a totally different side of his personality came to the fore during the interview, such as when he expressed his sympathy for poets who had turned to drugs in an attempt to summon the muse. He was a kind man, ever ready to help, and a champion of the Welsh language, but he was also the great poet of the relentless imagination, and he kept on challenging the world until the very end.'



Professor M. Wynn Thomas talking to R. S. Thomas during a meeting of the Friends, April 1997

CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

The Books Council has worked closely with the publishers and booksellers to produce two special books supplements this Christmas.

50,000 copies of *Books from Wales* have been produced, and most of them have already been distributed by targeting various issues of the *Western Mail*. Copies have also been sent to the bookshops and libraries as well as to all members of the Friends of the Books Council.

The six-page full-colour supplement includes the latest offerings

from the publishers, with books for children, teenagers and adults. With over 60 titles featured in the supplement, we are sure that there are books to suit everyone this Christmas. Some of the titles will also be featured in our television advertising campaign.

All the books will be available from your local bookshop and further information regarding individual titles can be found on the Books Council's website www.gwales.com.

To accompany *Books from Wales*, there is also a supplement of Welsh-language titles, *Gwledd y Nadolig*, which has been distributed through the Welsh community newspapers.

MY FAVOURITE BOOKS

A column where members of the Friends are invited to discuss their favourite books. This is the selection of Jane Aaron, who lectures at the University of Glamorgan.

The most indispensable books on my bookshelf are those I know I could not easily replace by visiting a bookshop or a web page, because they're out of print as well, of course, as being personally valuable to me for their own sakes. Of these, the five Welsh writing in English texts I'd choose (at the moment) as the most indispensable, are, in chronological



order: Jane Williams (Ysgafell)'s defense of the Welsh nation against the accusations of the Blue Books, *Artegall* (1848); J. O. Francis's political play, *Cross Currents* (1923); Rhys Davies's Gothic novel *The Dark Daughters*, (1947) Hilda Vaughan's feminist re-telling of the 'Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach' folktale in her novel *Iron and Gold* (1948); and Margiad Evans's poetry collection *The Candle Ahead* (1956).

And which of these five do I consider the most desirable? Jane Williams's *Artegall*, perhaps, in part because I don't actually own the thing itself, but only its shadow, a photocopy, but more significantly because: a) it stands as evidence of Welsh women's vital contribution to the cultural and political life of the nation in the first half of the nineteenth century; b) its analysis of the significance of the Blue Books, and their likely effects, is very astute, particularly its recognition of the likely harm to Wales were the English to take command of Welsh education; c) in it the English language is used so adroitly and with such telling ironies to deflate the assumed moral and cultural superiority of imperial England.

A BEQUEST FROM A FRIEND TURNER EVANS

During the summer, the Friends of the Books Council lost one of its most loyal supporters.

Turner Evans was very supportive of the work of the Books Council over many years, and it was a privilege for the Council to receive a generous bequest in his will.

As well as offering financial support, he had also assisted the

Marketing Department with its promotional work, through his links with the library authorities.

'We greatly appreciate his generosity towards the Council,' said Gwerfyl Pierce Jones, Director of the Welsh Books Council. 'In accordance with the terms of the will, the legacy will be used to support Welsh-language writers.'

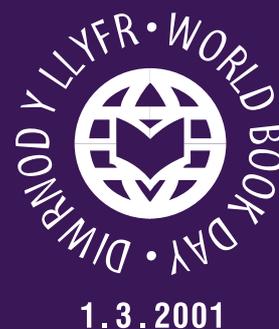
WORLD BOOK DAY

There will be a host of events held in Wales on 1 March, 2001, as we will be celebrating World Book Day as well as St. David's Day.

Following the great success of this year's celebrations, arrangements are well in hand for a repeat performance next year. Children from Anglesey will travel to Dublin and will meet up with pupils and authors from Ireland. The trip will surely be a unique experience for them, in honour of authors from both countries.

Information about the Book Day has already been circulated to schools and libraries throughout Wales, and we look forward to receiving details regarding their individual activities. We are sure that they will once again rise to the challenge.

Publishers and booksellers will also participate in the celebrations and will arrange author readings and book promotions.



BOOK REVIEWS

As a number of members of the Friends had noted that there was a distinct lack of book reviews following the demise of the *Books in Wales* magazine, the matter was discussed at length at the last meeting of the Friends' Steering Committee.

We are pleased to be able to announce that they have secured funding from the National Assembly for this purpose.

Initially, the intention is to commission 500 book reviews of titles that have appeared since *Books in Wales* was last published. The reviews will be placed on the Council's website, as well as offered to various magazines and newspapers for publication.

New books will also be reviewed as they are published.

WORKING WITH BOOKS



Lyn Lewis Dafis, the editor of *The Friends*, interviews Janet Thomas, a free-lance editor in Aberystwyth.

The editor of *Catwomen From Hell*, Honno's most recent collection of short stories by women from Wales, is playing her part in fulfilling her own vision of 'establishing a community of Welsh writers, visible, active and supporting each other'.

Janet Thomas lives in Aberystwyth and earns her living in the publishing industry as a freelance editor. Before moving back to live in her native town she had worked for a large London-based publishing house as an editor of children's books. But *Catwomen*, as she affectionately calls her latest edited volume, does not pretend to be a children's book. With twenty-five contributors, it brings together new and established writers 'to be subversive, to tackle dark, dangerous subjects, to break away from the constraints of naturalism ... to have fun'.

