

# THE FRIEND

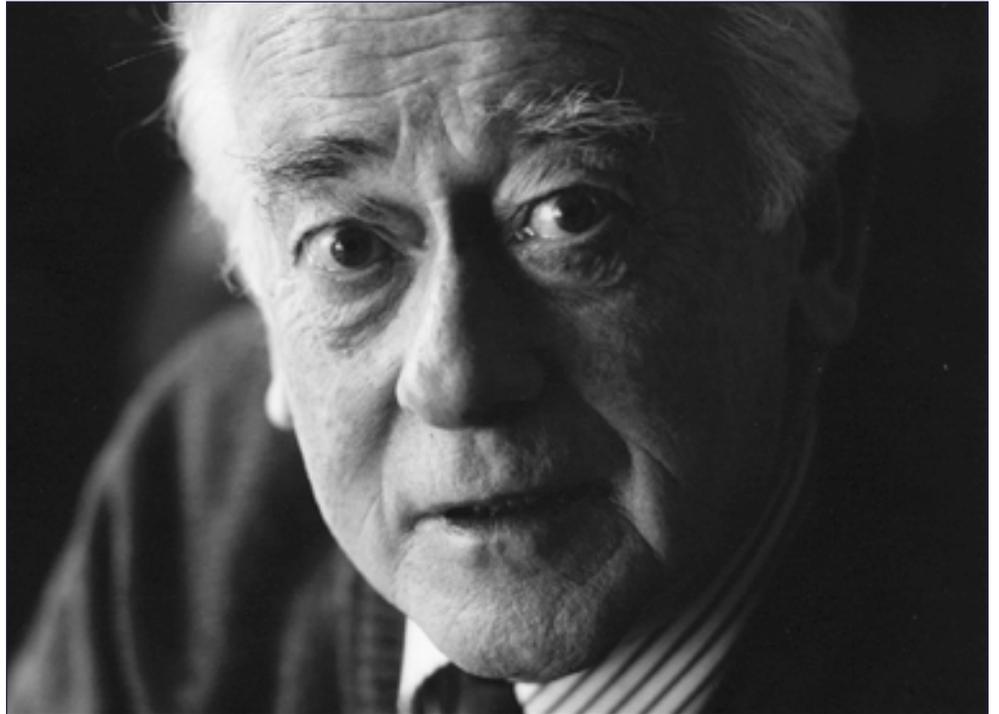
Friends of the Welsh Books Council Newsletter

## MANON RHYS INTERVIEW

The guest of honour at the Annual General Meeting of the Friends on 6 September 2003 was the writer Manon Rhys and those present enjoyed an interesting and revealing time listening to her responses to the perceptive and often mischievous questions asked of her by Professor M. Wynn Thomas. Manon, like Wynn himself, is a native of the Rhondda and it was no surprise that some considerable time was spent discussing the influence of those valleys on her upbringing and her creative work. Her parents, James and Mair Kitchener Davies, were leading members of the campaign to secure Welsh-medium education in the area. In addition to discussing some of her most prominent published works such as her novels *Cysgodion* (1993) and *Tridiau, ac Angladd Cocrotshen* (1996) and her collection of short stories *Cwtsho* (1988) she also talked of her career as a television scriptwriter and of the interesting process of re-writing scripts as traditional print novels as happened in the case of her drama series *Y Palmant Aur*. In the latter part of the interview she discussed her ambition to write a novel based on life in the Rhondda valleys and of the difficulty of portraying, in Welsh, a society which had lost that language to a large extent. Needless to say, the novel will be eagerly awaited!



## FAREWELL TO A FRIEND



With the death of the Reverend Dr Islwyn Ffowc Elis, the Friends of the Welsh Books Council has lost one of its honorary presidents. Islwyn's selection for this post came as a surprise to no-one. He diligently attended every annual meeting of the Friends until he was prevented, last year, by ill health and at every meeting he contributed enthusiastically to the discussion following the address. He was a true friend to the Books Council, as can be seen from the editorials he wrote as editor of *Llais Llyfrau / Books from Wales* which were later published in his volume *Naddion*. He did not fail in praise of the Books Council as an institution that supported authors of Welsh books and opened up new markets for books from Wales.

When the Books Council was established, its main activity was distributing grants to the authors of popular books in Welsh. Later, Islwyn himself joined the staff for a time to work on a project involving the translation of books from Europe into Welsh for the use of libraries only. These were just two of many initiatives which were giving authors more time to write and a fairer return for their work – two things that were very much part of Islwyn's vision for authors.

