

THE FRIEND

Friends of the Welsh Books Council Newsletter

From the Chair

All members of the Friends probably know that Alun Creunant Davies died at the end of October 2005. Therefore, for the first time, the front page of *The Friend* will have a note about Alun rather than a note from him. He had been Chair of the Friends of the Welsh Books Council from its beginning and an active and enthusiastic supporter of its activities during that period. He was key to all the developments to the Friends over the years and in ensuring that they supported the work of the Books Council in every way possible. His sober judgement and lively sense of humour will be missed in both the steering committee and annual meetings of the Friends. There is a tribute to him in this issue of *The Friend*.

Friends of the Welsh Books Council Steering Committee

A meeting of the steering committee of the Friends of the Welsh Books Council was held on Saturday morning, 15 October 2005, with Professor M. Wynn Thomas in the chair due to the absence of the Chairman, Alun Creunant Davies. Most of the meeting was taken up with discussion of the financial situation of the Friends in order to bring recommendations to the Annual Meeting to be held that afternoon.

The Treasurer, Richard Morgan, reported that the present financial situation of the Friends was fairly satisfactory, but that a substantial fall in annual income would occur from 2006 due to the terms of the life membership scheme. Following discussion it was agreed that the following changes would be taken to the Annual Meeting: (i) immediate ending of the life membership scheme; (ii) raising the annual membership from £10 to £15 from 1 April 2006 with the promise of no further rise for 5 years; (iii) offer a new ten year membership to those who

would pay a single sum of £125 (rather than £150 over 10 years).

It was also decided that the committee, in association with the officers of the Books Council, should examine how best the Friends could practically promote the work of the Books Council. It was agreed that the changes to the membership payments, if accepted by the Annual Meeting, would place the Friends in a stronger financial position in order to achieve this.

Elections were held for officers and members of the Steering Committee for the period 2005–2008. The following were elected:

Chair: Alun Creunant Davies;

Vice-chair: Tegwyn Jones;

Treasurer: Richard Morgan;

Secretary: Lyn Léwis Dafis;

Other members: Dr Brynley F. Roberts, Marian Delyth.

Annual Meeting of the Friends 2005

The 2005 Annual Meeting of the Friends was held at Morlan, Aberystwyth. Over the years the order in these meetings has become a tradition: a short report on the work of the Friends followed by an interview with an author about their work.

As three years had elapsed since the last business meeting there was more than usual to discuss in this meeting. Following a declaration of intent in the previous year's Meeting the steering committee brought its motion of change to the membership fees, discussed earlier in the day, to this meeting for its approval. Following an explanation on the background to the changes from the treasurer the changes were approved unanimously.

The guest author was Mererid Hopwood and as always the interview was conducted by Professor M. Wynn Thomas, who is now Chair of the Books Council. Mererid is a Welsh-language poet who has won a place in history as the first woman to win the chair at the National Eisteddfod. During 2005–2006 she also holds the post of Bardd Plant Cymru, Welsh-language Children's Poet Laureate. Through incisive questions and comments, Mererid was enabled to tell about her life and work with her usual enthusiasm and liveliness. Mererid has written two books, *Singing in Chains* (2004), an introduction to the Welsh poetic tradition of cynganedd, and a children's book *Yr Ynys Hud* (2005). She is also the editor of a book of Pembrokeshire poetry, *Cerddi Sir Benfro* (2002), in the *Cerddi Fan Hyn* series.



Alun Creunant Davies 1927 – 2005

A tribute by Professor M. Wynn Thomas

Whose baby is the Welsh Books Council exactly? Alun Creunant always insisted it was the brainchild of that other Alun, Alun R. Edwards, when he was the visionary County Librarian of Cardiganshire. And who would ever dare challenge Alun Creunant's judgement?! So let us then indeed accept that the Books Council was the brainchild of Alun R. Edwards. But if it originated as a glint in his eye, then it was unquestionably Alun Creunant who tended it and raised it until it was established as a major national institution. Originally it was tiny enough to be confined to a single, small office in Aberystwyth, but as it grew so Alun Creunant saw his chance and secured for it its present majestic home at Castell Brychan. Yet who but the most blindly doting of parents, the most rash of dreamers, would at the time have relocated to a building that seemed so grossly disproportionate to the infant Books Council's modest needs? But it was there, quite as much as on his own hearth, that Alun Creunant was to preside serenely until his retirement, and under his care the castle on the hill was turned into a light set on high to illuminate the whole of Wales. It is dark indeed, now that he has passed away.

