

Helgard at the helm

As you might imagine, I was delighted to receive a phone call from the chairman of the Books Council, Professor M. Wynn Thomas, last autumn offering me the position of Chief Executive. After moving to Wales in 2005 and having worked for the Council until 2009, I was fully aware of the crucial role it has played in developing the book industry in Wales over more than 50 years and it was an exciting opportunity to join the organisation.

Starting in any new role is challenging, but my return to the Books Council has been an easy transition due to the competence and dedication of its staff, who, from day one, have been unfailing in their support and professionalism.

I was, of course, fortunate to start during a time of relative plenty, with the Books Council having received an increase in funding for 2017/18. This brought a number of exciting new opportunities: a tender for 20 books for learners, children's publisher Firefly added as programme publisher, funding for new posts in a number of different publishing houses, a reversal of cuts that had previously been made to Welsh-language digital and print magazines, as well as additional training opportunities for the book industry.

A much welcomed one-off grant in capital funding also meant that we are able to invest in a number of infrastructure improvements: a new mezzanine level was installed in the Distribution Centre in April and phase two of the renovation of Castell Brychan is currently taking place. The IT infrastructure also had some much needed upgrades, with new servers installed and improvements made to both the reporting and finance systems.

It has been a rewarding and stimulating experience to meet with Welsh Government officials, publishers, booksellers and third sector organisations, not to mention attending the CILIP conference and presenting this year's Tir na n-Og Awards in Llandudno, and at the Urdd Eisteddfod in Bridgend.

The recent publication of the much anticipated *Independent Review of Support for Publishing and Literature in Wales* has outlined some new opportunities for the Books Council. Whilst in principle they complement the current work, further discussion is needed for a clearer understanding of how and when these schemes may be integrated into our current remit, subject to the requisite funding being available.

To be entrusted with leading the Books Council during times of great technological and political change is both an honour and a responsibility – after more than 20 years of working in the publishing sector I relish the



Helgard Krause, Chief Executive of the WBC

opportunity to use my skills and experience to be an effective and passionate advocate for the publishing industry in Wales.

Helgard Krause



From the Chair Ion Thomas

It's great to have this opportunity to welcome Helgard Krause as the new Chief Executive of the Books Council. A native of the Rheinland-Pfalz area of Germany, Helgard has worked in the marketing and publishing world, and these experiences will undoubtedly prove helpful to us all. The Friends wish her well in her new role, and look forward to supporting her.

I also had a new experience recently, having received a book as a gift which I wouldn't normally choose to read. Prejudices were put aside, and to my surprise, I enjoyed reading

the book. The experience has inspired me to be more adventurous when choosing books, and I encourage you to do the same!

One complaint which is often heard is that the children and young people of today don't read, even though they always seem to be on their phones. Reading, however, requires a longer period of concentration, and as a result is a great way of unwinding, while developing other key skills at the same time. The downside is that finding time to read a book requires an element of commitment and organisation.

I often notice individuals in cafes or on trains who are totally engrossed in their books. Shouldn't we, as Friends, lead by example by buying books which we wouldn't normally choose, and show the world that reading is a great activity by turning to them at every opportunity, wherever we might be?

I close this short piece by inviting all Friends to visit the Welsh Books Council's stand at the National Eisteddfod, and to attend its annual meeting.

Tales on the Rails – an author tour to remember!

In April this year, the Welsh Books Council organised an author tour with a difference as part of their successful @LlyfrDaFabBooks scheme. Past events have included school visits by authors such as Siân Lewis, Griff Rowland and Dan Anthony, but on this particular tour, the pupils had the opportunity to meet the author whilst on a train journey!

The lucky young travellers were pupils from Ysgol Bro Hyddgen at Machynlleth and Ysgol Tan y Castell, Harlech. With 2017 earmarked by the Welsh Government as the Year of Legends, the author selected for this special event was Meinir Wyn Edwards, author of *Deg Chwedl o Gymru* (Y Lolfa), which reached the shortlist of the 2017 Tir na n-Og Award. Meinir has also written several English-language books on Welsh legends and folk tales, so that all children can appreciate Wales's rich literary heritage.