He contributed richly to the life of Wales in many fields: as minister, editor and lecturer. But in every post he felt a sense of frustration, since fulfilling such duties reduced the time available to him for writing. That is why he tried to live from his writing for a while, and the reason why he was so appreciative of the support of the Books Council in all his efforts.

This is not the place to try and measure his contribution to Welsh literature. The most recent of many attempts to assess his achievements, *Rhywfaint o Anfarwoldeb*, by T. Robin Chapman, was published last year. But as we extend our sympathies, as Friends, to Eirlys, Siân and family, we – the Friends of the Books Council, the Council which Islwyn appreciated so much as an author – will also share that loss.

**ALUN CREUNANT  
DAVIES  
Chair,  
Friends of the  
Welsh Books  
Council**



# Supporting English writing from Wales

An interview with Dr Kirsti Bohata from the Books Council's Publishing Grants Department

Along with responsibility for the English-language publishing grant formerly administered by the Arts Council a new face has appeared amongst the staff at the Books Council's Publishing Grants Department. Dr Kirsti Bohata has, since Autumn 2003, been working as the officer with responsibility for administering the English-language grant, alongside Welsh-language grant officers Richard Owen and Ifana Savill and secretary Jane Hopkins.

I met Kirsti in the Council Chamber at Castell Brychan. It is not a room you would call 'cosy', but Kirsti managed to fill it with her enthusiasm for her new role. 'I have enjoyed my first few months at the Books Council even more than I thought I would,' she said. 'Of course I came here not only to work on a new project which is always exciting, but also just as the National Assembly Culture Committee began its inquiry into Welsh writing in English.'

After taking a degree in English literature at Durham University, Kirsti studied for a doctorate at the University of Wales, Swansea, where she was able to continue with her interest in Welsh writing in English. Before coming to work at the Books Council she taught at various universities, including Glamorgan and Stuttgart.



'One other reason I've enjoyed my first few months at the Council is the positive response I've received from all the people I have met who are working within the book industry in Wales. There seems to be the potential for some exciting developments and hopefully the Books Council can be part of instigating and supporting such progress.'

When I asked her about some of the challenges to English-language book publishing in Wales I had expected to hear an echo of the Welsh-language situation. There were some parallels in the answer she gave but she surprised me with two points. 'The market for Welsh-language publishing is more easily defined compared to the English-language market and therefore much easier to target in some ways. Publishers of Welsh writing in English in Wales face competition from outside, especially from the large London publishers who have more resources to offer authors and editors. In addition, there can be negative perceptions concerning the popularity of work from Wales to overcome. I'm pleased to be working with the Books Council so that we can go some of the way to meeting these challenges.'

Originally from the Carmarthenshire/Pembrokeshire border area, Kirsti's family roots are deep in middle Europe, in the Czech Republic and Germany. She enjoys reading and mountain walking, but recently she has been giving most of her spare time to her book, *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English*, which is to be published later this year by University of Wales Press. 'Writing the book has meant a great deal of work and I'm looking forward to being able to read "for pleasure" once again, she added.

# My Favourite Books

Members of The Friends are invited to discuss their favourite books. This is the selection of the author Siân James

I think it's in their poetry that Welsh writers in English excel, so the first two books I'll choose are two poetry anthologies.

The first is *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* edited by Dannie Abse and published by Seren (1997). Of course it has omissions, including Dannie's own 'Epithalamion' – what can he have been thinking of? – but, for all that, it contains an abundance of riches. It seems to me a wise and honest selection that doesn't set out to follow any fashionable trends. I take a childish pride in poets I know personally: Tony Curtis, Herbert Williams, Gillian Clarke, Sally Jones, Sheenagh Pugh, Catherine Fisher, Christopher Meredith, Dannie Abse himself and the late lamented and much loved Glyn Jones. Eight is the largest number of poems Dannie allows any poet: I wish he'd given Edward Thomas at least ten, but then, I suppose every reader would have their own special favourite.

The next I'd choose would be *The Penguin Book of Welsh Verse* edited by Tony Conran, his translations of Welsh poetry from the sixth century onwards, with an excellent sixty-page introduction. What an enormous debt we owe translators like Tony Conran and Joseph Clancy. Even people whose Welsh is better than mine are lost when confronted by early Welsh texts, so these translators give us back our heritage.

