

Date: 12 March 2003  
Time: 9.00 – 12.30  
Venue: National Assembly for Wales



[*Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales*]

**ENGLISH-MEDIUM WELSH WRITING:  
BRIEFING AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

by  
Professor M. Wynn Thomas FBA, Director, CREW  
University of Wales, Swansea

**CONTENTS**

**I. OVERVIEW**

---

- English-Medium Welsh Literature, a Summary 1
- The Assembly's Vision for Welsh Culture 1
- The Culture Committee and the Culture of Wales 1
- The Culture Committee and Literature 2

**II. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Assembly Review of Provision 2
- Book Production 2
- Retail Outlets 3
- Primary and Secondary Education 3
- Higher Education 4

**III. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS** 5

## **I. OVERVIEW**

### **I.1 English-Medium Welsh Literature, a Summary**

English-language writing in Wales dates back to the fifteenth century AD. However, the significant writings of past centuries (including the incomparable poetry of Henry Vaughan) are eclipsed by the wealth of literature resulting from the industrial birth of modern 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Wales. During this recent period, not only have figures of international stature been produced (e.g. Dylan Thomas, Raymond Williams, R. S. Thomas), but a body of writing has emerged that reflects the internal cultural variety of Wales and thus actively encourages the development of a flexible, inclusive and tolerant sense of nationhood.

These works range from world-class imaginative records of industrial and post-industrial civilization to explorations of geographical and cultural border territories, fictive anatomies of rural Wales, in-depth portrayals of the north-eastern and north-western parts of the country, and mappings of what Harri Webb called the 'green desert' of central, upland Wales.

And over the last few decades a correspondingly varied body of work has addressed gender identities in Wales (women's experience and also gay identities) and ethnic identities. Through these texts, the literature of Wales therefore compellingly images the kind of culturally decentred, internally diverse country that the Assembly is committed to developing. It is thus a potentially powerful instrument for effecting the kind of shift of consciousness which alone can bring about such a development.

### **I.2 The Assembly's Vision for Welsh Culture**

The Assembly has declared an aim to foster and promote a multicultural Wales, integral to which is the country's active recognition and cherishing of its bilingual, bicultural inheritance.

### **I.3 The Culture Committee and the Culture of Wales**

Before it is an economic or political entity, Wales is by definition a cultural entity. The sole justification for a 'Welsh political assembly' managing a 'Welsh economy' is that a 'Wales' exists that needs to be served in these ways. Since more economically viable units based, for instance, on the linking of south-East Wales to the Bristol conurbation could easily be imagined, for Cardiff to identify itself as the capital of Wales is primarily a cultural, not an economic, decision. Given the primacy of culture in this respect, the work of the Culture Committee must lie at the very heart of the Assembly Government programme, as it is concerned with various means of producing and reproducing an internally diverse Welsh culture.

#### **I.4 The Culture Committee and Literature**

Literature has long been one of the primary means by which a modern society produces and reproduces itself as a culture. It is an integral part of a society's most sophisticated ongoing conversations with itself about the way(s) it can live its life. For a society to devalue or otherwise disregard this kind of seminal cultural activity would be for it to court suicide – to jeopardise its survival as a distinctive socio-cultural unit. And in any modern, developed society, the state plays a key role in actively encouraging and safeguarding such cultural practices as are necessary for the transmission of culture from generation to generation.

Until the establishment of the Welsh Assembly Government, these responsibilities towards Wales were adopted and exercised on the country's behalf by the United Kingdom government, and one of the most crucial instruments it established to discharge this responsibility was the Arts Council of Wales. Over the last few years, this Assembly has presided constructively over the redefining of the ACW's role. Now, the resulting arrangements both require and encourage the development of a much larger system of structures for the management of Wales's literary cultures.

## **II. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **II.1. Assembly Review of Provision**

This is therefore an ideal time for the Committee to **undertake a review of provision in the whole area of English-medium Welsh writing.** Such a review should begin by dispensing with the crude working distinctions that hinder more than they help developments in this sector – distinctions such as those between 'literature' and books of wider popular appeal. Such artificial categories need now to be seen to belong to a single continuum of creative writing, just as 'education' cannot be separated from 'culture' when it comes to considering the vital question of how to reach and serve communities of readers. What is therefore needed is a review that adopts a 'holistic' approach to the field, and the following are no more than pointers to the kinds of issues, problems and above all opportunities that need to be addressed.