Meinir held the workshops 'on the move', and pupils from both schools had the unique

opportunity to learn about legends specific to their own area in an exciting and innovative way. Harlech castle and MOMA art gallery at Machynlleth formed the stopover parts of the days where pupils 'refuelled', visited the pop-up bookshops and continued on their learning 'journeys'.

Diane Bailey of Penrallt Books, Machynlleth, said: 'We really enjoyed contributing something to such a worthwhile project which encourages reading while learning about Welsh folklore and legends, and where children experience how much fun public transport can be, especially train travel.'

The project was a collaboration between the Welsh Books Council and Arriva Trains Wales. Arriva Trains Wales Schools Liaison Officer, Phil Caldwell, has worked closely with many schools and libraries along the line, and this special project was a great opportunity to further improve pupils' awareness with presentations on safety being given at participating schools. The views from the carriage were unforgettable

– last year, the journey between Dyfi Junction and Pwllheli was included in the *Guardian's* ten most 'epic' train journeys in the world!

According to Helen Jones, the new head of the Children's Books and Reading Promotion Department:

'One of the main objectives of the @LlyfrDaFabBooks scheme is to promote reading, and we have witnessed the positive impact on reading that our author tours have made, as well as raising the profile of children's and young adult literature. We will certainly be continuing our work with these projects in future in order to support teaching and learning in fun and innovative ways.'



Deliciously Sweet Pizza!

Cardiff-raised author Giancarlo Gemin scooped the annual Tir na n-Og Award for the second time.

Organised by the Welsh Books Council, the awards celebrate the best English-language title with an authentic Welsh background. In a prestigious event held at Llandudno Library on 11 May, this year's award was presented to Giancarlo Gemin for his second novel, *Sweet Pizza*, published by Nosy Crow.

Sweet Pizza is the funny yet moving story of 14-year-old Joe, a fourth generation descendant of Italian immigrants to south Wales. The story effectively interweaves Joe's current problems concerning his family's increasingly dilapidated cafe and the plight of his grandfather Beppe. His grandfather's World War II experiences, based on the true events of the *SS Arandora Star* which was torpedoed en route to Canada during the war, are cleverly voiced in flashback fashion through tape recordings as he recovers from a stroke in hospital.

The panel of judges agreed that *Sweet Pizza* skilfully deals with aspects of contemporary life in Wales, and is brimming with personality.

John Humphreys, Chair of the Tir na n-Og English-language Panel, stated of the winner, 'Giancarlo Gemin effectively engages the



At the Tir na n-Og Award ceremony. From left to right: Kathryn Parry (CILIP), Helgard Krause (WBC), Giancarlo Gemin (prizewinner), Lorna Herbert Egan (Chair, Children's Books Panel), Rona Aldrich (WBC Vice-chair)

reader in this feel-good novel with a strong storyline and well drawn characters. A notable feature of the novel is the emphasis on how problems can be overcome when working together.'

Giancarlo Gemin said, 'I'm delighted to win the Tir na n-Og Award for the second time! It's great for me to win this important prize. I'm very moved and proud to receive such an acknowledgement from my native country.'



My Favourite Books

Wendy Crockett

It's fortunate that I won't be asked onto *Desert Island Discs* since I would never be able to settle on eight pieces of music. I find it equally – if not more – difficult to settle on my favourite books, so I'm going to cop out and mention some of those which I've recently enjoyed. Clement Attlee is the only famous person I have ever met, and then only because I helped him into his taxi and set the rug over his knees when he had been kind enough to attend a London University student event as an honoured guest. He is perhaps the most unlikely person to have become (arguably) the best leader of the Labour Party there has ever been. *Citizen Clem*, the biography by John Bew, provides real insight into how this modest, patriotic man, proud witness of both Queen Victoria's jubilees, became



the politician who helped bring the modern welfare state into being.