Nor is the Council the only important Welsh institution to feel its loss. Alun Creunant was fashioned to be a cornerstone of any institution he served. His advice was always mature, his judgement dependable and his leadership unshakeably firm. Moreover, he could handle people without manipulating them (I never saw a better committee man than he) and when it came to handling money, he demonstrated all the gifts of the shrewdest, but also the kindest, of Cardis.

Although Alun naturally possessed a gentle authoritative



manner, he was also full of subtle humour, and he constantly had the Council's interests not only at heart but also on his mind. I will remember encountering him once on a bus carrying Eisteddfodwyr to the 'maes', and within a matter of seconds our conversation had turned to Castell Brychan. He took great pride in all its activities, and when I first visited HQ, shortly after becoming chair of the Welsh Arts Council's Literature Committee that at that time largely funded the Council, he arranged a conducted tour and ensured I was introduced individually to every member of his staff. Of course I was completely won over. But more importantly than that, I was thoroughly convinced by the principled conviction of Alun Creunant himself. Who could remain immune to the infectious love he showed for his work, or long remain indifferent to the unsparing devotion that he himself demonstrated to his beloved Council? And that is how I shall always remember Alun – as one of the twentieth century's greatest benefactors of Welsh culture. 'In my father's house there are many mansions,' it is said in the Bible. Now that Alun Creunant has crossed over, I am certain that there is a Castell Brychan to be found somewhere among them all.



Author Malachy Doyle reads to children from Cardiff

World Book Day 2005 – building on strong foundations

With the aid of thousands of adults and tens of thousands of children, World Book Day continues to go from strength to strength, and the seventh World Book Day was one of the most successful yet. The celebrations were launched with an inspiring lecture by Professor Dai Smith, Library of Wales series editor, and amongst the other highlights was the simultaneous announcement of the Academi's Book of the Year long list, at Cardiff and Wrexham.

Booksellers and publishers organised a wide variety of activities, and the children's author tour was especially successful. Authors Owen Sheers and Caryl Lewis hosted on-line chatrooms, and Katherine Jenkins, Iolo Williams, Sarra Elgan and Gethin Jones gave their support to the Day by appearing on promotional posters.

The Spread the Word campaign gave adults and children the opportunity to use specially produced postcards in order to recommend titles to friends and colleagues. Over 140,000 bilingual cards were produced and distributed through libraries, bookshops, schools and other locations.

The most important development this year was the advent of the new series of Quick Read books, aimed at a new market – that of emergent readers. In Wales, the scheme is the fruit of a partnership between the Welsh Books Council and the Basic Skills Agency, with the support of the Assembly Government. Two Welsh-language novels, by Geraint Vaughan Jones and Meleri Wyn James, appeared by World Book Day, and further titles will be launched towards the end of May.

The high profile that World Book Day continues to enjoy offers an excellent opportunity to focus specifically on books, reminding everyone of the pleasures of reading.

Library of Wales Launch

The Library of Wales launch took place on the evening of 17 January at the Cardiff Millennium Centre. With some 90 people in attendance, from the media to academics, authors and publishers, the support for the Welsh Assembly-backed scheme was evident from all corners of Welsh culture.

The event was set in motion by a short speech from Alun Pugh, the Minister for Culture, Welsh language and Sport, who emphasized the importance of the Welsh literary classics becoming accessible to the public once again.

Wynn Thomas was also in attendance and reinforced the Minister's statement while adding that as a 'culturally deprived person' he was looking forward to filling his bookshelf with this essential series for every Welsh household. He further added, that with the forewords being written by modern writers, the series is brought full circle and illuminated in a fresh context for a new audience.