### **II.2 Book Production**

- Funds currently being transferred from the Welsh Arts Council to the Welsh Books Council (WBC) assist in the production of books of conspicuous literary interest. But **comparable funds should be made available for the production of Welsh books to satisfy a much larger, popular market** - popular novels, books on sport or cinema, biographies, travel books, detective stories, thrillers, popular history etc. Such books are almost exclusively supplied by the big UK-American publishing consortia, and accordingly very rarely reflect specific Welsh interests or concerns. And without financial

assistance it is next to impossible for Welsh publishers to compete in such a ‘global’ market. (Contrast the situation in the Republic of Ireland or Scotland.)

- When reviewing the provision of books of Welsh interest for the wider market, **particular attention needs to be paid to those of interest to children and young people.**

### **II.3 Retail Outlets**

- The major, dominant retail outlets for books in Wales are obviously the big UK bookstore chains. It is, however, acutely difficult for Welsh publishers to ensure exposure through these outlets, and such Welsh books as are displayed are usually relegated to the demeaning catch-all category of ‘books of Welsh interest’. It is just unimaginable that a Dublin bookstore would have a section entitled ‘books of Irish interest’! Or a store in London – ‘books of English interest’.
- There is an **urgent need for the Committee to undertake an investigation into the policies and practices in Wales of the major retail book outlets, and to engage in dialogue with them.** Their UK-centralised selection, marketing and promotion policies effectively control the sales of Welsh books, and thereby control product.
- There is also an **urgent need for the Committee to re-examine the wholly inadequate marketing programme for Welsh books** not only within Wales but in England and throughout the UK.

### **II.3 Primary and Secondary Education**

- There are very few countries whose education systems do not introduce children and young people to the experience of discovering their own country (past and present) through books. Until quite recently, Wales was sadly one of those countries. The introduction of the *Welsh Curriculum* has now begun to remedy that situation. Substantial sums of money are made available, through ACCAC, for the production of Welsh-language books and bilingual books on a variety of subjects, for use in schools. But ACCAC feels that its remit expressly prevents it from commissioning English-medium works about Wales for use on the *Welsh Curriculum*. It seems clear that there is therefore **a need to review ACCAC’s existing remit as a matter of real urgency.**

## II.4 Higher Education

- Until very recently no undergraduate or postgraduate courses in English-medium Welsh writing were available in the universities of Wales. Bearing in mind that universities are among the leading think-tanks of cultures, this was an extremely serious state of affairs. One significant consequence of this situation has been that there are few teachers of English in the schools of Wales who feel confident to teach English-medium Welsh writing, as they were not themselves introduced to that literature at degree level. The implications of this deficiency are obviously very far-reaching. It is still largely the case that such university courses as have been established are vulnerable, in the sense that they are non-systemic and are reliant on the initiative and commitment of individuals.
- Moreover, there aren't, and have never been, any scholars at work in English-medium Welsh writing who were specifically trained in this area of expertise, for the obvious (if remarkable) reason that Welsh universities have only very recently recognized the scholarly legitimacy of this literature. Those of my generation who are now influential specialists in English-medium Welsh writing have all had to develop and practise their skills as a 'hobby' and by 'moonlighting' — that is, they have had first to establish their scholarly credentials by establishing a considerable reputation in some more academically respectable field of English studies.
- Over the last decade things have begun to change, but the key new developments (involving the production of scholarly studies, edited literary texts and learned journals; the establishing of undergraduate and postgraduate courses; the creation of research centers, and the training of future generations of scholars and teachers) are extremely fragile, lacking as they do any substantial financial and administrative underpinning. **There is therefore a serious need to examine the ways in which the universities are still, to a significant degree, failing in this regard to perform that 'service to the community' which they so proudly proclaim when it comes to scientific and technological research.**
- **The Culture Committee should engage in dialogue with the universities on how they can better serve the needs of the English-medium culture of Wales.**
- **Issues in this dialogue should include consultations with HEFCW, partnership working and the remit of the Board of Celtic Studies.**

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

***It is both timely and urgent for the Culture Committee of the National Assembly for Wales to investigate and review the provision currently being made for meeting the needs of English-medium readers and writers in Wales.***

***There should be:***

- *Appropriate financial support for the production of popular books*
- *Particular attention to the needs of children and young people*
- *An investigation into the major retail book outlets in Wales*
- *A re-examination of the marketing programme for Welsh books*
- *A review of ACCAC's remit*
- *A dialogue with the universities on serving the needs of the English-medium culture of Wales*