

# THE FRIEND

Friends of the Welsh Books Council Newsletter

## Welcome

*I hope that reading this issue of **The Friend** will be a great encouragement to all the members of the Friends of the Books Council. As Friends we exist to support and promote the work of the Council, and the latest changes reported here certainly do that. But in addition we are sure that these changes will also see the publishing and bookselling industry develop and strengthen. These developments happened as a result of close cooperation between the Council and other organisations and the fact that the Welsh Assembly Government responded positively to such cooperation. We are also confident that this will lead to the further growth of reading, publishing and bookselling in Wales, which should also be very close to the hearts of the Friends.*

**ALUN CREUNANT DAVIES**  
**Chair,**  
**Friends of the Welsh Books Council**



Islwyn Ffowc Elis



Emyr Humphreys



Jan Morris

## Honorary Presidents

At the Annual Meeting it was decided unanimously to invite three of Wales's leading writers to become Honorary Presidents of the Friends. This was on the recommendation of the Steering Committee and the three invited were Dr Islwyn Ffowc Elis, Emyr Humphreys and Jan Morris. The contribution of all three, whose careers have been so varied, to the literatures of Wales during the second half of the twentieth century has been immense. Although they belong to the same generation they represent very different aspects of literature in Wales. Islwyn Ffowc Elis is regarded as a pioneering Welsh-language novelist, someone who 'dragged the Welsh novel into the twentieth century', as one

critic claimed. We also know of his important contributions as a literary critic. Emyr Humphreys also came into prominence as a young novelist before becoming a poet and prolific television dramatist. Since the publication of *The Little Kingdom* in 1946 he has been a central figure in Anglo-Welsh literature. Jan Morris became internationally recognised for remarkable travel books such as *Sultan in Oman* (1957) and *Venice* (1960) and later for more historical works such as *Pax Britannica* (1968). From the early 1980s she has produced numerous volumes that deal specifically with Wales. It is our pleasure and honour to welcome three such distinguished writers as our Honorary Presidents.

### The Honorary Presidents reflect on the work of the Books Council

'One of the most exciting stories in the history of our culture is the development of the Welsh Books Council, and now the Council has a strong bond of Friends to support its work. It gives me great pleasure to be one of their Honorary Presidents.'

Islwyn Ffowc Elis

'In an age of hectic technological development and global communication, the book remains by far the most effective literary vehicle. It is, therefore, very reassuring to know that in Wales we have a bilingual Books Council devoted to the well-being of the book.'

Emyr Humphreys

'The Books Council is not just an invaluable instrument for the distribution and understanding of books in both the languages of Wales: it is a declaration that the nation really does care about that fundamental of civilized life, the written word.'

Jan Morris

# Reading the Future

The editor of *The Friend*, Lyn Lewis Dafis, interviews Gwerfyl Pierce Jones, Director of the Books Council, regarding the recent developments in the books trade in Wales

The view from the office of the Director of the Welsh Books Council would surely be the envy of the chief executive officers of some of the world's most influential companies. Overlooking Aberystwyth's north beach towards the pier, Old College and castle, one can see the glorious coast of Cardigan Bay stretching into the distance. It was there I had a chat with Gwerfyl Pierce Jones who has been Director of the Council since 1987. It is a period that has witnessed many changes,; but the changes happening at the moment are possibly amongst the most far-reaching in the history of the Council.

In the eyes of many people, the Council has been seen as the archetypal Welsh-language institution, but that image is being challenged in the wake of major restructuring at the Arts Council of Wales which will mean that the Books Council will, for the first time, be administering grants for English-language literary works in Wales. 'I'm no stranger to the Arts Council, of course,' said Gwerfyl, 'as I once worked there as a Literature Officer. It is also important to note that the Books Council's departments have served publishing in both English and Welsh over the years. We have had experience of working with most people in Wales who are involved in any way with publishing – from authors and publishing houses to booksellers and readers. Distributing grants for literary material in both languages is therefore a natural extension of our present activities.'

I then dared to ask about the possibility of publishing grants for leisure reading in English. Gwerfyl's response was significant. 'That is not being discussed at the moment,' she said, 'but the fact that we are developing our role in publishing, marketing and reading means that we are building the infrastructure required for a strong book industry; the result of that will be further development and progress in publishing in Wales, in both English and Welsh. And that is how I see the future at the moment.'

