

## Annual Meeting



Eigra Lewis Roberts  
and M. Wynn Thomas  
in the Drwm.

To mark the half century of the Welsh Books Council, the Friends took their Annual Meeting to the National Library in October 2012. There, in the Drwm, we had a memorable evening in each other's company.

The Chairman presented a report on the meeting of the Steering Committee, which had met earlier that afternoon at Castell Brychan. The financial situation of the Friends is comparatively healthy and they are always looking for opportunities to promote the work of the Council in every way possible. Amongst other matters, it was reported that we now have a Facebook page and that a number of individuals had joined it, many of

them being young people. Our hope is that some of them at least will take the next step of signing up as Friends.

The main event of the evening, however, was welcoming our guest, National Eisteddfod Prose Medal and Crown winner Eigra Lewis Roberts, who held a very interesting conversation with the Chairman of the Books Council, Professor M. Wynn Thomas. The session also included film clips of television programmes based on her stories and novels.

At the end of the session, she was presented with the following *englyn* that had been especially written for the occasion by fellow Crown winner Dafydd John Pritchard:

Nodau'r iaith fel cŷn dy dras yn canu  
yn acenion eirias  
y meini yw cymwynas  
dy awen ar lechen las.

## From the Chair

Tegwyn Jones



'R. S. Thomas,' to quote the blurb that accompanies a volume of his uncollected poems (Bloodaxe Books, 2013), 'is a major writer of our time, one of the finest poets in the English language, and one of Wales's greatest poets.' It is fitting, then, that the centenary of the birth of this remarkable figure should be marked by this collection – edited by Tony Brown and Jason Walford Davies – as well as by two other publications of note. *Poems to Elsi* (Seren), edited by Damian Walford Davies, with a foreword by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is a fascinating bringing together of those poems that, over the years, the poet addressed to his wife, the painter Mildred E. Eldridge, leading to, as Rowan Williams aptly puts it, 'the discovery, almost, of a new poet in the words of one you think you know'. Both volumes have illuminating editorial introductions. Another altogether impressive contribution to the celebration of the poet's life and work is M. Wynn Thomas's highly authoritative collection of essays, *R. S. Thomas – Serial Obsessive* (University of Wales Press). The subject of these greatly-to-be-welcomed books is a name familiar to aficionados of fine poetry far and wide, and it behoves us to record our debt to those who have laboured to honour him in his own land.

# My Favourite Books

Members of the Friends are invited to discuss their favourite books. Here is Rona Aldrich's choice.



Rona Aldrich (Photo: The Big Lottery Fund)

My first choices show that students can be enthused by set texts and I pay tribute to Mr Arwel Jones and Mrs Goodall, Welsh and English teachers at Ysgol David Hughes, Porthaethwy, for fostering my ongoing interest in literature. I start with *Cerddi* by T. H. Parry-Williams. Amongst his well-known poems, the one I return to is 'Hon', where he asks, 'What do I care about Wales?', but by seeing the change in his square mile he realises that he is inextricably bound to his country: 'God help me, I cannot escape from her.'

The poems by the First World War poets found in various English anthologies continue to haunt me. I'm particularly touched by the work of the young man from Oswestry, Wilfred Owen, who died aged 25, and who penned that immortal line, 'What

passing bells for these who die as cattle?'

In complete contrast, my next choice is the work of the enigmatic Afro-Guyanese performance poet John Agard, with whom I hosted an event at Rhyl Library in the mid '80s in which he promoted his beautifully illustrated anthology, *I Din Do Nuttin*. Further testament to his talent was the response of a full bar of people at the Grange Hotel who later came under the spell of his impromptu reading. A truly multicultural experience.

Being a children's librarian is a good excuse for reading children's books. This is how I was introduced to *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* by Judith Kerr, a semi-autobiographical story of a young Jewish girl who is forced to flee her home in Germany. It was written for Kerr's eight-year-old son and can be enjoyed at that level. However, the book was recently transmitted by BBC Radio 4 as the classic serial for the enjoyment of adults.

After watching Theatr Clwyd's excellent production of Harper Lee's only published book, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, I felt I had to get to know the central characters – the lawyer Atticus Finch and his daughter Scout. Atticus, possibly the most enduring fictional image of racial heroism, defends a black man accused of raping a young white woman, with disastrous consequences for the whole community. Whilst dark in many ways, the book is full of hope, particularly for the younger generation.

