

THE FRIEND

Friends of the Books Council Newsletter

Welcome

*As Chair of the Friends I am very happy to see that the second number of **The Friend** has appeared. I find it very interesting to know who my fellow members are, and have the chance to get to know them a bit better by taking a look at their bookshelf. But it is also very important that we recognise and appreciate the type of work that the Books Council undertakes and its contribution to the promotion of the book trade in Wales, and to reading generally. After all the change and progress seen within the communications field over the last few years, the work of the Council is essential in making sure that publishing in Wales, especially in the Welsh language, participates in this revolution. With your support the Books Council will undertake its role fully.*

ALUN CREUNANT DAVIES
Chair,
Friends of the Welsh Books Council

Summer Reading

A major new festival celebrating the written word has seen Wales's leading English-language writers travel to every corner of the country to promote their latest books. Summer Reading, organised by Literary Publishers Wales (LPW), saw lively and entertaining readings take place in venues as diverse as a wildlife centre and a Gothic castle. Writers taking part included journalists, academics, travel writers, poets and novelists.

The Welsh media marked this achievement in a number of broadcasts and articles. Big Issue Cymru noted that the project would 'stamp Wales's authority on the book reading world,' whilst BBC

Wales interviewed George Brinley Evans. The 76-year-old former miner's collection of short stories about colliery life proved a runaway success with the opening night audience at Neath Library.

Five out of the twelve books promoted during the month-long festival featured in the bestseller list produced by the Welsh Books Council.

'This was particularly important to us as the festival aims to develop

our relationship with Welsh booksellers and buyers,' says Richard Houdmont, chair of LPW.

For anyone who missed the festival, there is a chance to catch up on the writers and their publications by visiting a special website: www.summer-reading.net



Marion Eames in discussion with Professor M. Wynn Thomas

Among Friends

The annual meeting of the Friends was held at Aberystwyth on Saturday, 9 June, when it was reported by the chairman, Alun Creunant Davies, that the membership has remained at 400 over the past few months. Following the official business of the Friends, the members spent a pleasant hour in the company of the author Marion Eames, when she was interviewed by Professor M. Wynn Thomas. She discussed the influence of her own background on her novels, and the different themes running through her work.

My Favourite Books

Members of The Friends are invited to discuss their favourite books.

This is the selection of Dewi Roberts, editor of the recently-published *Wales in Celebration*.

The Eisteddfod is being held on my home ground this year, and it was in Dyffryn Clwyd that Hopkins wrote some of his best-known poems while a student for the Jesuit priesthood. We can be grateful to Walford Davies for his *Everyman Poetry and Prose*, as good a selection as one could wish for.

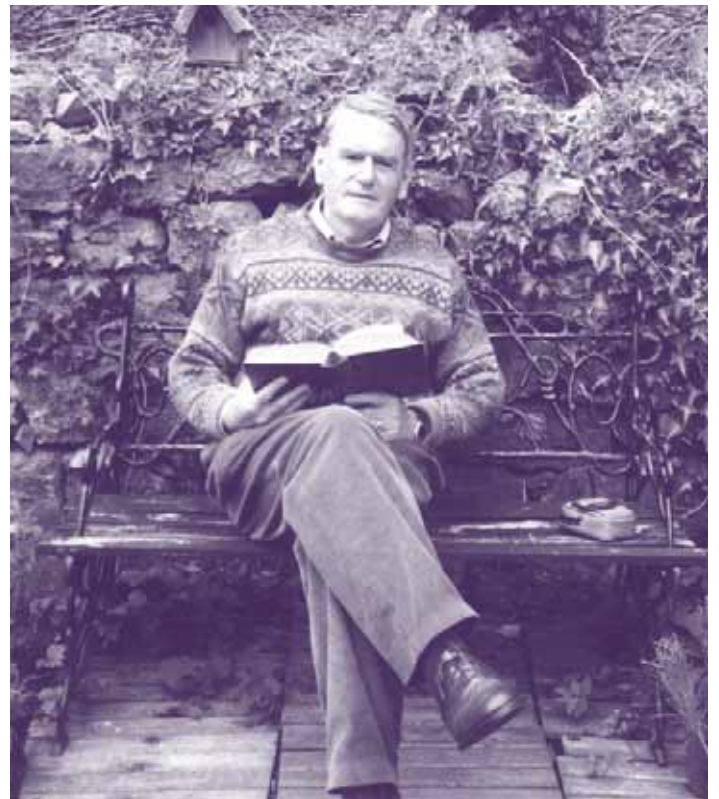
Translation, despite its limitations, can open a door on to a different literary culture for monoglot readers like myself and I greatly value Joseph Clancy's *The World of Kate Roberts* and the enterprise of the American press who produced it.

