

The Annual Meeting



Professor M. Wynn
Thomas and
Bethan Gwanas

It has been our custom to hold the Friends' Annual Meeting in Aberystwyth, the home of the Welsh Books Council, but, in response to several suggestions received from time to time, it was decided in 2011 to decamp to another venue with a view to attracting a local audience to join the faithful who come along every year. And what better place to start this venture than Bala? The meeting took place on 15 October at the Cywain Centre on a sunny day with no cloud in the sky, save for the fact that the Welsh rugby team's heroic bid for the World Cup came to an abrupt end that very morning in New Zealand.

The Friends' Steering Committee met in the morning to be told that the membership still hovers rather stubbornly around the 340 mark, a matter which will be given priority by the new Steering Committee (see below).

It was agreed to donate £400 to the Books Council's Children's Department to allow a number of schools to shadow the Tir na n-Og awards and arrange activities based on the competition's titles. We shall also be approaching the Urdd with a view to sponsoring young authors to attend courses at the Tŷ Newydd Writers' Centre, Cricieth. A sum of £1,000 had previously been earmarked by the Steering Committee in 2010 to promote reading among boys. This funded two successful events, one at the Liberty Stadium, Swansea, and the other at the Racecourse, Wrexham,

in which authors and sportspeople took part and parcels of books were distributed to the participating schools.

Thanks for many years of dedicated service to the Committee and Friends in general were given to Dr Brynley F. Roberts and Mr Lyn Léwis Dafis, who have recently retired as Vice-chair and Secretary, respectively.

A reasonably encouraging financial report was put before and accepted by the Committee.

Every three years nominations are invited for membership of the Steering Committee, and this was the case in 2011. Officials and members of the Committee for 2011–14 are: Chairman: Tegwyn Jones; Vice-chair: Bethan Gwanas; Treasurer: William Howells; Secretary: To be appointed; Committee Members: Marian Delyth, Meinir Pierce Jones and Ian Lloyd Hughes.

After lunch, as is the custom on these occasions, a question and answer session was held between Professor M. Wynn Thomas, Chairman of the Books Council, and an invited guest from the Welsh literary scene. This year it was our pleasure to welcome Bethan Gwanas, one of our most popular and prolific authors and broadcasters. It is hardly necessary to add that Professor Thomas's gentle but penetrating questions, and Bethan's interesting and exuberant reaction to them provided for a very lively and enjoyable afternoon.

From the Chair

Tegwyn Jones



To paraphrase the Reverend Eli Jenkins in Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, 'Praise the Lord! We are a rugby-loving nation', but are we? Anyone watching a game of club rugby played in Wales on TV – often in spanking new state-of-the-art stadiums – will be struck by the rows and rows of empty seats to be seen, whereas similar games played in the rest of the UK and the Irish Republic seem to attract capacity crowds with an enthusiasm rarely seen since Christians were fed to the lions in the Colosseum of old. Curious, therefore, that the Gwales website should inform us that 'the bestselling English-language book from Wales this Christmas' was Eddie Butler's *The Greatest Welsh XV Ever* (Gomer). Another volume (albeit a slim one) that should do well is *The First XV: A Selection of the Best Rugby Writing* (Parthian), edited by Gareth Williams, with a foreword by Gerald Davies. So where are the supporters who should be occupying all those empty seats in the Liberty Stadium and Parc y Scarlets and other hallowed grounds? Are they instead seated in comfy armchairs in front of roaring fires, reading books about rugby? If so, it suits us. If writing about rugby sells books, we are all for it, and more power to the elbows of those who write them.



Bethan Gwanas

My Favourite Books

Members of the Friends are invited to present their favourite books. Here is Carole Morgan's choice.



Carole Morgan

I love travelling and I try to find books which are linked to the places I'm visiting. During a short holiday in Berlin I read one of the most moving and harrowing books I have ever come across, *Alone in Berlin* by Hans Fallada. The central characters of the novel, Otto and Anna Quangle, embark on a campaign of rebellion against the Nazi regime after the death of their son by dropping postcards containing subversive messages around the city. The tension conveyed in the book is unbearable at times and it demonstrates how ordinary people can be affected and ultimately destroyed by events in a very powerful way.

I was fortunate to spend time on the beautiful north Norfolk coast this summer and visited Holkham Hall and beach during my stay. While I was there I read *A Scandalous Life* by

Mary S. Lovell, a biography of Jane Digby (1807–1881), the grand-daughter of Lord Coke of Holkham. This biography offers readers a fascinating look at the unconventional and adventurous life of a woman in the nineteenth century who spent the last thirty years of her life married to a Syrian sheikh some twenty years her junior, dividing her time between a grand house in Damascus and a nomadic life in the desert.