I have a weakness for detective

fiction and I also have an affinity with Italy, where I spend as much time as possible. It was, therefore, a double gift when a friend introduced me to the work of Donna Leon and her series of stories about Commissario Brunetti of the Venetian Police, his family and colleagues. Leon is a prolific writer and although overexposure may have resulted in her plots and character development becoming lax, she has again regained her usual form and I look forward to reading her latest title, *The Golden Egg*.

Books are not just about the written word. Whilst nothing can compare with the thrill of the original, Bernard Meehan, Keeper of Manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin, has produced a readable illustrated introduction to the *Book of Kells*. I am fascinated by the photographs of the decorated pages and the enlargements showing the minutiae of the detail in this controversial manuscript.

I eagerly await the publication of the annual Prose Medal and the Daniel Owen Prize winning entries at the National Eisteddfod. The book that has moved me in recent years is the 2011 Medal winner, *Neb Ond Ni* by Manon Rhys. Siriol and Dewi are special children – she is wheelchair-bound and almost blind and he is autistic – who go to a special school during the week and who understand one another perfectly. If you're looking for a book to make you laugh and cry at the same time in a totally un sentimental way, this is it.

## Welcome to the Bookshop Support Scheme

One of the Welsh Books Council's priorities is to promote the independent bookshop sector in Wales, and to ensure that the excellent service provided by these outlets continues.

The Gwales.com website was set up by the Welsh Books Council to provide information about all available Welsh-language and Welsh-interest titles, and to supply customers who were not within easy reach of a bookshop with works of their choice.

While encouraging Gwales users to visit their local bookshop at every opportunity, we realise that this is not always practical and that many customers prefer to browse and order from the comfort of their own homes. We have now set up a scheme which will allow the customers' chosen bookshops to benefit even if they decide to order online.

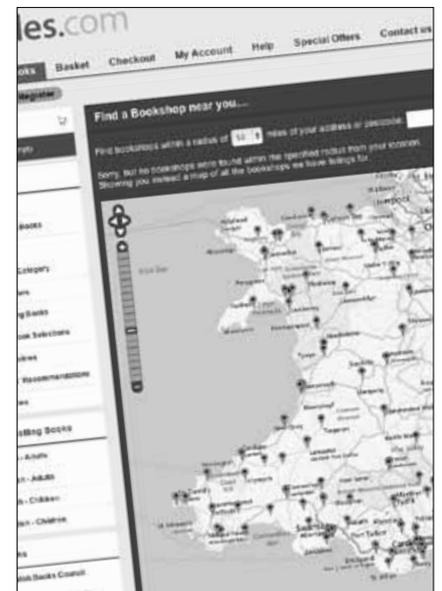
The Bookshop Support Scheme invites Gwales customers to select a local independent bookshop, which will then receive a commission on the sale. This will not cost customers a penny, but by choosing a bookshop they will help the bookselling industry in

Wales in its efforts to provide a high-street presence for books from Wales.

There are currently 91 independent bookshops participating in this scheme.

A new 'Find a Bookshop' button has also been added to the Gwales.com home page, and it is possible to locate 138 bookshops (including branches of the major chains) on an interactive map.

According to Phil Davies, the Council's Director of Information and Promotion, 'We very much hope that this new service will encourage customers to support their local bookshop, and help their effort to maintain a presence in our towns. If they opt to order online, we hope that they remember to nominate their favourite bookshop, which will receive a commission on the sale.'



A screenshot of the 'Find a Bookshop' web page

# Tir na n-Og awards 2013



Daniel Morden, winner of the English Tir na n-Og award.

The winner of this year's English Tir na n-Og award was announced in a special ceremony held during the CILIP Cymru conference in Cardiff on 16 May. The award of £1,000 and a glass trophy were presented to Daniel Morden for *Tree of Leaf and Flame*, his unique take on the tales of the Mabinogi.

A recent development with the Tir na n-Og awards is a shadowing scheme whereby a class of children reads and discusses the shortlisted books.

The pupils themselves then decide on a winner of their own choice.

St Andrews Major School, Dinas Powys, took part in the shadowing scheme this year, and came along to the award ceremony in Cardiff for an exclusive question and answer session with Daniel Morden.