The third book I want is *Collected Poems 1945–1990* by R. S. Thomas published by Dent. I haven't really got to grips with R. S.'s poems, many of them seem so high-minded and austere, but I'm slowly getting to appreciate many and to love some. I like good value for money and this one is, with a beautiful cover painting of North Wales by Stanley Spencer thrown in.

Could I possibly have *A Frost on my Frolic* by Gwyn Thomas for my



fourth book, or is it still out of print? My copy was stolen from me about fifty years ago by a boyfriend who insisted I'd given it to him – as if! Gwyn Thomas takes us back to a south Wales full of fire-brand socialists who all talk like philosophers on speed. Perhaps such a place never really existed, but I'm determined to believe it did. I'm prepared to wait for this one till one of the Welsh publishers decides to re-publish it.

The Welsh are particularly good at short stories, which can at their best be very close to poetry and, at the moment, I think women writers, Glenda Beagan, Leonora Britto for instance, are better than men. (What about Leslie Norris? a nagging little voice asks. Listen, I'm only allowed five books.) As I was saying, I think women are more honest, better at getting to the heart of a relationship than men who often have too much pride to reveal any pain they feel. Honno has published many excellent anthologies but, only able to choose one, I'd go for *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe* published by Parthian (1999) – my absolute favourite 'Documents' by Stevie Davies – because it has more stories to choose from and also as a tribute to co-editor Arthur Smith who for fifteen years has put his old-age pension into bringing out the short story magazine, *Cambrensis*.

# BOOKS FROM THE PAST

During a visit to Castell Brychan I had an opportunity to talk to Welsh-language grant officer Richard Owen concerning a very exciting development in the field of electronic publishing. In partnership with Culturenet Cymru, an organisation set up to promote the heritage and culture of Wales online, the Books Council is developing the technology to publish electronically books of national cultural significance which are out of print and difficult to locate.

Richard provided information about the project's background. 'In 2001 the Books Council commissioned Rightscom, a London-based company, to report on the state of play with regard to electronic publishing. One of their suggestions was that the Council should involve itself in developing an online archive of out-of-print books. Culturenet Cymru was established in 2003 and it provided the Council with a partner to fund and develop a pilot project in electronic publishing.'

The whole project has been geared for the convenience of the user. The books will be available in two forms, as images of the original pages and also as an electronic text. When Books from the Past is available it will be possible to read the pages online, or download the file to read offline or even print a hard copy which could be read anywhere. The first step in digitising will mean scanning or re-typing every

page in the book. Users will then be able to navigate through a book page by page or proceed to a specific page. Every word will be searchable, which means that users will be able to find particular words, phrases and even first lines of poems. As the project grows it will be possible to search across all the books together.

Richard explained to me that the nine books chosen for the pilot included both Welsh and

English-language books, and also a mixture of genres: children's books, poetry, drama and folk literature. 'It is not intended that Books from the past should "compete" with traditional publishing. Rather it is a way of ensuring that culturally significant works that are unlikely to be republished are easily available.

'In time, the

number of books in the project will grow and they will be selected very carefully by specialists in their fields. There are many books which are of great significance but would not prove economical to republish even with the support of the publishing grant,' added Richard. 'I know that the idea of reading electronic books still sounds strange and unattractive to many, but with this project it will be possible to print a hard copy thereby avoiding the need to read from the computer screen itself. If you wish, you can even read it in the bath!'

It is hoped that the project will be available on the internet in late spring 2004.



## Annual Sale of Books

The Books Council is again organising a books sale this year during March and April and we are pleased to enclose a complete list of books that are in the sale.

The publishers have been busy submitting an excellent selection of titles with books for children and teenagers, as well as adults, all being offered for half price or less.

'We are aware that members of the Friends

appreciate the opportunity to see the full list of sale titles,' said Phil Davies, Head of Marketing at the Books Council, 'thereby enabling them to study it at their leisure.'

As all bookshops will not be able to stock all sale titles, please remember that you can ask them to order specific titles for you. We hope that you will be able to take advantage of this offer for the Friends.

## LLYFR Y FLWYDDYN BOOK OF THE YEAR

A number of changes have been introduced to the Book of the Year Award this year, with a long list of titles having been announced on World Book Day. There are 10 titles each on the Welsh-language and English-language lists and events have been arranged so that readers can meet the authors.

The short-lists (3 titles on each of the Welsh- and English-language lists) will be announced in May, before the eventual winners are announced at a prestigious ceremony in Cardiff.