Michael Lieven's *Senghennydd* is meticulously researched and conveys a graphic insight into the cataclysmic affect of the explosion of 1901.

I am an ardent fan of Siân James's

fiction, and her latest novel, *Second Chance*, is set in the reinvented Wales of the Assembly. She provides a unique take on the chapel minister.

My main literary interest is travel in Wales, and *Wild Wales* reigns supreme in this genre. It even inspired me to re-trace a substantial part of Borrow's route for a book of my own. Despite his ingrained prejudices, his affection for the Welsh people cannot be denied. His extraordinary personality combined with immense physical strength almost give me an inferiority complex. Many readers outside Wales might well not have heard of Twm o'r Nant and Goronwy Owen had it not been for Borrow, and his is the book I would most like to have with me if marooned on that hypothetical desert island.



Book of the Year Awards

The Book of the Year Awards, which acknowledge achievements by Welsh writers in all categories of creative literature, were presented this year during the Hay Festival. The winner of the English-language award was Stephen Knight for his first novel *Mr Schnitzel*, based on the author's own childhood and the magical stories told to him by his father. The Welsh-language category winner was Owen Martell, once again for a first novel entitled *Cadw dy ffydd*, brawd, about the tedium and despair in the life of the main character, Dafydd Gilley. Both winners received



£3,000 for their work.

Arts Council of Wales Chair Sybil Crouch noted the fact that both awards were won with first novels, showing the strength of new writing in Wales, which bodes well for the future.



Reviews On-line

‘Would you like to review a book that's just come in?’ Words which, for me, always set up a confusion of responses. Yes, it is, in most cases, either a book which I intended to read or one which immediately arouses my interest. But then there are all the other things that I have promised to do and not yet got round to, hovering accusingly at the back of my mind. I shouldn't really take on anything else – but the voice on the phone is always persuasive and I agree. After all, it doesn't need to be in for a month, two months even. There'll be plenty of time to deal with all the other pressing matters first.

Time passes and the deadline looms. The book read, I am confronted with the real problems of reviewing. Will I succeed in giving a fair and adequate report on what I have read? Will a prospective reader be moved to go out and buy

or borrow the book? Have I understood what the author is trying to convey, or have I missed the whole point?

With all these things in mind, it was with some trepidation that I in my turn picked up the phone: ‘Would you be willing to review this book for the Welsh Book Council's Reviews on the Web?’ And in almost every case (so far), the response was positive. Is everyone I have contacted naturally of a kind and obliging disposition? Or can it be that I have already acquired the correct tone – soothing, but ever so slightly minatory? Whatever the reason, I am very grateful to all those who have agreed to contribute.