But this is only one development amongst many. These changes, taken together, have led to what the Director calls 'possibly the most



important changes the Books Council has seen since its inception'. One of those significant changes was the increase in the Publishing Grant for Welsh-language books. With the support of the Welsh Assembly Government, additional resources have been allocated to allow publishers to commission experienced Welsh-language authors, many of whom are at present making a living writing for the media, to consider writing books in Welsh for adults or for younger readers.



Earlier this year the names of some of these commissioned authors were announced: they included Bethan Gwanas, Manon Rhys, Sonia Edwards, Penri Jones and Dafydd Huws.

Some new names are also included on the list.

The Director explains: 'These developments are part of a wider vision for the industry. In addition to a significant increase in the commissioning grant, there has been a similar increase in the resources to support the posts of editorial officers in our leading publishing houses. These posts will allow publishers to develop their programmes by being much more

proactive. From now on it will be possible for publishers to seek out new talent, instead of waiting for authors to approach them.'

These developments have coincided with a change in the Council's method of funding. Until recently the Council received its funding from a number of sources, including the Welsh local authorities and the Welsh Language Board, as well as from the Welsh Assembly Government. After the last local government reorganisation, this meant that the Council had to deal with twenty-two separate local authorities. Gwerfyl explains the consequences: 'Dealing with so many authorities on an individual basis involved a huge investment for us in terms of time and effort, and funding was vulnerable to say the least. But the change to direct funding from the Welsh Assembly Government has at last placed the Council on firmer financial foundations. At the same time I am glad that the traditional role played by local government has been maintained. Local authority representatives retain their place on the Council and its Executive Committee, and the staff of the various public libraries play a considerable part in the Council's activities. I very much hope that this will be the case well into the future.'

# Friends News

## Annual Meeting

The meeting of the Friends of the Welsh Books Council held in Aberystwyth on 11th May was in two parts. Initially, the Chairman, Mr Alun Creunant Davies, welcomed all those present and received reports from the various officers of the Friends. He paid a special tribute to Mr Jenkin M. Griffiths who was standing down as Secretary to the Friends, and to the Treasurer, Mr Richard Morgan. Following officers' reports the process of electing officers and members of the Steering Committee for the next three years was conducted and the following were elected:

Chairman – Alun Creunant Davies

Vice-Chairman – Professor M. Wynn Thomas

Secretary – Rheinalt Llwyd

Treasurer – Richard Morgan

Additional Committee Members:

Rev. Meirion Evans; Richard Huws; Dr Brynley F. Roberts

## My Favourite Books

Members of the Friends are invited to discuss their favourite books. This is the selection of Sandra Anstey, who works for the Welsh Joint Education Committee.

R. S. Thomas's writings must feature at the top of my list. His *Collected Poems* (Dent, 1993) offers the widest selection of his work, but for presentation of material I return to the 1968 publication of *The Mountains* from the Chilmark Press: here R. S. Thomas's prose is printed alongside ten drawings by John Piper, engraved on wood by Reynolds Stone. The result is magnificent.

I find myself referring regularly to *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales* (UWP, 1998) edited by Meic Stephens: it is an invaluable storehouse of information about so many aspects of Welsh literary life.

The work of Welsh artists is another area that fascinates me – one of the many consequences of being married to a sculptor! I welcome the growth of books exploring aspects of Welsh art (from Peter Lord's pioneering work to Mel Gooding's recent study of Ceri Richards) and add to my list *Welsh Artists Talking* (Seren, 2000). Here artists, in conversation with Tony Curtis, offer candid insights into their techniques and concerns.

My next choice is Brenda Chamberlain's *Tide Race*. I first



encountered this in my days as a research student and was delighted to find, in Jeff Towns's bookshop, a second-hand copy of the 1962 edition (Hodder and Stoughton), illustrated by the author's own paintings and drawings.

My final choice is from the growing range of writing for children that has relevance to Wales, an area that I have followed with great interest during the past decade. Pont has led the way in this field, and *One Moonlit Night* (Pont, 1991) is, in my view, one of their most memorable contributions. The text by T. Llew Jones has been skilfully adapted by Gillian Clarke and hauntingly illustrated by Jac Jones.

