

Culture, Welsh Language and Sport Committee CWLS(2)-06-03(p.10)

Date: 3 December 2003

Time: 9.00am – 12.00pm

Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly for Wales

Policy Review: English medium writing in Wales

Gomer Press

Summary of points made on behalf of Gomer Press: please see the concise notes which follow overleaf

1. Welsh writing in English for children and young people is not a separate or peripheral issue: it joins up with writing for adults in a fundamental way. Gomer urges committee members to consider the contribution made by Pont Books over the past decade and to support development there. Given the strengths in terms of writers, expertise, status and rationale of the imprint, this is surely an area worthy of further investment.
2. Support mechanisms for writers should continue at least in the varied forms we now have: Writers on Tour; Mentora: Ty Newydd; courses run in conjunction with publishers; bursaries.
3. Support mechanisms for publishing need to be boosted with Commissioning Grants to Authors being made available to publishers, as in Welsh-language writing/publishing.
4. Awareness-raising of Welsh writing in English is piecemeal, lacks commitment, authority, vision, rigour – and is not in any way inclusive at present.
5. The focus of any new initiative or funding should be on new writing. Writers will plunder the ‘classics’ and take from them or be influenced by them as they will. There was never a golden age for Anglo-Welsh writing and we should, in any case, be looking forward.

Mairwen Prys Jones
Publishing Director

August 2003

1. Background

1.1

Gomer Press is the largest publishing house in Wales, publishing some 125 new titles every year. Approximately 40 of those titles are in English. All have a Welsh significance, setting or theme: that Welsh dimension is the criterion at the core of our publishing policy – not, for example, the birthplace or parentage of the writers themselves, though many writers in search of a publisher would wish that to be the case!

1.2

Gomer Press receives funding for the English-language publishing in the form of a modest block grant from the Welsh Books Council (formerly from the Arts Council of Wales). Its purpose is to support work of a literary nature that would not otherwise be commercially viable. This accounts for around half of Gomer's output in English. The other half of our output consists of titles that can reach a wider readership, such as the tourist market, and can therefore be undertaken without grant aid, sometimes in partnership with other organisations.

2. Response to issues under review

2.1

Generally, Gomer applauds the support mechanisms available to writers. We have seen the great benefits that authors have had from schemes such as: Mentora, the individualised tutoring opportunity; writing bursaries; subsidised courses at Ty Newydd Writers' Centre; Writers on Tour grants which provide a valuable interface with readers and other writers, especially young people. In addition to these general provisions, Gomer has worked with the Arts Council to run particular courses for promising writers e.g. on Writing for Teenagers, and Writing Readalones for newly fluent readers. Both courses led to excellent books; 90% of the participants subsequently had work published by us. With the shift of responsibility to the Welsh Books Council, Gomer hopes that this publisher-led activity will continue to be supported.

2.2

Support mechanisms for the production and marketing of new writing is an issue which affects Gomer most particularly. Over the past eighteen months, we have had experience of commissioning Welsh-language writers on a scale we had never been able to consider before. The additional funding devoted to Welsh-language writing over the past two years has transformed the way writers are able to work and produce books that the marketplace desires. It has professionalised our dealings with writers, made scheduling so much more feasible and brought a new confidence into the world of books. This is exactly what is needed now to revitalise English Medium Writing in Wales as well. To be able to persuade the best writers to write on Welsh themes and be published in Wales, to work to agreed deadlines and deliver; all that is made possible if remuneration on a reasonable level is offered. Writers are not prepared to starve in a garret in order to produce a novel, when they could be scriptwriting or translating or writing copy for commercial purposes. To provide for English-language writers what has already

been offered to Welsh-language writers must therefore be the starting-point; it will lead to all kinds of collaborations and will minimise hostility between the two strands of our writing culture.