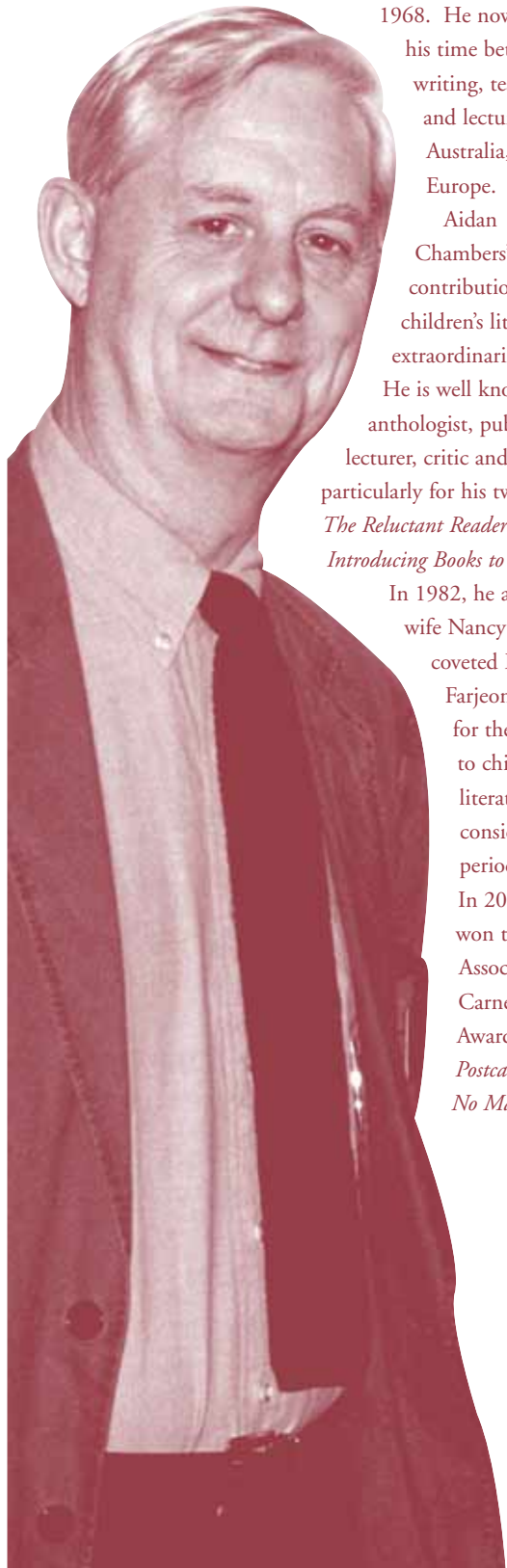
Janet Davies



Aidan Chambers

'I will not write books that sell young people short. What I write is intended to make people think.'

Aidan Chambers, who delivered the Wales Book Day lecture at the National Assembly in February 2001,



started writing at the age of fifteen because he 'couldn't help it' but was not published until he was thirty. He taught for eleven years before becoming a full-time writer in

1968. He now divides his time between writing, teaching and lecturing in Australia, USA and Europe.

Aidan Chambers's contribution to children's literature is extraordinarily wide. He is well known as an anthologist, publisher, lecturer, critic and theorist, particularly for his two studies *The Reluctant Reader* and *Introducing Books to Children*.

In 1982, he and his wife Nancy won the coveted Eleanor Farjeon Award for their services to children's literature over a considerable period of time. In 2000, he won the Library Association Carnegie Award with *Postcards From No Man's Land*,

his novel for readers aged 14 and upwards. An ambitious and complex novel, it deals with subject matters such as euthanasia, war, adultery, art and sexual identity.

Postcards From No Man's Land has received massive critical acclaim:

'This is one of the most incredible novels I have read for a long time. The quality of the writing is superb, with language that is rich, powerful and descriptive . . . It is writing and literature at its best.'

(Annie Everall in *School Librarian*).

Aidan Chambers has written 6 novels for teenagers and these novels have taken teenagers into a new territory in terms of both plot and style.

To Aidan Chambers, reading comes before everything else in education. 'Reading is the single most important facility we need, not only to become an educated person, but in order to survive in our society.'

He strongly believes that serious readers, both children and adults, should keep a diary record of what they have read as it is very important in their growth as readers.



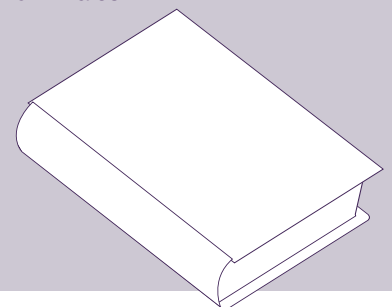
WALES BOOK OF THE MONTH

Following the success of the Welsh-language campaign *Nofel y Mis* (Novel of the Month), which was launched last year to promote new Welsh-language fiction, the Books Council have recently launched a similar campaign to promote English-language books from Wales under the banner of Wales Book of the Month.

The campaign was officially launched at the beginning of April with the title *Eat Well in Wales 2001*, edited by celebrity chef Gilli Davies. Since then, *Drawings*, Kyffin Williams and *100 Great Welshmen*, T.D. Breverton, have also been promoted as part of the campaign, with a stock of each title being distributed in advance to all participating bookshops.

'We are extremely pleased that we are able to promote some of the excellent books produced in Wales in this way,' said Phil Davies, Head of Marketing at the Books Council. 'The campaign has been well supported by the publishers and booksellers alike, which will no doubt lead to further sales.'

