

THE FRIEND

Friends of the Welsh Books Council Newsletter

From the Chair

It is always a pleasure to present a new issue of the *Friends'* newsletter. As usual, you'll be able to read the latest news about the Friends as well as current information about the work of the Books Council. There is also an opportunity to learn more about our members and the duties of Books Council staff.

A significant pleasure this time is to congratulate our vice-chair, Professor M. Wynn Thomas, on his appointment as the Chair of the Welsh Books Council. For those of us who know of Wynn's contribution to the Friends, it is most appropriate that it is he who succeeds Dr Lionel Madden. His commitment to the Friends is also a mark of his commitment to the Books Council. May we wish him well in the new post.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all those members of the Friends who have wished me well over the last few months. Your kind words are much appreciated.



ALUN CREUNANT DAVIES
Chair, Friends of the Books Council

Electing New Members

As the term of office for members of the Steering Committee draws to an end we will shortly be starting the process of appointing new members.

We have approached the present members to see whether or not they wish to be considered for a further term, and we will in due course contact all

members to see if they wish to nominate any new members.

The new members will be elected at the General Meeting in the Autumn. We will also have an opportunity at that meeting to thank the present members for their work and support.



Poet, illustrator and children
celebrate World Book Day

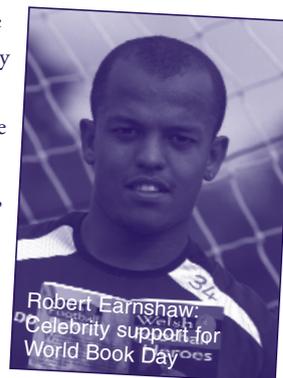
World Book Day 2005 – celebrating books and reading!

With the aid of thousands of adults and tens of thousands of children in schools and playgroups, the seventh World Book Day proved as successful as previous ones! The celebrations were launched with an inspiring lecture by Professor Derec Llwyd Morgan, and amongst the other highlights was the simultaneous announcement of the Academi's Book of the Year long list, at Cardiff and Wrexham.

Booksellers and publishers organised a wide variety of activities, and the children's authors tour, which visited almost fifty

locations, was especially successful.

Spread the word, a new campaign for 2005, enabled members of the public to use specially produced postcards in order to recommend specific titles to friends and colleagues. 125,000 bilingual cards were produced and distributed through libraries and bookshops across Wales. The high profile which World Book Day has secured amongst the press and media offers an excellent opportunity to focus specifically on books, reminding everyone of the pleasures of reading.



MY FAVOURITE BOOKS

Tony Brown

I have always had great admiration for both the poetry and the fiction of Christopher Meredith; while he is probably best known for his fine novel *Shifts* (1988), about the slow decline of industrial life in south Wales, I think his second novel, *Griffri*



(Seren, 1991), is a magnificent achievement. Set in twelfth-century Gwent – vividly and sometimes shockingly evoked – and narrated by the court bard of one of the minor Welsh lords, it is still very much a novel of our times, about the uncertain nature of truth and our need for the patterns fiction makes.

One of the achievements in the field of Welsh writing in the last decade has been the re-establishment of the reputation of Rhys Davies. His *Collected Stories* (3 vols. Gomer 1996–8), edited by Meic Stephens, contains a vivid portrayal of life in the Valleys in the first half of the twentieth century, including an acute awareness of the plight of women in a society whose conventions and sexual codes are structured in the interests of men. Few writers – certainly in Wales – have portrayed sexual tensions with the vividness that Rhys Davies achieves in these stories, which are by turn funny, sardonic and passionate.

From fiction to poetry: I sometimes think that Tony Conran's achievements as a translator and critic have meant that his own poetry has not always received the critical attention it deserves. It is a substantial body of work, of course, and there are fine poems throughout. For me, his volume *Castles* (Gomer, 1993) is one of the major achievements in Welsh writing in English since the War: modernist in technique, rooted in history and rich in literary allusion, it is a sequence which is also deeply, and movingly, personal.

And finally, R. S. Thomas's *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (Dent, 1993), a volume that is literally rarely out of reach on my desk. While his reputation in some quarters is for spare austerity, I am frequently struck by the power of emotion which flows beneath the surface of so many of these poems. There are those lovely, delicate late poems to his first wife, of course. But the depth of feeling is there too in his spiritual reflection. In 'The Other', the poet lies awake at night listening to the sounds of the sea:

And the thought comes
of that other being who is awake, too,
letting our prayers break on him,
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity.

