

The Welsh Books Council's financial settlement

Following the news that its budget was to be cut by 10.6% during the 2016/17 financial year, members of the Friends were well aware the Books Council was facing a very difficult period. However, in a much welcomed announcement from Ken Skates, Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism, the Council was recently told that no cuts were to be made to next year's budget after all.

The news followed an intense period of petitioning by publishers and authors, and Ion Thomas, Chair of the Friends, wrote to the Welsh Government concerning the matter. 'The Friends are fully aware, and more so than most, of the Council's key role in promoting the book industry,' said Mr Thomas, 'and to be able to add our voice to the multitude that opposed the initial announcement was an honour.'

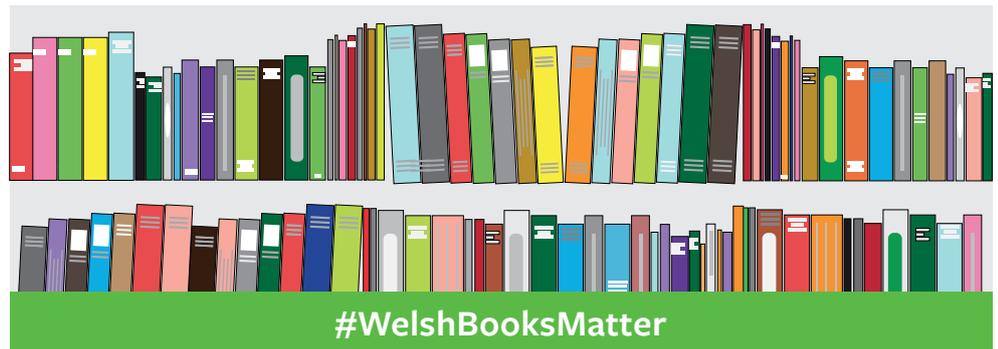
'The Books Council, like many other organisations, has faced substantial cuts during recent years,' added Elwyn Jones, Chief Executive of the Council. 'A further

cut would have severely undermined the important work of securing an extensive choice of good quality books to readers, in both Welsh and English.'

'With the support of the Welsh Government, the publishing industry has reached out to communities of readers across the whole social and geographical spectrum of Wales,' said Professor M. Wynn Thomas, Chairman of the Books Council. 'It has been successful in encouraging the development of e-books as well as the printed book, in increasing interest in books from Wales, in fostering

authors and in supporting a network of flourishing businesses, both publishers and booksellers. Books produced in Wales are also vital to the country's libraries and education sector.'

Elwyn Jones added: 'In the present economic climate we appreciate the confidence of the Welsh Government in our work and we will put all our efforts into supporting the industry and promoting books in both languages. We will also continue with our efforts to secure other funding sources to sustain and develop our work.'



From the Chair Ion Thomas

Thanks to each and every friend who responded to the recent threat facing the Books Council. Letters were sent and petitions arranged following the news that the Welsh Government intended to cut the Council's budget by 10.6%. This would have meant a reduction of £374,000, which inevitably would have led to job losses, together with a hefty blow to the Welsh language and the culture of Wales – and all this following four long years of cuts to the Council's budget.

The reaction to the news was astounding, with supporters from far and wide raising their voices in protest. And then came the unexpected news – that not a penny was to be cut from the Council's budget after all. Such a complete U-turn is very unusual, and we, as members of the Friends, praise those

politicians who were prepared to listen to taxpayers' concerns.

However, a number of unsettling questions remain unanswered. How was the decision to cut 10.6% from the Council's budget reached in the first place? It's difficult to imagine the reasoning involved in the civil servants' debates which led to the initial decision, especially in view of the Welsh Government's statement that it would provide an additional £184,000 to the Council for essential maintenance work on its buildings, and for upgrading its IT systems.

Was it to the Council's advantage in this instance that the responsibility for culture lies with Deputy Minister for Culture, Tourism and Sport, Ken Skates, while First Minister Carwyn Jones is responsible for the Welsh language? Was the U-turn caused by

the inevitable threat to jobs within the books industry, or by the danger of undermining the Welsh language? The fact that 2016 is an election year must have had some bearing on the matter. One individual who hasn't been mentioned is Edwina Hart, Minister for Economy, Science and Transport – she may well have played a positive role in reversing the decision.

Despite the change of heart, knowing that the Council had been a target for such severe cuts is worrying. The situation has highlighted the crucial role of the Friends in safeguarding and supporting the work of the Council and the individuals who maintain the Welsh books industry. We're glad of the respite, but we need to continue to fight the Council's corner and show that it is one organisation Wales can't do without.

Magazines

2015 was very much the Year of the Welsh-language Magazines for the Grants Department. Between commissioning a review of the sector by Andrew Green, advertising, receiving and processing the applications, and interviewing, we seem to have spent the whole year discussing magazines.