The Welsh-language awards were presented at the Urdd National Eisteddfod in Pembrokeshire on 30 May. The award for the best Welsh-language book for primary school children was won by Iolo Williams and Bethan Wyn Jones for their publication *Cynefin yr Ardd*, and the winner of the secondary schools category was Alun Wyn Bevan for his book *Y Gêmau Olympaidd a Champau'r Cymry*.

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*Tree of Leaf and Flame* is a fresh retelling of the Mabinogi in Daniel's distinctive style and includes Brett Breckon's excellent illustrations which help bring the tales to life.

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*Cynefin yr Ardd* is a delightful book for children and adults alike to learn to enjoy all the wildlife in the garden habitat – the animals, birds, insects, reptiles, trees, shrubs, flowers and herbs that inhabit the rich areas on our doorstep.

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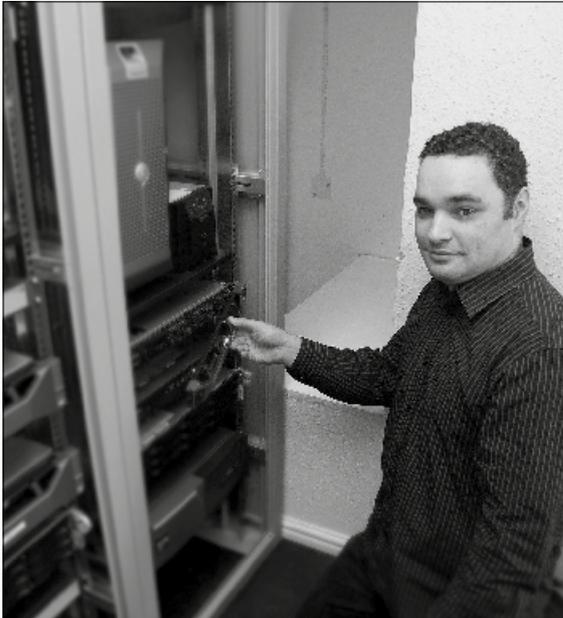
*Y Gêmau Olympaidd a Champau'r Cymry* celebrates the London 2012 Olympics. The book is full of intriguing facts and includes some of the Games's most interesting and remarkable stories over the years, with an emphasis on the Welsh connection.

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*Tree of Leaf and Flame* (£9.99) is published by Pont Books, *Cynefin yr Ardd* (£6.99) is published by Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, and *Y Gêmau Olympaidd a Champau'r Cymry* (£9.99) is published by Gomer Press.

The awards are sponsored by CILIP Cymru and Cymdeithas Lyfrau Ceredigion.

## Owain Llyr Thomas Information Technology Officer



Owain Llyr Thomas

Owain has been working as the Welsh Books Council's IT officer since 2011, and in his particular field, two years can be an age. Technology develops, legislation changes, work routines vary, and the way people use technology is becoming far more complex. As Owain will testify, the duties of an IT officer are certainly challenging and varied, and no two days are ever the same.

Owain was born in Carmarthen and lived near Rhydwylym, then moved with

his family to Aberystwyth. He admits that he found it hard to settle here and spent most weekends and holidays working on the family farm in Llanelli. This is where his interest in machinery and engineering was born. Owain thinks that he must have been a walking health and safety nightmare, especially when his grandfather gave him a pocket knife on his fourth birthday!

When he started attending Ysgol Gyfun Penweddig he found out that he was dyslexic, and the five years spent there proved difficult. When the 16-year-old was given the opportunity to leave, he jumped at the chance, but left with very few GCSEs. Despite this, Owain enrolled on an electronics and IT course in Coleg Ceredigion. From then he began to find his feet – he studied for his BTEC National Diploma, and gained a few GCSEs as well as a City and Guilds welding and fabrication qualification. Owain then began studying for a HND in agriculture at the Welsh Agricultural College in Llanbadarn before enrolling on a CS engineering degree course at Swansea Institute. Gaining his B.Eng. gave Owain the opportunity to involve himself in motorsport, working with materials and systems that were beyond the scope of most businesses.

His first post on leaving Swansea was at the IT office of Menter a Busnes in Aberystwyth and Pontarddulais. He then became self-employed, gaining a wealth of experiences, but returned to his Alma Mater – newly renamed as the Swansea Metropolitan University – to study for an M.Sc. in communications engineering. It was an intense year's course, but Owain completed his studies, despite his father's ill health during this time. He was then appointed as a network manager at Penglais School, Aberystwyth, which included some teaching work. Owain found this post very rewarding, but particularly demanding, and so he decided to return to self-employment, advising and working with many local companies and institutions, including some of Ceredigion's primary schools, solicitors, estate agents, farms and factories. He still keeps himself particularly busy undertaking various technical and engineering tasks, and feels he's found a home at the Welsh Books Council.