It's been a good year for biographies. I have just finished *Martin Luther* by the Catholic journalist Peter Stanford. Most people's knowledge of this forbidding sixteenth-century figure is probably sketchy, to say the least, yet as Stanford shows in his most readable and balanced study, this reluctant rebel has had an immense influence on the lives of everyone in the West.

I am enjoying Carol Ann Duffy and Gillian Clarke's lovely anthology, *The Map and the Clock*, with its diverse collection of voices; how good to have something which does not interpret 'British' as meaning 'English, with a bit of Scots thrown in'. The readings by Ifor ap Glyn in English and Welsh at the launch in Aberystwyth were a delight.

Having learned Welsh as an adult, I have struggled to reach a reading level commensurate with the way I read English – perhaps I never will – but it is a great pleasure now to be able to enjoy Welsh-language novels. For me, the test is whether the book would have lost its essence in translation. Anything by Mihangel Morgan passes the test, and I'm looking forward to *60* which I've just got hold of. *Ymbelydredd* by Guto Dafydd, set in Manchester (very sadly in the news as I write) also made me extremely glad to be able to read Welsh.

Finally, I have just finished Dominic Sandbrook's witty and intelligent overview of popular culture, *The Great British Dream Factory*, and am now starting on *The Essex Serpent* (Sarah Perry) which I hope will justify the hype!

Gregynog

Around Easter every year academics and students make their way through the winding roads of Montgomeryshire to Gregynog Hall for the annual conference of the Association of Welsh Writing in English.

The conference has been held since 1986 and has welcomed an array of delegates and keynote speakers. During that time it has also attracted many very different authors, from R. S. Thomas to Niall Griffiths. It provides an opportunity for those interested in the field, at all levels, to come together to share and discuss their research. It has been an important focus for an area of literature and scholarly interest that has long had to fight for recognition.

In 1989, writing in the Welsh Books Council's *Llais Llyfrau / Book News from Wales*, Dr John Pikoulis described the task ahead of the newly established association as formidable: 'There are relatively few of us in the Association and we are all burdened with many other interests. Nonetheless, we have made a start and are in good spirits ... We hope, in the end, to have something substantial to show for our efforts: the establishment of Welsh literature in English as a discipline worthy of study, like any other.'

Almost thirty years later, it is therefore encouraging to see that the well-attended 2017 conference featured papers presented not only by established academics in



the field, such as one of its most committed ambassadors, Professor M. Wynn Thomas, and writers such as Dr Jasmine Donahay, but also a great number of emerging scholars, which suggests that despite some of the challenges that the field still faces, there is a great deal of interest and promise for the future.

In recognition of the vital role that academics working in the field have made to developing English-language books from Wales, the Council is pleased to organise the bookshop at the Association's annual conference. Just as Welsh writing in English has developed as a scholarly interest, the publishing industry in Wales has gone from strength to strength, which is evident in the selection of titles available to buy in the bookshop, which improve in production quality, variety and in sheer number every year! Not only is the bookshop at the conference a showcase for titles from Wales and an opportunity to sell books, it is also an opportunity for those working in universities in Wales to identify titles to add to course reading lists, which helps to extend knowledge and interest in books from Wales to new generations of students, who may themselves help to contribute to this important field one day.

Catalogues published to coincide with events in 2017

Two brochures have recently been published by the Books Council, namely *Myths and Legends*, to celebrate Wales's Year of Legends in 2017, and *Hedd Wyn and WWI*, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the death of poet Hedd Wyn.

The aim of the *Myths and Legends* catalogue is to promote the stories, traditions, history and culture of Wales, and to ensure that this distinct rich heritage is passed on to the next generation, as well as to all those who visit Wales in this exciting Year of Legends. The brochure, which lists titles for all ages, is published in conjunction with Visit Wales, with support from singer-songwriter Cerys Matthews.