It's a difficult time for the magazines, but these are hard times for all. Sales are always a challenge, and our expectations of finding material free of charge online make them even more challenging.

But despite everything, it was a very heartening experience. Eighteen applications were received, including three for brand-new magazines by teams of young and enthusiastic people: one application was for a magazine for small children, one for older children and another for a purely digital news digest for adults.

Two of the three applications were supported. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances, the news app had to decline the

offer. However, we can look forward to seeing *Mellten*, a new comic for older children by the talented cartoonist Huw Aaron, to be published by Y Lolfa, at the Urdd Eisteddfod this year.

Similarly, after the initial disappointment of failing to support a literary magazine following the first round of tenders, we re-advertised and received two exciting applications. Even though the literary landscape will be very different without *Taliesin*, the publication of *O'r Pedwar Gwynt* will be eagerly anticipated. This is a new literary magazine edited by Sioned Puw Rowlands, Owen Martell and Mari Siôn, in partnership with the School of Welsh at Bangor University. The first print issue will be published in time for the National Eisteddfod in August.

What's exciting about both publications is that their existence online and on paper is holistic, with one medium constantly feeding the other without merely being an appendix to it. We hope they'll create a great deal of excitement and a constant stream of interactions with their audiences.



The Panel spent three days interviewing. The quality and vision of all the applications were very encouraging. Indeed, during the second day, it dawned on the Panel that the vast majority of those they had interviewed were under forty. Whatever the difficulties facing Welsh-language magazines, our young people are certainly ready for the challenge.

So if 2015 was the Year of the Magazine for the Books Council, let 2016 be the Year of the Magazine for you. Enjoy, support and buy the varied publications, old and new, that will be available to you in all good bookshops.

@LlyfrDaFabBooks author on tour

September proved to be an exciting time for the Children's Books and Reading Promotion Department as new Twitter and Facebook accounts named @LlyfrDaFabBooks were launched to promote books and events concerning children's books in Wales. The main aim of creating these accounts on social media was to connect with our target audience – parents, teachers, schools and all those who are interested in books for children.

To bring the brand @LlyfrDaFabBooks to life, it was decided that events would need to be a key feature in its calendar. As a result, author Meleri Wyn James took a week-long tour of schools in north-west Wales during

November. She visited ten schools, where over 500 pupils aged between 7 and 11 years old were invited to attend workshops.

During each workshop, Meleri would introduce the characters from her popular Na, Nel! series, and then discuss the various processes involved in writing her books – from gleaning ideas for plots and scenes for her characters and working closely with an illustrator, to the task of getting the books printed. The children enjoyed meeting a real-life author, and had an opportunity to take part in a question and answer session. And to end the workshop, the pupils co-wrote a short story with Meleri. The various pieces of work produced reflected the children's vivid imaginations.

'The session inspired me, and I enjoyed helping to write the story,' said Enlli Llwyd Davies, one of the pupils from Ysgol O. M. Edwards, Llanuwchllyn, and the head of Ysgol Maenofferen confirmed that the experience had supported and reinforced the work undertaken in class: 'It was great for the children to have first-hand experience of an author's work. The children also enjoyed taking an active role in the workshop.'

To ensure that all 500 children who were engaged in this tour were given an opportunity to purchase books, the Welsh Books Council worked with five bookshops in the region: Awen Meirion, Llên Llŷn, Awen Menai, Siop yr Hen Bost and Bys a Bawd. 'It was a very positive experience for us –

Meleri's workshop was great, and inspired the audience's imagination. Taking authors and their books to schools is undoubtedly a very effective way of promoting books and reading in general,' said Rhiannon from Awen Menai.

The week-long tour created a buzz and an interest in books, and seeing the children enjoy discussing words and stories was a pleasure. It proved to be a valuable exercise for Meleri Wyn James also: 'It's been a great experience and the tour has gone very well. The pupils have been enthusiastic and full of ideas, and I've had a terrific response from the children and their teachers.'

On 11 and 12 February, the @LlyfrDaFabBooks show was held at Cardigan Castle, when some 600 school pupils were entertained by four children's authors and illustrators: Caryl Lewis, Huw Aaron, Casia Wiliam and Sioned Lleinau.



Meleri Wyn James with children from Ysgol yr Eiffl



Meleri Wyn James with children from Ysgol Pont y Gof and Llifon Jones from Llên Llŷn

Celebrating the centenary of T. Llew Jones



Celebrations at Ysgol Gymunedol T. Llew Jones

2015 was the centenary of the birth of T. Llew Jones, the prolific Welsh-language author and poet, and during the autumn term a large number of events were held to commemorate the author's contribution to Welsh literature.