Attractive promotional items have been produced, and they have been distributed to the bookshops. We very much hope that you will take advantage of the campaign, and get to know about the extensive range of books available from Wales.



Reluctant Readers?

It is a truth universally acknowledged that young people don't read any more, especially if they are boys. At secondary school parents' evenings the comment is made over and over again by anxious parents that, though the daughter reads sometimes, 'We can't get Justin to read anything'. We teachers make helpful suggestions about persuading him to try a little and often (as if we were doctors prescribing medication) and offer worthy booklists. It's a curious state of affairs really, because as I walk round school at lunch time, I find groups of children, very often boys, engaged in peering intently at text on mobile phones, electronic games and computers or even in *Skateboard Monthly*. These children are clearly reading something, though it's true that they are not curled up in corners absorbed in *Robinson Crusoe* or the latest Philip Pullman novel.

What we really mean when we lament the fact that teenagers, especially boys, don't read is that relatively few of them enjoy the wealth of quality fiction which is so easily available to them. We are puzzled by their resistance to those authors who gripped us when we were young, even though their books are now much more visually appealing, with large easily-read print and beautiful illustrations. We wonder why so few of them seem to get hooked on the superb range of authors who now write specifically for adolescents (virtually unheard of when I was a bookish teenager).

In the secondary school where I teach we have library lessons in which pupils are encouraged to



develop their own reading and make their own choices. In a recent lesson, I recorded all the titles which were being read. Everyone was genuinely reading something; all the boys were reading non-fiction with the exception of one who spent part of his time reading *Asterix*. By far the most popular titles are the *Guinness book of...* series, but manuals and yearbooks on football clubs, hobbies, military uniforms, survival techniques, nuclear war etc, all figure prominently. It would be a nonsense to say these boys were not reading, but it is obvious that they view reading in a much more functional way than the girls tend to do. (All the girls in the same lesson were doing 'silent reading' of novels.) Furthermore, they appear to want to read in a social way. It is unusual for a boy to stay quietly reading for the hour; he likes to

point things out to others at the table, particularly anything which is strange, ghoulish, funny or remarkable. The snag is that this kind of shared activity is generally frowned upon in libraries by teachers and (dare I say it?) librarians, and the subliminal message gets through that there is something invalid about their kind of enjoyment of books. It seems likely that this may be replicated at home since many of those parents who tell us that their sons don't read will complain about the hours the boy spends reading football magazines.

I wonder whether we are not scoring an own goal (if you will forgive the metaphor) by trying to 'prescribe' fiction for boys as if it were morally superior to get our knowledge of the world from stories. It might be better tactics to promote a more inclusive view and give equal value to the skills of skimming, scanning and information gathering which the boys are developing through their reading choices. How many girls are lectured on the necessity of reading an encyclopaedia or 'how to' manuals?

Of course, I believe in the wonderful imaginative power of a good novel, and I'd be delighted to report to you that all the boys in my class are reading David Almond and Catherine Fisher. If anyone knows a foolproof way of achieving this, please let me know – but I doubt if I'll get there by making them feel they're not reading when they pick up *The Manchester United Annual for 2001*.

Wendy Crockett

A NEW WEBSITE FOR THE COUNCIL

The past three years have been particularly eventful ones for the Books Council, as it is during this period that it has utilised the latest technology in order to promote and market Welsh and Welsh-interest books.

The latest step in this process was redesigning and updating the Council's bilingual website, launching the new-look site shortly after Easter this year to be an attractive and effective 'shop window' for all the Council's activities. The mammoth task was completed internally over a

period of a few weeks.

If you click on www.wbc.org.uk, what will you see? Well, in addition to information about the Council and its background, its aims and committees, there are details also about the various Departments and their activities; current initiatives; details of awards and prizes; press releases, and the latest information about books in Wales – all of it updated regularly. In addition, there is a link to the World Book Day site, where there is a wealth of colourful, lively material which will appeal to

children, teachers and parents. There are also electronic versions of materials produced by the Council including, of course, the current issue of *The Friend*!

Remember to visit the site –

you will not be disappointed. www.wbc.org.uk is a veritable treasure trove of material which will appeal to all those interested in the book scene in Wales. Enjoy!