The *Hedd Wyn and WWI* brochure aims to raise awareness of Hedd Wyn's life and work as we approach the centenary of his death on the Belgian battlefield. Full details of a number of relevant titles are noted in the booklet.

We hope that both brochures will urge people to visit their bookshops and buy copies of the books advertised.

Summer catalogues

60,000 copies of the Council's *Summer Reads* leaflet will again be distributed via the *Western Mail* and *Daily Post*, and the Welsh-language supplement, *Llyfrau'r Haf*, will be distributed via the *papurau bro*. Copies of the leaflets are provided to bookshops and libraries, and will also be available on our stands at the Royal Welsh Show and National Eisteddfod.

'There is an excellent selection of books this summer,' said Helena O'Sullivan, the Books Council's Head of Sales and Marketing. 'Remember that all the titles featured in both leaflets, and many more, will be available on our stands at the Show and at the Eisteddfod.'



Hay 2017

The 2017 Hay Festival, which took place from 25 May to 4 June, also coincided with the festival's 30th birthday. Once again this year, in conjunction with the festival organisers, books from Wales in both English and Welsh, spanning the spectrum of adults' and children's titles, had a very visible presence on the Hay site.

There were numerous events on each day of the festival which involved publishers from Wales. These covered a broad and diverse range of subjects, and began with authors from Wales such as Daniel Morden and Phil Steele entertaining hundreds of young readers during the opening days.

The opening weekend saw Horatio Clare top the bestseller list with his book *Myths & Legends of the Brecon Beacons*, leaving all the celebrities trailing in the wake of this Welsh author as he took festival goers on a journey to discover the secrets hidden in the rolling hills of the Beacons.

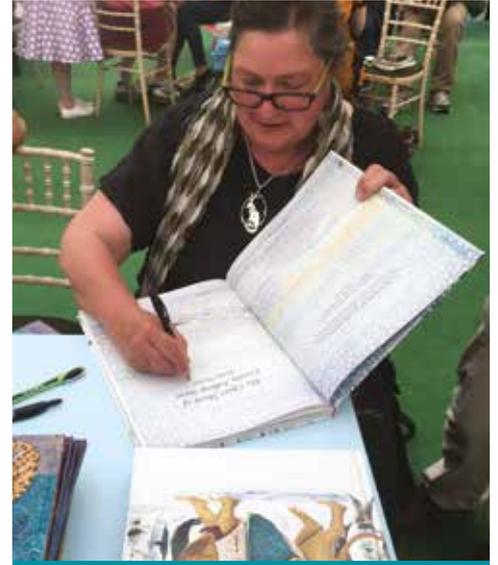
Another writer making an impact on the

opening weekend was Alys Conran, author of *Pigeon* and *Pijin*, who was included on the shortlist for the prestigious Dylan Thomas literary prize earlier this year. Jackie Morris, Nicola Davies and Cathy Fisher illustrated their talks, showing their audience how they create their stunning artwork. Poet Philip Gross, in a conversation entitled 'A Quaker Life', followed by a signing of his new book *A Bright Acoustic*, served once again to emphasise the diverse range of subjects and talents from the writers from Wales.

Other highlights from the Hay Festival week included a talk given by the former National Poet of Wales, Gillian Clarke. The current National Poet of Wales, Ifor ap Glyn, talked about the life, work and remarkable legacy of Hedd Wyn, and while 2017 may have marked the 30th year for the festival, it also marked the centenary of his death. The producers of the cult *Hinterland* and *Y Gwyll* thriller, together with photographer David Wilson, talked about the silent hit of this TV show – the landscapes of Ceredigion, reflecting on what the settings have brought to the show and the impact the show has had on this quiet part of Wales. They also signed copies

of their books *Hinterland – Ceredigion Landscapes* and *Y Gwyll – Tirweddau Ceredigion*.

