

THE FRIEND

Friends of the Welsh Books Council Newsletter

Welcome

I'm writing this piece soon after the excitement associated with the launch of the latest Harry Potter novel and the BBC's The Big Read campaign. I'm sure that seeing books and reading receiving such attention delights members of the Friends of the Books Council. The fact that the Books Council has been doing similar work in Wales with great success over the years should also be a source of pride for us, and now that work has extended even further afield, as you will read in this issue of *The Friend*.

By now, the Council has taken up its responsibility for supporting publishing in both Welsh and English in Wales. As Friends I'm sure that seeing the work and role of the Council developing in such a direction can only give us pleasure. I believe that the Friends should develop into a strong voice for reading and books in Wales in order to ensure that the work of the Council, which is central to these developments in Wales, receives the public support it deserves.

Finally, may I encourage you to attend the annual meeting of the Friends on Saturday, 6 September. Many of Wales's prominent authors have spoken with the Friends over the years and it has proved to be a special experience to hear them discussing their lives and work. I'm sure that the discussion which Professor M. Wynn Thomas will have with Manon Rhys will continue in the same vein.

ALUN CREUNANT DAVIES
Chair,
Friends of the Welsh Books Council

To Honour our Friends

We are pleased to note in this issue of *The Friend* that the works of two of our Honorary Presidents have been recognised recently.

Emyr Humphreys was the guest author at a special event at Mold in March to celebrate World Book Day in Wales. A large audience gathered at the Town Library to hear Emyr in conversation with Professor M. Wynn Thomas when they discussed his life and work.

As part of the event, Emyr's latest volume of short stories, with the intriguing title *Old People are a Problem*, was launched.

'Emyr has always written about the elderly, even in *The House of Baal*, written back in 1963,' said Wynn Thomas, 'and although one might say that he is now looking at the life of elderly people with some insider knowledge, I can testify that this 83 year old author is as sharp and witty as ever.'

The volume *Rhyw Fath o Anfarwoldeb: Cofiant Islwyn Ffowc Elis*, T. Robin Chapman, is a biography of the renowned novelist Islwyn Ffowc Elis and will be launched at this year's Eisteddfod in Meifod.



Islwyn Ffowc Elis



Emyr Humphreys

T. Robin Chapman, who recently published an English-language biography of the author in the *Writers of Wales* series said: 'This year is an appropriate one to publish a biography of one of Wales's most influential living writers. The 2003 National Eisteddfod is being held in the very area of Montgomeryshire where Islwyn Ffowc Elis wrote his groundbreaking novel *Cyngod y Cryman* (translated as *Shadow of the Sickle*, Meic Stephens) exactly fifty years ago. I hope that the finished work goes some way towards revealing his creative and literary talent to a wider audience.'

ANNUAL MEETING

2.30 pm Saturday, 6 September 2003

St Paul's Centre, Aberystwyth

Professor M. Wynn Thomas, Swansea

in conversation with Manon Rhys

on her life and work

(Translation equipment will be available)

Followed by tea

Book of the Year



A NEW LOOK FOR GWALES

Following the recommendations of the National Assembly's Task and Finish Group on Publishing, a number of changes have been recently introduced to the gwales.com website. Since 1 April of this year, it has been possible for the public to order books directly from the site, and a number of readers from all over the world have already taken advantage of this new service to order books from Wales. Alongside these exciting developments, changes have also been introduced to assist the booksellers, including a support package for small, independent bookshops to encourage them to embrace the new technology. The developments also make it easier for the readers to access the information pages.

'We are confident that the readers will appreciate these developments,' said Phil Davies, Head of the Marketing Department at the Books Council. 'It has also been encouraging to see readers from all over the world accessing and ordering the books on the website and it confirms the increase in interest we have seen in books from Wales.'

We sincerely hope that you will have an opportunity to visit the website and we would be interested in receiving your comments.

During this year's Hay Festival of Literature the winners of the Book of the Year competition, sponsored by the Arts Council of Wales, were announced. This year's English-language prize was awarded to Charlotte Williams for *Sugar and Slate*. Also on the shortlist were Jo Mazelis for *Diving Girls* and Sheenagh Pugh for *The Beautiful Lie*.