PLANET BOOKS

John Barnie introduces us to one of Wales's smaller publishing houses

Planet Books was established in 1994 as an off-shoot of our main publication venture, the cultural magazine *Planet, the Welsh internationalist*. The aim was to extend our profile by publishing books that reflect the range of Planet's interests. Since book production has to be fitted around the bi-monthly cycle of the magazine, this has inevitably been a small-scale affair, with a new book appearing on average every eight months.

Our first publication was Mike Jenkins's *Graffiti* narratives, a collection of poems in the Merthyr dialect, which established Mike as the heir to Idris Davies. (We published a second collection, *Coulda bin Summin*, in 2001.) This was followed in 1995 by *Words with pictures*, Peter Lord's study of Welsh images and images of Wales in the British popular press from 1640 to 1860, which brought to light many images relevant to Wales which had never before been reproduced or analysed.

In these early years we were very much feeling our way as to the kinds of books we should concentrate on. A chance encounter with John Rutherford of the Centre for Galician Studies at Oxford University led to our third book, *Them*, by Xosé Luís Méndez Ferrín. Ferrín is one of the masters of modern Galician fiction (he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1999) and this selection of his short stories, translated by John Rutherford and his team, is the first English-language edition of his work. We have now established a Modern Galician Classics series which so far includes *Things* by

Alfonso R. Castelao (2001) and *Wounded wind* by Carlos Casares, two of the leading figures in the Galician literary renaissance of the twentieth century.

One aim of the press has been to encourage new talent. In 1997 we published Peter Morgan's first book, *A barrel of stones*, based on his experience of the Bosnian war as a Channel 4 reporter, and in 2000 *The Red Jag*, a first collection of stories by the Newport-born writer Ray French. Both went on to secure contracts with major London publishers. One of the limitations of being a small publisher is that talented writers understandably tend to move on. One of the pleasures, on the other hand, is that you have the satisfaction of having published them first!

In this context mention must be made of Charlotte Williams's first book, *Sugar and slate*, a memoir which explores the complexities of the author's Welsh-Guyanese background, which won the Arts Council of Wales Book of the Year in 2003 and which has been our best selling book to date.

And the future? Planet has just published the first new edition since 1920 of Caradoc Evans's *My Neighbours* which will be followed up in the late autumn by a new edition of his novella *Morgan Bible* coupled with *Journal 1939–44*, both edited by John Harris and containing some surprises, including two stories suppressed by the publisher from the original edition of *My Neighbours* 'on grounds of taste'.





Professor Dai Smith (centre) with Alun Pugh (right) the Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport and Richard Davies, Parthian, discussing the Library of Wales project



CYNGOR LLYFRAU CYMRU
WELSH BOOKS COUNCIL

INVITATION

It gives us great pleasure to welcome you to the Books Council's stand at the Eryri National Eisteddfod.

An excellent opportunity to see a display of the latest books, exchange your book vouchers and enjoy a cup of tea.

The Library of Wales

Dai Smith is Series Editor of *The Library of Wales* and – since St. David's Day 2005 – Research Professor in the Centre for Research in to the English Literature and Language of Wales at the University of Swansea. He introduces the new series.

The Library of Wales is a Welsh Assembly Government project designed to ensure that all of that rich and extensive literature of Wales which has been written in English will now be made constantly available to readers in and beyond Wales. It will be thought provoking, enjoyable, defining, exploratory, our own. Sustaining this wider literary heritage is clearly understood by the Welsh Assembly Government to be a key component in creating and disseminating an ongoing sense of modern Welsh culture and history for the future Wales which is now emerging from contemporary society.

Through these texts – largely unavailable, or out-of-print, or merely forgotten – the Library of Wales will bring back into play the voices and actions of the human experience that has made us 'in all our complexity' a Welsh people. Only this literature can give the essential expression of that humanity.

The Library of Wales will include prose as well as poetry, essays as well as fiction,

anthologies as well as memoirs, drama as well as journalism. It will complement the names and texts that are already in the public domain and seek to include the best of Welsh writing in English as well showcasing the unjustly neglected.

This series will, as it proceeds over the years, cover Wales in all its aspects with writers as divers as Ron Berry and Raymond Williams, as connected as Alun Richards and Elaine Morgan, as profound as Emyr Humphreys and Alun Lewis, as savage and comic as Gwyn Thomas and Rhys Davies, as epic as Lewis Jones and Alexander Cordell, as probing as Hilda Vaughan and Dorothy Edwards, as urban as Dannie Absie and as rural as Geraint Goodwin. There will be no boundaries in the intention of the Library of Wales to open up the borders that have denied some of our best writers future presence in a coming Wales. The Library of Wales has been created with that Wales in mind: a young country not afraid to remember what it might yet become.