In addition to the festival stock there were over 200 individual titles from Wales available for sale at the festival bookshop.



Jackie Morris at the Hay Festival

New Books from Firefly

Monkeys and jaguars headline Firefly's autumn list as we recover from a hectic and very exciting spring ... oh, and more than a sprinkling of hope!

Firefly's small list of around eight titles per year depends on promoting each and every title to the very best of our ability, and with five books already under our belt in 2017, our three autumn books span the age ranges in children's fiction.

We're so delighted that *Thimble Monkey Superstar* (May 2016) by Jon Blake, and illustrated by Martin Chatterton, has been shortlisted for the Lollies 2017 Laugh Out Loud awards, in the 6–8 age category. The book, set in Cardiff, is one of four titles in this category chosen by the judges, headed by none other than Michael Rosen, and will now battle for top spot as children across the UK get to vote on the shortlisted titles. The award is promoted by Scholastic who also stock the books for their school book fairs and clubs, with the winners announced in January 2018.

Hard on the very nimble heels of this success for Thimble we are publishing a second title in the series, *Thimble Holiday Havoc*, also by Jon Blake, in November 2017. This adventure sees Thimble head off to France with his adopted family Jams and his mum and dad, when Mum organizes a house swap. And when Thimble finds the keys to a speedboat, a drill and a makeshift burglar outfit, what could possibly go wrong? *Thimble Holiday Havoc* will be the second 2017 book in our Dragonfly series for 7–9-year-

olds, following *Dragon Red* by Shoo Rayner in March this year.

Moving onto our middle-grade books, we will be publishing *The Jewelled Jaguar* by Sharon Tregenza in September 2017. Sharon's first Firefly title, *The Shiver Stone* (Sept 2015) was highly commended for the Tir na n-Og award and has been a consistent favourite with readers. *The Jewelled Jaguar*, also for 8–12-year-olds, brings them a new adventure. When a huge sink hole opens up in Griffin's garden, nearly swallowing him and his mother, life gets tough. With his mum in hospital, Griffin has to stay with his uncle who he doesn't know, his cousin Cinnamon and her pet rat Ruby Ruby. Trying to discover why his mother and uncle don't speak, the cousins stumble on the mystery of the jewelled jaguar, a fabulous jewel-encrusted

dagger his mother found whilst diving, which may hold the key to both their family secrets. The novel follows no fewer than three middle-grade titles for Firefly this spring: *Aubrey and the Terrible Ladybirds* by Horatio Clare, *Alex Sparrow and the Really Big Stink* by Jennifer Killick and *Gaslight* by Eloise Williams, all of which have had great reviews so far.

Also in September 2017 we will be publishing *Hope*, a young adult novel by Rhian Ivory who hails from Swansea. Rhian's first YA novel with Firefly, *The Boy Who Draws the Future*, has been a big success, with several regional award-listings and a Carnegie nomination earlier this year. When Hope doesn't get into drama college and her friends do, all her plans fall apart. She's struggling with anger, grief over her father's death and a sense that her own body is against her. A boy she meets on the ferry gives her someone to talk to, and her mother's day job with a Singing Medicine group working in the local hospital finds a new outlet for her talents and thoughts.

The autumn will also see us promoting the Fairy Doors pack of *Sophie Finds a Fairy Door*, combined with an actual fairy door itself, in association with Penarth-based Fairydoorz.

Next year sees a busy spring for Firefly with the third and final books in our two trilogies, *Heart of Mars* by Paul Magrs and *The Territory* by Sarah Govett, along with a second title from Malachy Doyle, *Fug and the Thumps*, aimed at reluctant readers. There will also be a second Alex Sparrow title, *Alex Sparrow and the Furry Fury* from Jennifer Killick, and some very exciting new signings to watch out for as we aim to continue to grow our range and UK reputation for quality literature.

Firefly publisher, Penny Thomas