The Welsh-language winner was Angharad Price for *O! Tyn y gorchudd*. The others short-listed were Mihangel Morgan for *Pan Oeddw'n Fachgen* and Hefin Wyn for *Be bop a Lula'r delyn aur*.

Angharad Price is Research Fellow in the Department of Welsh at Cardiff University. This was not the first prize she had won for her novel, it also won the Literature Medal at the St Davids National Eisteddfod 2002. According to one of the adjudicators of the Book of the Year competition it is a modern Welsh classic.

This is a translation of Gwenllïan Dafydd's review of the book which appeared on the www.gwales.com website:

The Literary Medal competition in 2002 was awarded for an autobiography, but what we have here is a classic biography of an entire family. Even though it is Rebecca Jones who tells her own story, we are also told the story of her entire family – a farming family from rural Merionethshire, the family of Tynybraich, Cwm Maesglasau. This is a small volume which is easy to read but which can also 'move one to tears', according to Hywel Teifi Edwards.

The book is a remarkable mixture of lightness and seriousness, of humour and heart-rending tragedy. One cannot but laugh at some of the amusing stories recounted (such as the bus driver who informs a blind man 'You need the green bus, mate'), but the main pleasure of the volume is the way in which the author creates living portraits of its subjects. Lewis, one of the brothers in the story, was a talented artist in paint; Angharad Price has inherited the same talent, and is a brilliant artist with words.

Her portraits are so alive that they dance in front of your eyes, especially that of the

blind brother, William – from the detail concerning licking the label, his unsettled nature, his desire for independence, to his painful deterioration in old age.

In these portraits we are struck more than anything by the exciting combination of what we know to be historical fact and the result of Angharad Price's imagination and experience. The story of the family from Tynybraich is obviously true – photographs in the volume prove this – and the whole volume is a word album of this amazing family. Rebecca Jones, the storyteller, was a sister to the author's grandfather, and as the story of the generations is told, Angharad Price herself takes her place in the family tree.

But interwoven with the facts there is an obvious element of fiction – Rebecca died when she was eleven years old, and this volume is a 'tribute to the life that she could have had'. The combining of fact and fiction is very entertaining – how much is true and handed down through the generations, and

how much comes from Angharad's imagination? This is especially true of the portraits of the author's great-grandparents; they are so rounded, from Evan the skilled storyteller to his wife and her strong religious beliefs. Yet it is the understated style which strikes one, especially when dealing with suffering – losing a daughter of two weeks, losing a son of five

years, with three blind sons, and (even though it does not occur in the book itself), losing Rebecca when she was only eleven years old.

The volume covers a period of nearly a century, and records the changes seen in society over this period as well as the family's own history. I felt that the last chapter was too direct in its message, and is in fact the first chapter of a volume of history of today's world, rather than the last chapter in the history of the author's grandfather.

The author should certainly write more, her language is so rich, so Welsh, so alive; reading it is pure pleasure. One cannot but be awed by the richness of the vocabulary, the phrases and the descriptions. This is a volume worth reading, and it would be your loss not to do so.



My Favourite Books

Members of the Friends are invited to discuss their favourite books. This is the selection of Joseph C Clancy.

John Davies, *History of Wales*.
Thomas Parry, *A history of Welsh literature*, translated by H. Idris Bell.
Meic Stephens, ed., *The Oxford companion to the literature of Wales*.
Tony Conran, tr., *Welsh verse*.
Raymond Garlick and Roland Mathias, eds., *Anglo-Welsh poetry*.

I suppose the most 'essential book' for me as a poet-translator is *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*.

A dictionary of the Welsh language, but apart from its being in four volumes, it's too big and heavy to fit anywhere on my shelves and is usually on the floor beside my chair. So I've listed the other books I find myself constantly consulting.

John Davies's work has proved invaluable over the last few years in supplying an historical context for the medieval poetry I've been translating. And it's so fascinating and readable in itself that it's there for enjoyment and illumination as well as information – though I consult other books and articles, I like having this individual view of a complex history.