Meet the Authors

Awards will be presented for the first time this year to acknowledge excellence within the publishing industry. The Awards, organised by the Books Council, will include the best sellers in both languages, best cover and best editor. We hope that the Awards will give well-deserved recognition to the publishing industry in Wales.

The Awards will be presented at a special day for readers held in Aberystwyth on Saturday, 1 October. The programme will include a series of sessions when prominent authors will discuss their work and the art of writing.

The prestigious event will be held at the Aberystwyth Arts Centre and we have already gained the support of Welsh libraries for the event.

The arrangements are well in hand and we hope that we'll have the opportunity to welcome members of the Friends to the celebration.

So please remember the date – Saturday, 1 October. We'll see you in Aberystwyth.

The London Book Fair

Helgard Krause, the Council's newly-appointed Overseas Marketing Officer, reports from the London Book Fair. Before joining the team at Castell Brychan, Helgard was Sales & Rights director at the illustrated books publishing group Rockport/RotoVision.

One of the big international events the Welsh Books Council attended earlier this year was London International Book Fair. It has grown enormously over recent years and arguably is now the second most important publishing event after Frankfurt Book Fair.

The Welsh Books Council hosted a stand and exhibited a wide variety of titles on behalf of 19 different publishers. London Book Fair was an ideal opportunity to demonstrate to other publishing professionals and the general public that Wales has a vibrant and diverse independent publishing scene. The Welsh Books Council stand provided a platform that enabled publishers to show their latest titles to visitors from over 100 countries. The Book Council's own staff took enquiries on behalf of those publishers that could not attend in person, but an increasing number of publishers used the stand to meet with their contacts and Accent Press chose to have a champagne launch there.

Overseas rights sales are an increasingly important business

aspect of London Book Fair and there were plenty of opportunities to make those vital face-to-face contacts with other overseas publishers as they scouted to find new and different titles. Another important group of visitors are distributors and booksellers who are also on the lookout for new business partners. By exhibiting at London, even the smaller presses will be able to seize the often sizable distribution opportunities arising from outside of Wales.

There was a real 'buzz' at London, and I was pleased to see that also reflected by the large number of visitors stopping at our stand to meet with publishers or to find out more about our work. The number of books published both in Welsh and in English has increased significantly over the years and the main issue now is to find the right marketing and sales channels for them. There was immense interest in these products from overseas distributors and, as a result, a number of significant deals were struck and new business relationships started at this year's Fair.



Book Reviews on Gwales.com

Janet Thomas explains how reviews for English-language books find their way to www.gwales.com

I took over the English-language book reviews for the gwales.com site about a year and a half ago, and I am really enjoying what is an interesting and varied job. I collect all the new books from the Welsh Books Council. As I'm a book addict, this is like a mini-Christmas every month as I take each book out of the box in turn, often surrounded by my family, who are also fascinated to see what has been published. Then I set about fitting the book to the reviewer.

I receive all the English-language books carried by the gwales.com site, so there is every kind of book with a Welsh connection – fiction, non-fiction, poetry and drama, from the biggest London-based publisher to the tiniest small press; from specialist local history books to the Books of the Year.

Reviews are about 300 words long and usually aimed at the general reader. Reviewers are paid £25 and they keep the book. I try and choose someone who has an interest in the subject. There is no point in a review of a crime novel, for example, by someone who would never enjoy a crime novel, however good it was. A guide to hill walking needs to be reviewed by someone who goes hill walking and knows whether or not the book is accurate and complete. Academic titles and some poetry collections need a reviewer with experience and specialist knowledge. One of the great joys of this job has been getting to know our 'stable' of reliable, enthusiastic reviewers, who are a pleasure to work with. (The only downside is the number of people who now say 'I know I haven't done the review yet' instead of 'Hello, how are you?' when I see them.)

Most reviewers, though not all, are based in Wales. If readers are able to return the reviews by e-mail, that is helpful, but many are handwritten and it's no problem to type them up. I'm always pleased to hear of new reviewers, particularly those with unusual interests, though I have to say that I currently have more reviewers than books. If you are interested in reviewing for gwales, please do write to me c/o The Editorial Department, Welsh Books Council, Castell Brychan, Aberystwyth SY23 2JB (wbc.editorial@wbc.org.uk) saying what kinds of books you would be interested in and your contact details. I'd love to hear from you.