Dai Smith stressed the historical importance of the series as being able to play a pivotal, and previously largely ignored, role in keeping alive



Promoting the series (from left). Gwerfyl Pierce Jones, Alun Pugh, Professor Dai Smith, Professor M Wynn Thomas, Jane Davidson

the heritage of the Welsh people, making the point that without history there can be no definitive future.

Finally, it is important to note the key role the Welsh Books Council has played, especially that of Kirsti Bohata, who has liaised between the Assembly and the publisher Parthian through

the duration of the project.

So far the series has been a complete success with a plethora of media attention, and reprints already on the way. The Welsh Books Council is looking forward to the five new titles being published in September and the continuation of the Library of Wales series for the next few years.

Meet the Author

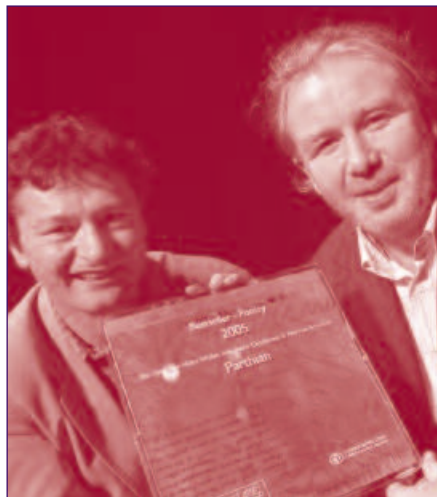
Sue Mace, CILIP Wales, reports on a successful readers' day in Aberystwyth

Nearly four hundred readers from across Wales gathered in Aberystwyth one Saturday last October to listen to and talk to some of their favourite writers and discover some new ones. They arrived in coaches from all corners of Wales and their enthusiasm made it a day to remember. Many libraries now have readers' groups and this was a marvellous opportunity for them to get together and share their enjoyment of reading.

The Arts Centre in Aberystwyth was buzzing as people made their way in and out of sessions, buying books, talking to authors, getting their books signed and keeping their strength up with some excellent refreshments.

One of the themes of the festival was crime writing and Simon Brett, screenwriter and author of many bestselling crime titles, offered a charismatic and entertaining start to the afternoon when he was interviewed by fellow writer, Phil Rickman (of Radio Wales's 'Phil the Shelf'). Earlier in the day, John Williams, famous for his gritty noir novels set in Cardiff, took part in an entertaining discussion of crime writing with Jasper Fforde and Lindsay Ashford.

Welsh-speaking readers had the opportunity of hearing Welsh-language writers Elgan Philip



Parthian: Bestseller Poetry

Davies, Geraint Vaughan Jones and Lyn Ebenezer discussing their forays into this genre. Those preferring non-fiction could share the masterfully delivered anecdotes of broadcaster Hywel Gwynfryn as he discussed his autobiography, and talk to Rhys Evans, journalist and author of a substantial and intriguing biography of Gwynfor Evans.

One of the most popular sessions of the day introduced some new Welsh women writers to a new audience. The ensuing lively discussions and the great many readers delighted with their discovery of these exciting new authors was testimony to the enthusiasm of the



Gomer Press: Bestseller: English-language Children's Book and the two Welsh-language Awards

audience for a wide range of writing.

At the end of the afternoon, Elinor Jones hosted Wales's first ever Publishing Trade Awards ceremony which recognised the achievements of Welsh publishers in categories such as fiction, poetry, non-fiction and children's books. The Minister for Culture, Alun Pugh, presented the awards and we were treated to a series of dramatised readings from some of the winning titles.

Finally the day was over, and as all the coaches disappeared over the horizon, everyone could look back on a day of celebration and sheer enjoyment of books.