Being a member of Cardiff Library's Welsh reading group has meant that I've had the opportunity to read a number of books I might not normally have chosen from the shelves. *Y Dŵr* by Lloyd Jones, which portrays the disintegration of civilised society, falls into this category. Even though the novel did not contain the slightest glimmer of hope, it is one that has lingered in my mind. It is now one of my favourite Welsh novels and it certainly proves the old adage that you can't judge a book by its cover. It was a pleasure to read *Tair Rheol Anhrefn* by Daniel Davies after having read a number of quite depressing works. It was a real laugh-out-loud book with plenty of twists and turns in its fast-moving plot.

I'm interested in reading books which are set in Cardiff, my home for over thirty years. Two fairly recent novels that spring to mind are *Un Ddinas, Dau Fyd* by Llwyd Owen, and *Yr Argraff Gyntaf*, a historical detective novel by Ifan Morgan Jones. I enjoy seeing how familiar locations are woven into the

tales. Two more novels that were a joy to read last year were *Hen Blant Bach* by Gwen Parrott and *Yn y Tŷ Hwn* by Sian Northey, together with *Awr y Locustiaid*, a volume of short stories by Fflur Dafydd. The most interesting factual book I read during 2011 was *Bydoedd: Cofiant Cyfnod* by Ned Thomas. I loved the way the author's personal story was interwoven with events of international importance.

My husband and I are avid fans of Literature Wales's inspiring programme of tours and walks to locations in south Wales that either form part of a writer's work or are considered influential in its creation. In recent years we have discovered many new, delightful parts of the country as well as learning about hitherto unfamiliar authors such as T. Harri Jones (1921–1965) and Lynette Roberts (1909–1995). One of the most memorable trips was a day spent with Horatio Clare exploring the area which is the setting for his autobiographical book *Running for the Hills*. It was a magical experience hearing passages of the book being read while looking at the scene he was describing. The same was true of a trip to the Olchon valley, the setting for the book and film *Resistance* in the inspirational company of author and poet Owen Sheers.

Writing this short piece has reminded me of some of my favourite recent reads, and I look forward with enthusiasm to seeing which titles will appear in 2012.

Dr Lucy Thomas English-language Grants Officer

It has been nearly two years since Dr Lucy Thomas began working at the Welsh Books Council as its English-language Grants Officer and, as she told me in her office in Castell Brychan, the period has been challenging as well as exciting. 'I'm sure that you realise that my period working for the Books Council has coincided with an economically difficult one. Therefore it has been inevitable that this economic climate has had an effect on the publishing industry in Wales. But one of the main challenges for me in this post has been to work with publishers mainly to help them overcome these problems in the best ways possible.'

Lucy explained that the English-language publishing grant is slightly different from the Welsh-language grant as it's mainly targeted at supporting the publishing of materials that are literary in nature. 'This is a very important distinction and gives me a different perspective on matters. But basically, as there is the need to



Dr Lucy Thomas

ensure that the publishing industry succeeds in the world as it is, then this must be done in a wider context. As I

work with publishers I support their efforts to build on their strengths and to expand their lists to include new works that will bring a balance to those lists.

'Unfortunately, this can sometimes be counterproductive because very often when a publisher has put in the effort to work with an author that brings success in the wider market, the author becomes an attractive proposition for publishers from outside Wales and this brings with it the risks that the benefits from success will be lost. So one of the ways in which the Council tries to help is with its author advance scheme for English-language writers in order to give publishers in Wales the means to retain and develop their relationship with their more successful authors.'

Honno Celebrates its 25th Anniversary



Honno is an independent cooperative press run by women and committed to publishing the best in Welsh women's writing. The idea was conceived in 1986 by a determined group of volunteers who wanted to increase the opportunities for Welsh women in publishing and bring Welsh women's literature to a wider public. Honno was established as a working cooperative and published its first book less than a year later in 1987. At Honno's twenty-fifth anniversary one of its founder members, Rosanne Reeves – who is still on the committee today – remembers the

atmosphere that inspired them:

'It was in the 80s that Greenham Common started, when women from Cardiff marched to the base; Welsh Women's Aid extended to rural Wales; the Miners' Strike brought women of the Valleys out of their kitchens, to return to their homes empowered ... and a political branch of the Women's Section of Plaid Cymru was developed.

'The opportunity to sell women's literature became a possibility – the influence of Virago, The Women's Press, Spare Rib and Onlywomen, and the Attic Press in Ireland led the way. But of course Wales was different from England and there was a gap in the market in Wales for books which were relevant to the women of Wales, in both languages.

'None of the publishing houses in Wales were particularly interested in promoting women's literature or writers,

especially not in English. There was a tradition of publishing Welsh-language material by winners of competitions in the National Eisteddfod by the traditional presses, who would then pursue these particular authors. But the thought of going out to look for new female talent and female voices was not a priority.'

Over the years the press and its titles have won many awards and true to its roots still only publishes work by the women of Wales. Honno publishes a range of titles, including anthologies of new writing, novels, autobiographies and the Honno Classics series, which brings to a new generation of readers great women writers of the past.

Honno is the last independent women's press in the UK. We are still guided by a voluntary committee of volunteers and continue to publish the best writing by Welsh women.