Although the volumes in the *Guide to Welsh literature* series offer more detailed treatments of their subjects by varied critics based on the latest scholarship, I still go back to Sir Thomas Parry's literary history for concise and penetrating commentary on periods and authors. As with Davies, it's good to have one person's overall view, however much this may need to be qualified by consulting others. There's sentiment involved as well, I suppose – Sir Thomas warmly welcomed a brash young American would-be translator when I first came to Aberystwyth in 1961, and continued to encourage my efforts until his death. So his book is a memento as well as a continuing resource.

I should have replaced Meic Stephens's *Oxford companion* with the more recent *New companion*, but I've never got round to it – and besides, the earlier version was a gift from my college library in Manhattan. The companion continues to be exactly that – a handy reference book whenever I need to look something up.

The two anthologies are there for pleasure rather than work. I confess, though, that I usually take a look at how Tony Conran has tackled a particular translation – after I've done my own. We have very different approaches, and this is a useful and humbling reminder that there's no such thing as a definitive translation.



Bridget Shine Overseas Marketing

A chance to get to know the staff of the Books Council

When Bridget Shine last appeared on the pages of *The Friend* she was only a twinkle in the Head of Marketing's eye, but on my recent visit to Castell Brychan I got to meet her in the flesh. She had just flown in from BookExpo America, probably the largest event serving the book market in the world, which was held this year at Los Angeles.

Bridget was in Los Angeles to promote books from Wales in her role as Overseas Marketing Officer of the Council. In a little over a year she has been busy here, there and everywhere, telling the publishing industry in Wales about opportunities abroad, and overseas markets about what books from Wales can offer them.

'It sounds as if I'm never in the office, but really "overseas" is my office!' says Bridget. 'It's been a very busy first year on the project, but it's all very new and different. Gradually I can see where we're trying to go. We need to learn a lot about exactly how the book market works in particular countries and regions. And at the same time we have to make sure that overseas booksellers and distributors know what we have to offer them. So there's a lot of teaching and learning involved for us all.'

Perhaps travelling isn't such a great shock to Bridget as she was born and brought up in Kingston, Jamaica, and studied in England and México. After working for various London-based publishers she worked for a publisher at Bancyfelin, and she still lives in Login on the beautiful border between Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire.

'We were set quite a challenge in the first year, to organise twelve overseas book promotion events. I'm glad to say that we managed it: six in Europe – Paris, Amsterdam, Madrid, Brussels, Bern and Athens – and another six in the United States. It's not



easy to make people look at something new so you have to use every trick that you can to grab their attention. I feel a little bit guilty saying that we jumped on the Dylan Thomas bandwagon, but very often he is the only writer from Wales that people have heard about, and they usually don't know that he's from Wales!'

But Bridget doesn't work alone, she is forming partnerships with other agencies and bodies and is part of a wider strategy to promote Wales abroad. 'Working with the Wales Tourist Board we were able to organise a competition with a holiday in Wales as a prize to go with our promotions in Europe and the United States and that's very important when you're new in the field and fighting for attention,' she said. In Brussels the promotion was timed to be part of the Wales Week organised by the National Assembly's Wales Centre in the city. 'I've also worked closely with agencies such as WalesTrade International, because it's only when people know about Wales that they will be interested in what we produce, and that includes our books.'

The summer will again be busy for Bridget as she resumes her travels to market Welsh books abroad. Amongst other places she is intending to visit, she will be in Canada attending the North American Festival of Wales, the old National Gymanfa Ganu, which is being held in Vancouver.

Gregynog Press

With the National Eisteddfod of Wales due to be held at Meifod, it is befitting that we should consider the history of Gwasg Gregynog (The Gregynog Press) and its contribution to the Welsh publishing scene.

Gregynog press still operates from premises within the courtyard of Gregynog Hall and, to quote from its own publicity material:

'The traditional crafts of hot-metal typesetting, letterpress printing and hand-binding carried out by time-served craftsmen; illustrations by leading contemporary artists; printing on handmade and mould-made papers, and the use of the finest binding materials ensure Gwasg Gregynog books are among the best being produced by today's Private Presses.'