My Favourite Books

Members of the Friends are invited to present their favourite books

Wendy Crockett

The world of my childhood was drab and lacking in visual stimulus, certainly by comparison with today's environment. The power of words was perhaps so much the greater. At the age of about six or seven, I was taken by my mother to be fitted for a camel-hair coat, a fifties' fashion in smart outdoor clothes. These coats always had buttons in plaited brown leather. Not normally a stubborn child, I refused point blank to have one and no persuasion could move me. The reason was that Carlton Hobbs, a famous radio actor, had played a sinister villain in a Children's Hour drama, in which he was described as wearing a coat with brown leather buttons. The mere sight of a camel-hair coat was enough to evoke the terror of hearing his voice.

No wonder then that books made a big impact. There was a very limited range, but I remember the smell and physical feel of them, as well as their words and pictures. One of the first favourites to listen to was the Little Grey Rabbit series. Alison Uttley's anthropomorphic world delighted with its interplay of stock characters – conscientious, put-upon Grey Rabbit, silly, vain Squirrel and air-head Hare – together with their observation of real animal behaviour and the tenderly drawn illustrations of Margaret Tempest. I treasure my battered copy of *Hare Joins the Home Guard*, by now a fascinating historical text. I knew my dad had been in the Home Guard but was not sure whether he had been armed with bad egg sandwiches.

I became an independent reader when my older sister, Pat, said *Five on a Treasure Island* was a wonderful story. I sat with my fingers in my ears, trying to mutter the words without saying them out loud (because that annoyed her) and was hooked. It was a mystery why my school friend was forbidden to read anything by Blyton; fortunately we didn't have the reading police at our house.

The real *Treasure Island* was also a challenge set by my sister, but this time because she had been so scared by the description of Blind Pew's stick tapping on the ground that she couldn't go on. I got through the whole fascinating, repulsive narrative time after time; strange, horrifying and compelling as it was, it didn't seem to matter that I hadn't a clue what pieces of eight were. Teenage reading didn't exist then; you just went onto adult books somehow, in my case via historical romances by the likes of Baroness d'Orczy and Georgette Heyer. Then I read the incomparable *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's anatomy of human absurdity remains funny after countless readings. Her world is both utterly different yet strikingly similar to our own with its dysfunctional families, embarrassing relatives, absurd pretensions and snobbery. And of course clever, opinionated, unconventional Elizabeth gets her man. It still turns me into one of those annoying, laugh-out-loud readers.

Oh dear, no time for the last forty years! Two wonderful biographies have absorbed me in the last twelve months, *Wordsworth, A Life* by Juliet Barker and the two volumes on Coleridge by Richard Holmes.



Lila Piette

Schools Liaison Officer

Our regular column to introduce a member of staff at the Books Council

For the last eleven years I have been the Schools Liaison Officer with the Welsh Books Council's Children's Books Department. The schools project was first established in 1992 when it was decided to improve the way in which information about books was disseminated to schools. This started with the appointing of a schools liaison office to co-ordinate the work of three other officers who would visit primary schools throughout the length and breadth of Wales.

By today, I lead a team of four schools officers – three of whom are ex-head teachers themselves and the fourth has extensive experience of working in a specialist, independent bookshop. These four offer visits to all primary and secondary schools in Wales every year in order to show



teachers what new materials and resources are available and what is in the pipeline. They are able to give advice and collect orders which are then channelled through local bookshops. We work in close co-operation with ACCAC, the Schools Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in Wales, by passing on information about teachers' needs and the deficiencies they perceive in the availability of suitable materials for the curriculum in both Welsh and English.

Another aspect of my work at the Books Council is the information pack I prepare once a term which is sent out to schools, colleges and libraries supplementing visits with catalogues, posters, meet the author leaflets and a wealth of useful information about educational books and resources.

One of the ways the department keeps in touch with children's reading is by organising the Books Competition – both a Welsh-language competition, and, more recently, a newly-established English-language books competition. The final rounds of these competitions have taken place, during the past few years, in the Aberystwyth Arts Centre, with upward of 200 children participating. We have had to develop organisational skills we never knew we had, in order to keep track of over 30 teams of enthusiastic children competing in both a discussion group, and in giving a presentation of a book they've studied.