On weekends, Owain volunteers as a 4x4 response driver, taking medical staff to patients and hospitals during bad weather, and when time allows he instructs off-road driving techniques – and all of this for a young man who left school with three GCSEs!

# Book of the Year

On 13 May 2013 the shortlist for the Wales Book of the Year Award was announced via a special online broadcast.

The 2013 Award is to be presented to the best Welsh- and English-language works first published in 2012 in the fields of creative writing and literary criticism in three categories: Poetry, Fiction and Creative Non-fiction. The Award is administered by Literature Wales.

On the English Judging Panel this year was the author and business advisor Ffion Hague, who acted as Chair; the popular fantasy novel writer and member of the Welsh Academy Jasper Fforde, who has received critical acclaim for his series of novels starring the detective Thursday Next; and the poet, academic and literary critic Richard Marggraf Turley, who is a professor in the English and Creative Writing department at Aberystwyth University and whose poetry collection *Wan-Hu's Flying Chair* was awarded the 2010 Wales Book of the Year 'People's Choice' award.

## The shortlist:

### Poetry:

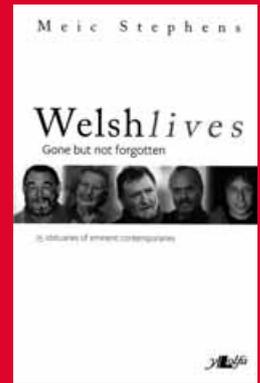
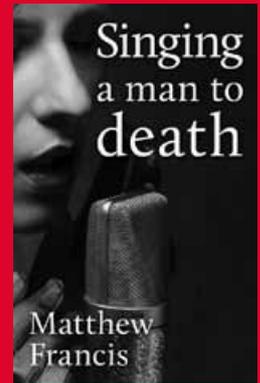
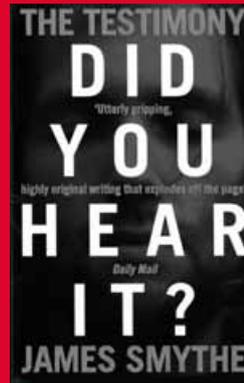
*Banjo*, Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch;  
*Burying the Wren*, Deryn Rees-Jones;  
*Clueless Dogs*, Rhian Edwards

### Fiction:

*A Girl's Arm*, Gee Williams;  
*The Testimony*, James Smythe;  
*Singing a Man to Death*, Matthew Francis

### Creative Non-fiction:

*Forgotten Footprints*, John Harrison;  
*Wales at Water's Edge*, Jon Gower;  
*Welsh Lives*, Meic Stephens



# Books for children in Wales



Firefly Press's logo

A new Wales-based children's publisher, Firefly Press, has won a contract from the Welsh Books Council to publish a series of books for 7–9 year-olds.

This series, called Dragonfly, will launch in bookshops and as ebooks from May 2014. The series will be lively and contemporary, beautifully produced, and based in Wales. The Books Council and Welsh Assembly-backed series will aim to use humour and illustrations, alongside great writing, to encourage children to read for pleasure outside school hours.

According to Firefly editor Janet Thomas, the stories 'may be funny, scary, magical, shocking, thrilling, sad or happy, but always aim to entertain and inspire.'

Firefly publisher Penny Thomas added: 'Our print and ebooks will be published from Wales, but we want to appeal to readers everywhere through great stories and the excellence of our books, authors and illustrators.'

Former Wales Young People's Laureate and bestselling children's

author Catherine Fisher, who is a board member for the new company, said: 'It's great to see expansion in books for children in Wales. I hope Firefly will be a vivid and energetic addition to the publishing scene.'

Welsh Books Council Chief Executive Elwyn Jones said: 'We're pleased to fund this exciting series of children's books from Wales. It's encouraging to see a brand new company broadening the range of titles available in this important area of publishing and we hope that the series will instil an enduring love of books in a new generation of readers.'

Firefly has also launched a competition for a story for 7–9 year-olds set in Wales, and details may be seen on their website: [www.fireflypress.co.uk](http://www.fireflypress.co.uk). The press will also be publishing books for 9–12 year-olds and teenage readers from next year.