And for those who are avid collectors of these elegantly produced books, it is no secret that they command extremely high prices in the salerooms.

The Gregynog Press was first established in 1923 by two sisters, Gwendoline and Margaret Davies, shortly after they bought the mansion that was soon to become a centre of cultural and artistic excellence. In addition to their interest in fine books they also became major patrons of artists and musicians. Between 1923 and 1940, when the press ceased to operate after the outbreak of the Second World War, forty-two books were produced – most of them works of literature. The first book published in December 1923 was *Poems by George Herbert* and, interestingly, eighty years later the next title due out (June 2003) is *George Herbert: Sundrie Pieces* edited by John Herbert, 8th Earl of Powis,



who has family links to the original author. Of the 42 titles produced on the original press eight were Welsh-language texts. The full story of this early period is related in Dorothy A. Harrop's authoritative *A history of the Gregynog Press* published by the Private Libraries Association in 1980.

For nearly four decades after the press ceased operations in 1940, the pressroom and bindery remained unused although some of the equipment was removed to the National Library of Wales in 1954. Then, in 1978, the press was re-established (under the name Gwasg Gregynog) mainly as a result of the endeavours of Gregynog's first warden, Dr Glyn Tegai Hughes, and with financial support from the Welsh Arts Council. The first book to be published by Gwasg Gregynog was R.S. Thomas's *Laboratories of the Spirit*, a most appropriate choice since R.S. had spent twelve years (1942–54) as rector of Manafon nearby. During this second period in its history the press produced some notable titles in both Welsh and English. Then in 1998 the Welsh Arts Council ceased its financial support and the future of the press seemed threatened. In January 2002, however, it was registered as a charity and there are innovative plans for the continuing production of fine books at Gregynog, thus carrying on the vision of Gwendoline and Margaret eighty years ago. In addition to the George Herbert volume mentioned earlier, *Llyfr Ruth* – a Welsh-language text – will be launched at the National Eisteddfod at Meifod in August.

Full details relating to Gwasg Gregynog can be found at their website at the following address: <http://www.gregynogpress.co.uk>

Rheinhallt Llwyd

Introducing Gomer Press

As Wales's largest publishing house, Gomer Press has a whole bookcase of new titles appearing every year – 125 new books last year and a schedule that is bursting at the seams for Autumn 2003 / Spring 2004. Fortunately for booklovers, and their bookshelves, these titles are spread out across four distinct lists. Readers can choose: books for adults – in English and in Welsh; books for children, also in the two languages, or, hovering between lists, a range of bilingual titles, which offer parallel texts and an insight into the whole process of translating not only language but the culture represented by the word.

Exploration of that culture is no doubt on the increase. For several decades now, Gomer has been publishing a wide range of books in the English language which, taken together, investigate the Welsh condition. It is no surprise – given the richness of our traditions, the glories of our landscape and the miracle of survival that is Wales – that the treatment often becomes celebration. Such is the nature of publishing in essence: the desire to share, to show, to relish, to reflect. In prose, in verse and in the visual image, publishers can show off the talents of writers, photographers and artists. Those of us involved in the publishing process often feel genuinely honoured to be playing a part – certainly, this was the experience of all Gomer staff who helped this summer with the production of *Heart of the Country*, a thought-provoking selection of William Condry's writings for the 'Country Diary' column of *The Guardian* over the years, juxtaposed with stunning photographs by Jeremy Moore.

A random selection of subjects which appear in the other English titles this year will give no indication of the enjoyment the books could provide, but they might dissuade a Robinson or a Gill from peddling stereotypes. What do you say to cheese, gravestones, refugees, Idris Davies's Rhymney, a flapper at finishing school, Dannie Abse (and several younger writers) on Cardiff, a storyteller in pursuit of the Bwca, the afterlife of dodgem cars from Barry funfair and a dog called Sglod who wants snow this Christmas? Yes, the latter titles are on our children's list. But come 2013, or long before, readers who read Pont Books today will be enjoying Welsh writing in English for adults. For them, and their parents and grandparents, Gomer will continue to publish books which reflect something of the rich and varied experience of living in Wales.

Mairwen Prys Jones