2.3

Raising public awareness of English-medium Welsh literature is a responsibility that is not taken seriously enough by anyone at present. If only someone could do for our product what the WDA Food Directorate does for the food industry in Wales. Is it only a matter of budget? Does it not also call for vision, flair, a thorough knowledge of the whole sector, a refusal to be elitist, a genuine belief that Wales as a whole means something, and that a great Babel of different voices, writing in English (as well as possibly writing in Welsh as well), is waiting to be heard? It's not just a case of finding raw, grim writing from the valleys or sexing up Cardiff Bay voices. There is currently no institution or body that shows the passion for Welsh writing in English that you can quite easily discover for Welsh-language writing. (One clear advantage of writing in a language under threat is that a great many people are predisposed to engage with what you publish.)

2.4

Promoting new writing in preference to preserving classics is the only way forward. Let the academics study the older work and identify the classics. There is a small canon of great work, yes; it will remain small unless we promote exploration, innovation, keep the writers of today writing by supporting them and their publishers.

3. A continuum: books for children-books for adults

3.1

Gomer is better placed to point out the importance of Welsh writing in English for children than any other single organisation in Wales. Under the Pont imprint, we publish books for children from a very young age all the way through teenage novels to the world of Welsh writing in English for adults. A great number of people who are concerned with or, indeed, concerned for, the adult provision, invariably forget that adult readers have grown from child readers. If children have discovered themselves, their own lives, their own country and culture in the books they read as they grow up, there is a far greater likelihood that they will be interested in indigenous Welsh writing when they read – or write -- as adults. This is an obvious point, but I cannot stress enough how often this is overlooked. I served on the Literature Committee of the Arts Council of Wales for several years and, as a teacher of English, I was amazed how the formative years of readers' lives simply did not interest the adults who planned strategies for literature! With some persuasion and awareness-raising by committed officers, however, the Arts Council of Wales agreed to support a part-time post for the Pont imprint, and to provide funding to support publications. That funding has remained consistent for over a decade and presently supports some 10 new titles a year.

3.2

Pont's achievements are important to this discussion because this is the nursery plot. No serious gardener would proceed without one, and no successful gardener would make do with so few seedlings either.

These are the categories of books:

Picture Books

Readalones for newly independent readers

Legends from Wales series

Collections of stories

Novels for 9-12 yrs

Pont Young Adults (teenage fiction)

Poetry

Plays

Pont Library (non-fiction on art/humanities topics)

Historical novels

Teaching Resources

Authors: many authors specialise in writing for children, and some of the best in the UK have written for Pont - Malachy Doyle, Jenny Nimmo, Catherine Fisher, Berlie Doherty, Jenny Sullivan. Other names will be familiar to readers of books for adults – Gillian Clarke, Julie Rainsbury, Nigel Jenkins, Glenda Beagan, Phil Carradice, Penny Windsor, Mike Jenkins. It may well be that a child's first encounter with a single poem or story by one of these writers will lead to a life-long awareness of not just this writer's work, but the whole concept of Welsh life and Welsh themes being story-worthy.

Sales:

Some of these titles reach a great number of children. The most popular are now in their 4th and 5th editions. To sell 6,000 copies of any title, given the competition in the English-speaking world, is no

mean feat.

Current list:

There are currently 120 titles in print. For a voracious reader, there will be about 10 titles for his/her age interest at any one time. That's a very small selection.

3.3

Gomer has invested heavily in the Pont imprint, publishing many titles in recent years that were not in themselves profitable but which increased the range and choice of books for readers and, very important, continued to develop the talents and repertoire of writers. Loyalty to the imprint by a number of excellent writers has been remarkable over the years. The time has now come, however, when the output needs to be increased; Gomer wishes to negotiate with the Welsh Books Council a full-time editor's post and a block grant that allows for 20 publications a year. With only ten a year, as we now have, it is not possible to produce even one new title in every category, and that is clearly not acceptable for marketing purposes. The principle here is to follow through a modest investment with support on a level that makes good use of what had been achieved. Pont is a market leader and could do much to raise awareness and standards to higher levels yet, but it must be supported in that.

Mairwen Prys Jones
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