## Coming of age: Seren

It began in a spare bedroom of the editor of *Poetry Wales*: the work of a group of the country's young English-language poets demanded publication in more durable book form. Twenty-one years later Seren is one of Britain's leading poetry publishers (and the only one with a female poetry editor), and poetry sits alongside a wide-ranging and prize-winning list of fiction, biography, lit.crit., drama, history, current affairs, art and photography titles. The guiding editorial principle remains largely unchanged: to provide a platform for outstanding writers and writing from Wales, and to hold up a mirror to Wales as it devolves and develops.

The plan has been to publish as various a list of authors as possible; to give voice to authors who may have one or many books; to shed light on the good and the bad in Wales past and present. So, the Seren list has included old-timers like R.S. Thomas and the wonderful Jean Earle and young writers like twenty-something Owen Sheers and valleys-attitude novelist Richard John Evans, with some of the very first Seren authors – Minhinnick, Curtis, Pugh, Mike Jenkins – sandwiched in the middle. It includes celebrations, in the form of anthologies like *Love from Wales* and *Christmas in Wales*, and questioning writing from the likes of Patrick Hannan and Ed Thomas. And Seren has run development competitions to discover new talent like the excellent novelist Gary Ley.

When Seren first began, the publishing landscape in Wales looked rather less well populated. There were strategic anthologies needed like *Anglo-Welsh Poetry 1480-1980*, Tony Conran's translations (Welsh Verse), the Green Bridge story anthology and later *Twentieth Century Anglo-Welsh Poetry* and the all-Wales *Oxygen*. More recently has come the Seren Classics series, home to fiction by Gwyn Thomas, Caradoc Evans, Rhys Davies, Sian James, Dannie Abse et al.

The ground-breaking Seren art list began in earnest in 1995 with a major art history of David Jones on the centenary of his birth: no publisher in London would contemplate a work on this major figure. There followed defining collections of interviews and essays with Welsh artists which have contributed to the rise of the visual arts in Wales, and books on Arthur Giardelli and Iwan Bala. This autumn sees the revival of Joseph Herman's brilliantly written *Related Twilights* in a new, illustrated edition and, in contrast, *Process*, an exploration of installation artist Tim Davies.

The autumn also sees *Haba: Margam Revisited*, a photographic essay of one of the earliest homes of photography; a first novel – *The Dylan Thomas Murders*; Mervyn Matthews's extraordinary childhood memoir, *Mervyn's Lot*; David Parry-Jones's exploration of the second golden era of Welsh rugby, *The Gwilliam Seasons*; the inimitable Peter Finch's take on his home town of Cardiff; the inspirational anthology, *Birdsong* (poetry for twitchers); and *North by South*, the selected poems of John Davies. The commitment to cultural and literary publishing remains strong.

And what of the future? New fiction by Emyr Humphreys and Roger Granelli, new poetry from Frances Williams and Tim Liardet, essays on art by Iwan Bala and Dylan Thomas anniversary books which will make us all look at him afresh. It will be a continuation of developing and publishing the best in our field. Oh yes, and *Poetry Wales* is still going strong, too.

Mick Felton

# About Honno: The Welsh Women's Press

## Patricia Duncker

Patricia Duncker lives in Aberystwyth. Her latest novel is *The Deadly Space Between* (Picador, 2002). She is now Professor of Creative Writing at UEA.

I first heard about Honno in 1991 when I came to work at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth. I had been involved in feminist writing and publishing for many years and had been on the board of Onlywomen Press, the first women's press to be set up in Britain during the 1970s. Honno, the Welsh Women's Press, was established in 1986 by a group of women who felt strongly that women in Wales needed wider opportunities to see their writing in print and to become involved in the publishing process. Initially, all the work was carried out by women on a voluntary basis, until Honno won a grant from the Arts Council of Wales in 1994 to fund the post of an Editor/Development Officer. Honno is still a non-profit making community co-operative that raises funds by selling shares at £5 a time to women all over the world, and the press is still managed by an unpaid committee of women, some of whom were the original founding members.

Janet Thomas is now the English-language editor and Gwenllïan Dafydd is the Welsh-language editor with a brief to seek out new Welsh-language writers and to investigate the possibility of re-publishing more Welsh-language classic texts by women. At present, although we've published many significant books in Welsh, particularly in our classics series and for children, Honno is not perceived as a Welsh-language publisher and receives no unsolicited Welsh-language manuscripts. We want this to change.