Books Competitions



The Books Council has held Welsh-language books competitions for over twenty-five years and generations of children have represented their schools in the final of the competition at Aberystwyth during this period.

The competition consists of two parts. Firstly, a team of four children discusses a book with the adjudicator, demonstrating their discursive and analytical skills as well as encouraging members to listen to the opinions of others within the team. Secondly, pupils give a short theatrical presentation based on a different book.

Over the years we have seen some excellent performances, with standards improving year on year as schools learn from each other and become more ambitious.

As the competition became more popular it was decided to extend it to include the younger children, and by now there are two separate competitions, one for 7–9-year-olds and another for 9–11-year-olds. This has resulted in two full days of avid competition at Aberystwyth Arts Centre in June every year.

In order to give the children a day to remember and to make it a celebration of books and reading, author sessions are also organised. Authors from all over Wales have entertained both pupils and teachers, from Myrddin ap Dafydd and Dewi Pws to

Winners of the English-language books competition from Broad Haven primary school, Pembrokeshire, with their teacher, and the adjudicator Mrs Lorna Herbert Egan

Caryl Lewis and T. Llew Jones.

A few years ago it was felt that it would be a positive step forward to give both Welsh and non-Welsh speakers the chance to take part and we now also arrange an English-language competition on similar lines, with the final being held in Theatr Brycheiniog, Brecon.

The enthusiasm shown by all the children who participate, as well as their teachers, means that we are confident that these competitions will go from strength to strength.

The Council Celebrating its Half Centenary



Clockwise from top left: Alun Creunant Davies; Give a Book Week launch; half centenary celebrations; Publishing Industry Awards

Establishing the Books Council

In his autobiography entitled *Yr Hedyn Mwstard* ('The mustard seed'), the pioneering librarian and bibliophile Alun R. Edwards traces the history of the beginnings of the Books Council and identifies 6 November 1961 as the date on which the Union of Welsh Book Societies was dissolved and a new national organisation was established. Edwards, who was Chief Librarian of Cardiganshire at the time, also states that prior to this development there had been ten years or so of diligent preparation, mainly in the form of support for the publication of Welsh books and promoting them through various campaigns such as selling books from door to door.

The establishment of a network of book societies, with Cymdeithas Lyfrau Ceredigion one of the most prominent amongst them, proved to be a key development. By 1961 there were fifteen societies in existence, including one in London. It is therefore significant, as Cymdeithas Lyfrau Ceredigion drew its activities to a close at the end of 2011, that its assets were transferred to the Books Council to promote Welsh-language children's books.

On 1 March 1965 Alun Creunant Davies started in post as first Director and the words written by

Alun R. Edwards in his autobiography stating that the ideal choice had been made when appointing him to the position, certainly ring true. Gwerfyl Pierce Jones succeeded Alun Creunant, and the rest, of course, is history.

A Developing Institution

Since its establishment in 1961 the Books Council has seen many important and far-reaching developments which have strengthened the publishing industry in Wales.

One of the earliest developments was the establishment of the Distribution Centre which forged a strong link between publishers and booksellers. The Council was also innovative in embracing new technology and invested in a state-of-the-art information system that has become a comprehensive source for books of Welsh interest, and this in turn has formed the basis of the Gwales websites for booksellers and librarians as well as the public. Today, books from Wales can be ordered from any location in the world.

Another important step was the change in the Council's funding system which ensured direct funding from the Welsh Assembly Government in Cardiff. In addition, in 2003 the responsibility for distributing grants for publishing English books from Wales was transferred from the Arts Council to the Books Council, which meant that

it now led the strategic development of the entire publishing industry in Wales.

The role of the Books Council in promoting reading has developed enormously since it received an invitation to spearhead the National Year of Reading campaign in 1998. The Books Council now arranges annual World Book Day events in Wales, as well as the Reading Communities and Quick Reads initiatives.

Recently, additional funding was secured to support Welsh-language creative editor posts at the publishing houses and the Council has now turned its attention to digital publishing to ensure that publishers can offer a selection of e-books from Wales to readers. The Council also has plans to further support English books from Wales.

A Programme of Celebration

To celebrate fifty years of service to the publishing industry, the Books Council is organising a programme of events throughout the year, culminating in its annual meeting in December. Several annual events will be included in the programme such as the World Book Day Lecture, the Publishing Industry Awards and a special meeting of the Friends of the Books Council. This year, for the first time, the Council will host an event at the Hay Festival.

The celebrations have already received considerable media and press coverage and hopefully further attention will be given during the year to the Books Council's activities and the work of the industry.

Calling Former Books Council Staff Members

Although the Books Council has been led by as few as three directors during its fifty-year history, with Elwyn Jones succeeding Gwerfyl Pierce Jones and Alun Creunant Davies, many individuals have served as staff members over the years.

As part of the celebrations, the Council intends to hold an event for current as well as former staff members. This event will be held at Castell Brychan on 21 June and if you are a former member of staff and wish to join us in our celebration, please get in touch.