To mark the milestone, the Welsh Books Council commissioned original artwork by the artist Andy Robert Davies, to create a poster to be distributed to schools throughout Wales. The artwork was based on one of T. Llew Jones's most famous poems, 'Cwm Alltcafán'.

On Friday, 9 October, the specially commissioned poster was unveiled by the sons of the author at Ysgol Gymunedol T. Llew Jones in Brynhoffnant, and all schools were encouraged to unveil their copy of the poster at the same time in order to create a

national event. Elwyn Jones explained: 'It was an exciting opportunity for everyone to unite to celebrate the centenary of one of the most well-known authors in Wales. Having every primary school holding the event on the same day and at the same time meant that T. Llew and his work were discussed by hundreds of children as part of the celebrations.'

There was a special atmosphere to the event in Brynhoffnant, and the pupils contributed to the morning's proceedings in word and song.

Copies of the A2 poster were distributed to 600 schools in Wales, along with a class resource based on the poster, with the aim of inspiring pupils to compose their own poetry. The best entries in the poetry competition were awarded book tokens – the first prize of



£50 was awarded to Ysgol Dinas Mawddwy; the second prize of £30 to Ysgol y Garnedd, Bangor; and the third prize of £20 to Ysgol Nefyn. The book tokens will hopefully encourage the schools to add to their libraries' resources.

The poster had very positive feedback, and its image proved to be popular on the @LlyfrDaFabBooks Facebook page, reaching 16,300 individuals. The poem 'Cwm Alltcafán' which featured on the poster struck a chord with a great many Welsh speakers, bringing back memories of their childhood.

Celebrating the centenary of the birth of T. Llew was a way of paying tribute to a writer who has been called the king of children's Welsh-language literature, proving that his works continue to inspire readers.

Friends meeting in Aberdare

One of the highlights of the Friends of the Books Council's year was the successful annual meeting held at Green Street Chapel, Aberdare, in October. Members of the Friends will all agree that the key element of these meetings is the session chaired by Professor M. Wynn Thomas. Over the years, Professor Thomas has been joined by some of Wales's finest writers, and this year's guest author was Dr John Pikoulis, an authority on the life and work of Alun Lewis who was born in Cwmaman near Aberdare.

During the session, Dr Pikoulis gave a fascinating overview of Lewis's life in the area, as well as his experiences in the Second World War. He is now recognised as one of the war's finest writers, and one who captured in his literature the horrors witnessed by so many of his contemporaries.

Lewis's period in India was also discussed, as well as the influence on his writing of his relationship with Freda Aykroyd – Lewis was at the same time in regular correspondence with his wife, Gweno, back home in

Wales. Tragically, Lewis died in Burma in 1944 when he was only 29, and the circumstances surrounding his death were veiled in secrecy for many years.

The Friends had the pleasure of welcoming many local residents to the event in Aberdare, and their fond reminiscences of Alun Lewis and his family were a valuable addition to the afternoon.

'It was a privilege to be at the meeting and to share the warmth and enthusiasm of all who were present,' said Ion Thomas, Chair of the Friends. 'Members of several local associations and societies came along, and they clearly appreciated the fact that the Friends had made an effort to arrange an event in their area – they want us to return again soon. This goes to show that visiting different parts of Wales is an important aspect of the Friends' work.'

The reception organised by the Friends at the Books Council's stand at the National Eisteddfod in Meifod was also a great success. Presenter and author Tudur Owen spoke with enthusiasm about the importance of reading, and the contribution made by publishers and the Council to the book industry in Wales.



My favourite books

“There is no frigate like a book to take us lands away.”
(Emily Dickinson)

I was named after a parent's favourite literary character and, like Pratchett's bookseller Aziraphale (in *Good Omens*), I am a reading hoarder. Following my very early encounters with the characters Sam and Mair, as well as hearing Sunday school stories, it did not seem long before I was encountering Wil Cwac Cwac, *Teulu'r Cwppwrdd Cornel*, I. D. Hooson's *Cerddi a Baledi* and a favourite word – aardvark – on the first tissue-paper-thin page of Mam's heavy red dictionary. I lost myself in *The Reader's Digest Great World Atlas* (Nain's gift), and experienced the world in *Gweld y Byd* with 'Anti Capal', namely Miss Mamie Williams. Inevitable Enid Blyton books and less likely *Marvel* comics were tempered by classics such as *Heidi* and *Little Women*, plus *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*, which really belonged to my brothers. I enjoyed myths, legends and fairytales: *Straeon y Gwledydd* by Alwyn Thomas (mostly written for *Awr y Plant* on the BBC); *Once Long Ago: Folk and Fairy Tales of the World* retold by Roger Lancelyn Green; Grimm's fairy

tales and Gwyn and Thomas Jones's *Mabinogion*; the *Collins Spurrell Welsh Dictionary* (a Standard Four prize which accompanied me to secondary school), as well as Mrs Jones Cymraeg and Mr Lewis English's monthly book reports – it never dawned on me to read just the first and last chapters! – and the contents of the school library. Ever since, like poet Emily Dickinson and Roald Dahl's Matilda, I have travelled on book ships through space and time – and collected them.