The Press has achieved recognition and acclaim. In 1994 Honno published the first-ever anthology of short stories in English by women from Wales. This collection, *Luminous and Forlorn*, edited by Elin ap Hywel, won the Raymond Williams Community Award in 1995 and was also one of 12 books chosen for the Feminist Book Festival promotion in 1995. And in 2002 Honno won the Pandora Women in Publishing Award.

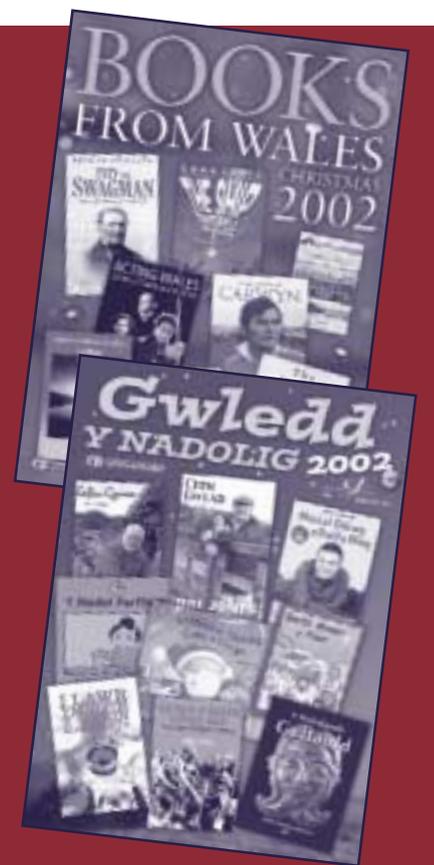
Honno's aim is to give women the chance to say what they want to say. If we judge the book to be excellent, we don't restrict ourselves to any particular styles or genres. We publish classics and contemporary work, literary and genre fiction, autobiography, biography and general

non-fiction. Finding new writers and giving them the necessary encouragement and feedback is a key element in our work.

Many national publishers lack the faith that Wales can be a commercial setting, but we feel that it is important that Welsh readers see their own world reflected in fiction. We are currently working on a crime novel and a sci-fi novel, both from first novelists, and a techno-thriller. We'd like to publish many more. Our autobiographical anthologies are among our most significant and popular books. These books have recorded a wide variety of Welsh women's experiences that would otherwise have been lost, and represent an important historical record. Forthcoming titles include *My Experience of Sex* and *Welsh Women Abroad*. In children's books we are concentrating in the key age of 5–12, which is when children often stop reading. We look for work that reflects a Welsh identity, or rather a wide variety of differing Welsh identities. We are also developing a series of books for 4–7 year olds.

We also wish to publish fiction aimed at older women, an area neglected by national publishers as unprofitable. These are readers hungry for books and it is something that a small press with its smaller print runs can afford to support. We will consider books about Wales in the '30s, '40s, and 1950s, as well as fiction and non-fiction about contemporary issues facing women who are over retirement age. So far as poetry is concerned, we'd like to develop the anthologies; a classic anthology, *Welsh Women's Poetry*, is to be published in March 2003. We would like to continue the pattern that has developed in the short stories series and develop collections of 3 to 6 women poets, to give new poets a chance to put together a collection, supported by publishing better-known, established writers alongside them. Honno has been fortunate in the support we have had from leading Welsh writers. We are very grateful to them.

My role at Honno has been that of guest editor and enthusiastic advocate of the aims and ambitions of the Press. Janet and I will be editing the next short fiction anthology on the theme of 'the other women'. We have already had many fine contributions, some from writers we do not know and have never read before. There is nothing else that is as exciting and rewarding as this process of discovering new talent.



## A Selection of Christmas Books

Once again there will be an excellent selection of books published this Christmas, with something to suit everyone's taste.

The Books Council have again produced the *Books from Wales* supplement, featuring the English-language books of Welsh interest that have been published recently. The 60,000 copies produced have been distributed through the *Western Mail*, and copies have also been sent to bookshops and libraries throughout Wales. We are pleased to enclose your complementary copy of the supplement in the Friends' information pack.

On the Welsh-language side, the Books Council have produced 80,000 copies of *Gwledd y Nadolig*, which have been distributed through the network of Welsh community newspapers, the *papurau bro*.

'We hope that you'll enjoy the opportunity of browsing through the supplements,' said Phil Davies, Head of Marketing at the Books Council. 'We are confident that there are plenty of good books in store for you this Christmas.'