'Very often short stories can tend towards the quiet and contemplative, and I love those sorts of stories. But in collecting material for this volume we were trying to nudge some of our authors into taking a few more risks with their writing. And the theme of "wicked women" is one which has a long history within feminist fiction, so this was in some way Honno's Welsh version of contributing to stories in that tradition.'

She feels a little frustrated with the attitude shown towards English writing from Wales by booksellers in Wales. This is exemplified by

seeing *Catwomen* put on the shelves alongside books on rugby and how to bake the perfect bara brith, rather than with 'real' fiction published by London-based publishers.

'In some sort of way it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. We can think that books with a Welsh theme will not be of interest to the "mainstream", and then lo and behold we find they're not. We shouldn't be happy with that, and things can change. All it needs is for one or two books to break through, and the situation can change overnight.

'When I was young, if you had asked me to name any Welsh pop groups or Welsh actors working in the "mainstream", I don't think I could have named one. But that has changed, people now go looking for them. In the same way I still believe it is worth persevering because the day will come when people will go looking for writing from Wales, shops will put it on the shelves with other fiction. Fashion can be a good thing sometimes!'

When asked to name one book from Wales that would have to have a prominent place on her book shelf, she immediately named another volume of short stories, Siân James's prize-winning *Not Singing Exactly* (Arts Council for Wales Book of the Year, 1996).

'I remember my feelings now as I started to read the book. After a few pages I realised that she was describing growing up in Aberystwyth, just as I had done – this was the first time I had ever read a work I could identify with in that way. I had read stories set all over the world, and had enjoyed them; but reading this was totally different. It was fantastic!'

www.gwales.com

In the second of the four tales of the Mabinogi, the story of Branwen, daughter of Llŷr, the seven who return from the battles in Ireland spend eighty years on the island of Gwales, with Brân's severed head as company.

Some could argue that you could spend eighty years and more browsing through the contents of the Welsh Books Council's virtual gwales and not see everything because of the abundant information to be found within it. On this 'island' you can find details about 14,000 Welsh-language and English-language books of Welsh interest. You can also fill your shopping basket to the top, place your order, and pay for it with your credit card.

gwales.com was launched in February by Tom Middlehurst AM, and the Council acknowledges the generous support of the National Assembly and the Llwybr•Pathway Project in the development.

For some people the internet appears as a deep and dangerous ocean. Yet, gwales stands in it – like the mysterious Gwales of old – as a symbol of renewed hope and as a golden opportunity to present the riches of our literature, in both languages, to a worldwide audience. It is a way of opening the doors on Wales and its books for the whole world to see.



SELLING BOOKS FROM WALES

Even though Helena O'Sullivan probably qualifies as one of the 'most Irish' persons ever to work for the Welsh Books Council, it was in Welsh that I talked to her about her work promoting English-language books in Wales. Helena was brought up in Dingle, Co. Kerry – an area renowned for its Irish-language literary heritage and its Hollywood connections. The islands and rugged cliffs of Na Blascaodaí and Corca Dhuibhne have been home to authors such as Peig Sayers, Muiris Ó Súilleabháin and

Tomás Ó Criomhthain, as well as being the backdrop for the films *Ryan's Daughter* and *Far and Away*. But now Helena works at Castell Brychan with its own literary and media connections!

Helena came to work at the Welsh Books Council after a period at the Celtica Centre in Machynlleth. Her appointment is the result of close cooperation between the Council and Literary Publishers (Wales) Ltd. – an umbrella body formed by Gomer, Honno, Parthian,

Planet, Seren and the University of Wales Press – which promotes the sale of English-language books throughout the whole of Wales. The post is funded by the Arts Council of Wales.

In the first place it means that Helena has to find out where all of Wales's bookshops and books outlets are, and then getting managers and proprietors as excited as she herself is about what is produced by the publishers. This has meant a few adventures, but it's not the little out-of-the-way establishments that cause the biggest headaches. As Helena herself recalled, 'Finding a particular bookshop in a place like Swansea is very difficult indeed – especially if it's your first visit to the place, it's the rush hour, and nobody's directions seem to make any sense!'

Helena has found her way into quite a few places since she started on her job a year or so ago, including Waterstone's Christmas selection. Six English-language books from Wales will feature prominently in their special promotion this year: *Our First Leader*, Jan Morris (Gomer); *For Club and Country*, : *Welsh football greats*, Peter Stead and Huw Richards (University of Wales Press); *The Night Garden*, Jenny Marlowe (Honno); *More Wild Tracks*, Trevor Fishlock (Seren); *Boys of Gold*, George Brinley Evans (Parthian); and *The Red Jag and Other Stories*, Ray French (Planet).



Helena O'Sullivan (left) talking to Catrin Davies, manager of Waterstone's bookshop, Aberystwyth.

IN PRAISE OF A FRIEND

J. Selwyn Lloyd of Corwen, a member of the Friends of the Books Council, was awarded the Mary Vaughan Jones Award at a special lunch presentation recently.

The award is presented once every three years for an individual's outstanding contribution to children's literature, and it is one of the highest accolades presented to Welsh authors. It is also a recognition of the dedication of the late Mary Vaughan Jones herself in promoting books for children.

J. Selwyn Lloyd has written 30 popular children's novels and has already won the Tir na n-Og award twice. We extend our warmest congratulations to a fellow member.