Some favourites? Pictures have power: Jeannie Baker's wordless *Window*; Anthony Browne's life-enhancing *Piggybook* and *Gorilla*; Libby Hathorn and Gregory Rogers's all too real *Way Home*; the shocking elephant war in *Tusk Tusk* by David McKee, creator of everyone's favourite, Elmer; and the magic of Margaret Jones and Jac Jones are for grown-ups too. Having read Frances Hardinge's Costa Prize winner *The Lie Tree*, only the second children's book after Philip Pullman's *The Amber Spyglass* to win outright, and this year's Tir na n-Og award shortlists, it will be a pleasure to reflect on developments in Wales forty years since its establishment.

I have relished more than the recipes in Manon Steffan Ros's *Blasu*, spent *The Last Hundred Days* in Ceaușescu's Bucharest with Patrick McGuinness and set off from Dolgellau to Australia with Bethan Gwanas (*I Botany Bay*). New versions and re-imaginings, such as Siân Lewis's *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* illustrated energetically by Valériane Leblond, and Seren's New Stories from the Mabinogion series, have refreshed old stories. I wish I was yet to read some books: Helen Macdonald's memoir *H is for Hawk*, confronting grief with its echoes of T. H. White, and *A Kestrel for a Knave*; Hilary Mantel, Barbara Kingsolver, Owen Sheers and David Mitchell's works; *Star of the Sea* (the 1847 murder mystery voyage from Ireland) by Joseph O'Connor; the war-scarred *Awst yn Anogia* (Gareth F. Williams) and *The Garden of Evening Mists* (Tan Twan Eng), and the breathtaking volume of short stories, *The Redemption of Galen Pike* by Carys Davies, to name but a few.

Where next? Reading club choices, the last of Terry Pratchett's works; and Connelly's Harry Bosch and Camilleri's Montalbano, the crime investigators, are waiting to take me



to the States and Sicily again. Then there are the Christmas gifts and Cerys Matthews's *Hook, Line and Singer* – a sing-along book picked up recently ...

'No person who can read is ever successful at cleaning out an attic', but many books have been gifted and donated – never binned – post-retirement: e-texts and use of the library mean there is some more space, but I still cannot resist books. Call me Matilda.

Lorna Herbert Egan

Quick Reads 2016



Authors of the Quick Reads/Stori Sydyn volumes with the Minister for Education, Huw Lewis

The 2016 Quick Reads and Stori Sydyn titles, published by Accent Press and Y Lolfa, are *Gorau Chwarae Cydchwarae* by sports broadcaster Dylan Ebenezer, *Y Gosb* by popular Welsh-language novelist Geraint Evans, *The Paratrooper's Princess* by award-winning writer and journalist Horatio Clare, and *Rugby Dads* by sports writer Jos Andrews. It's a diverse selection that will hopefully appeal to those who aren't that keen on reading.

The books published as part of the series this year include different generations of Welsh rugby heroes talking about their relationships with their fathers, both on and off the pitch (*Rugby Dads*); a novel about a girl who is attacked and decides to take

matters into her own hands (*Y Gosb*); the story of a young soldier who falls in love with a music journalist but whose inability to read and write hinders his new relationship (*The Paratrooper's Princess*); and an account of the Wales football team as it travels to France, hoping to bury the disappointment, pain and failure of the past (*Gorau Chwarae Cydchwarae*).

The four new titles were officially launched by the Minister for Education and Skills, Huw Lewis, at Yr Oriel in the Senedd on Thursday, 25 February. The initiative celebrates its tenth anniversary this year and it was wonderful to see representatives from organisations such as Wales TUC, Learning & Work Institute, the Shannon Trust, The Reading Agency and many more who have found the Quick Reads/Stori Sydyn books beneficial when engaging with reluctant readers. With one in six adults still struggling to read, this campaign aims to break down



barriers by producing short, gripping books which are available in bookshops and online for just £1. They are also available from libraries across Wales.

Angharad Tomos from the Welsh Books Council said: 'Quick Reads/Stori Sydyn are short, snappy books with fewer than 100 pages each, and are especially written for people who wish to improve their skills and confidence around reading. By taking a bite-sized approach to reading we aim to overcome any confidence issues and show that reading can be a fun and inspiring activity for all.'