In order that you may have an opportunity to read the new books listed, here are the titles on the English-language list (the Welsh-language titles can be seen in the Welsh version of *The Friend*).

### Book of the Year long list:

#### *New and Collected Poems*

Dannie Abse (Hutchinson)

#### *Wayward Sailor*

Anthony Dalton (McGraw-Hill)

#### *Stump*

Niall Griffiths (Jonathan Cape)

#### *Old People Are a Problem*

Emyr Humphreys (Seren)

#### *Fishboys of Vernazza*

John Sam Jones (Parthian)

#### *Keeping Mum*

Gwyneth Lewis (Bloodaxe)

#### *Falling*

Debbie Moon (Honno)

#### *The Sergeants' Tale*

Bernice Rubens (Little, Brown)

#### *China*

Alan Wall (Secker & Warburg)

#### *The Poems of Rowan Williams*

Rowan Williams (Perpetua Press)

LLYFR Y FLWYDDYN  
BOOK OF THE YEAR

# New Welsh Review

In April 2004, the literary quarterly *New Welsh Review* came under the jurisdiction of the Welsh Books Council, having formerly been funded by the Arts Council of Wales since 1988. The magazine has a long and illustrious history, with its roots dating back to such precursors as *Dock Leaves* and *The Anglo-Welsh Review*. Since June 2002, the magazine has been edited by Francesca Rhydderch, who has deliberately broadened the magazine's approach to critical and literary publishing in order to make it more accessible to a greater range of readers in Wales and beyond. *New Welsh Review* is also developing a contemporary, multicultural identity which reflects the cultural and literary concerns of post-devolution Wales.

As a former Editor for Gomer Press and Associate Editor of *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, Francesca Rhydderch has a keen awareness of the needs of both the publishing industry and the bookbuying public in Wales: 'I am delighted with the response to recent developments at *New Welsh Review*,' she said. 'Media coverage of new titles from Wales is particularly important for authors, publishers and readers alike, and *New Welsh Review* attempts to combine a range of critical articles and informed review coverage with lighter profiles and features. The magazine's role in the context of modern publishing is to raise the profile of Welsh Writing in English as much as possible, and to offer readers a quality publication at a reasonable price.'

Recent issues have included features on Sarah Waters, Maggie O'Farrell and Dan Rhodes alongside new poetry and fiction from Wales's best writers, from Emyr Humphreys to new poet Kathryn Gray. For further details go to [www.newwelshreview.com](http://www.newwelshreview.com).

## Culture Minister's Visit



Dr Lionel Madden (left) and Gwerfyl Pierce Jones welcome Alun Pugh, the Culture Minister, to the Books Council.

Alun Pugh, the Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport visited the Books Council recently. During the visit he had an opportunity to see the Council's Distribution Centre and Dafydd Charles Jones, the Centre Manager, showed him the extensive range of Welsh- and English-language books in stock.

'We have over 14,000 different titles in stock,' said Dafydd, 'and it was possible for us to explain the process of getting the books to the shop

within 24 hours.'

The Minister also visited Castell Brychan and was given a presentation on the Council's core services including marketing, editing, design and the promotion of children's books.

'It is a pleasure to welcome the Minister on his visit,' said Gwerfyl Pierce Jones, Director of the Books Council, 'which coincides with the Assembly's Policy Review of Welsh Writing in English.'

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## STEERING COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the Steering Committee held on 6 September 2003 it was reported that the Friends had 425 members at the end of August, representing a small increase on the previous year. Although new members were joining the Friends on a regular basis others were being lost, mainly through death. Therefore, the aim of securing a membership of 500 was proving quite elusive!

Following detailed discussions it was recommended that special efforts should be made:

- to attract more non-Welsh speakers to join the Friends
- to create closer ties with the Academi
- to try and attract more 'media authors' to become members
- to encourage each current member to recruit new members.

It was emphasised that membership of the Friends represented a considerable bargain! For an annual fee of £10 members received three information packs containing book lists, publishers' catalogues and other information relating to the book trade in Wales in addition to Book Vouchers to the value of £7.50. And two issues of *The Friend* – all for as little as £2.50 in fact. What a bargain!

Among other issues discussed were:

- making greater use of electronic communication media (e.g. e-mail) to publicize the Friends
- take advantage of [gwailes.com](http://gwailes.com) to enhance publicity
- encourage each member, where possible, to use a Banker's Order to pay their subscription.