

Culture, Welsh Language and Sport Committee CWLS(2)-06-03(p.8)

Date: 3 December 2003

Time: 9.00am – 12.00pm

Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly for Wales

Policy Review: English medium writing in Wales

Response from Seren

Introduction

Seren is Wales's prize-winning literary/cultural publisher in the English language. Based in the Bridgend area, it has existed for twenty-three years, the last fourteen as a company limited by guarantee. It employs five people (four full time, one part time) and is overseen by a management board of six, consisting of booksellers, a writer, an academic and a cultural administrator. It publishes 20-25 new titles a year in the areas of fiction, poetry, biography, translations from the Welsh, current affairs, history, art history, literary criticism, drama, illustrated and 'leisure'. It also publishes the quarterly magazine Poetry Wales, which will be forty years old in 2004, and poetry, with art and politics, is one of the areas in which it has a considerable reputation. All titles are edited, designed and produced up to printing stage in-house.

Sales are achieved through the Welsh Books Council in Wales, freelance sales representatives in the rest of the UK, agencies in the US and Australia and via its secure website. Marketing and promotion is also done largely in-house through press releases, an annual catalogue, via the internet, and through events. A freelance London-based publicist is engaged on a day per week basis to promote selected titles to the London media and to arrange London launches and readings. As a consequence Seren is probably the most developed publisher in Wales in this area.

Seren exhibits annually at the London Book Fair and the Frankfurt Book Fair, where it has been successful in selling rights to the US, Ireland and the Czech Republic and has helped facilitate rights sales for authors it publishes to France and Germany. It is a member of Literary Publishers (Wales) Ltd a consortium of six publishers formed to promote books from Wales and to jointly manage the English language books sales representative attached to the Welsh Books Council. Seren represented LPW on the group established to produce a marketing strategy for the book trade in Wales at the request of the Culture Committee of the Welsh Assembly Government.

Review Points

The Contribution of English-language Writing to Welsh Culture

As the main language of the majority of people in Wales, English is hugely, crucially important to the development of the country, culturally, socially and economically. This has been so, historically, for the last century and writers such as Caradoc Evans, Dylan Thomas, R.S. Thomas, Gwyn Thomas, Emyr Humphreys, Rhys Davies and the poets Harri Webb and John Tripp have helped the population of Wales, consciously or subconsciously, to engage in a debate about what it is to be Welsh and to evolve as a people. For many reasons (competing media, the insufficient report of the education system, changes in UK publishing and bookselling) equally talented contemporary authors (Robert Minhinnick, Christopher Meredith, Richard Evans, Leonora Brito) are less easily heard, yet have vital things to say about Wales and its people and in more informed and interesting ways than the sources to which Welsh people now turn for definition. Many of these sources originate outside Wales and can have a metropolitan or transatlantic filter. Increasing the profile of contemporary writers can only benefit the people of Wales.

Forms of Support for Writers

At present these are somewhat limited to time-buying bursaries and research grants. There has been a reluctance by the grant-making organisations to make a significant investment in a small number of writers, the preference being to spread the support more thinly. The result has been to discourage some writers from applying, or to force the writer to find ways of supplementing the support. The recently-established Welsh language model of more and larger bursaries, made available by the Culture Committee, could be usefully replicated in the English language.

Indirectly, of course, writers could be better supported through greater sales (increased royalties, rights sales) though this would need to be predicated on increased support to publishers for better marketing and promotion. For the most part writing in English remains a second occupation: unfortunately English-language broadcasting in Wales has failed to replicate the model of Welsh language broadcasting as far as writers are concerned (even though the producers are often the same for both languages). Anglophone writers remain shamefully underused by BBC Wales and HTV.

Forms of Support for Producing and Marketing New Writing

There is, effectively, only one easily accessible source of support for any kind of writing in Wales; the grants formerly distributed by the Arts Council Wales, devolved in April 2003 to Academi and the Welsh Books Council. It is consequently a matter of prioritisation by the grant-awarding body as to the targetting of that money. Literature has, historically, received the smallest proportion of Arts Council funds, and for several years was on standstill funding for publishers which produced an unfortunate chain of low inputs leading to low outputs. The lack of opportunity for publishers to invest makes it difficult to develop the original ideas, the flair and enterprise of Seren's staff and writers. Despite the decline in support in real terms Seren was able to increase sales income for a number of years, discover exciting new poets (Owen Sheers, Samantha Wynne Rhydderch, Pascale Petit) and begin the regular

publication of our highly regarded books on the visual arts in Wales.

Raising Public Awareness

In the long term education clearly has a significant role. Recent developments in post-14 and especially post-16 schools education suggest that a small, but important, beginning has been made through the inclusion of 'Anglo-Welsh' texts for examination, greater use of such texts in the classroom and the production of support materials for teachers. Seren is pleased to have lead the way here, providing titles by Emyr Humphreys, Sheenagh Pugh, Robert Minhinnick and Dannie Abse as A-level set texts. This development needs to be consolidated to become part of a culture within schools, and to be built on at degree level both in the training of teachers and the development of literature courses and research. More works of criticism such as those Seren has published on R.S. Thomas and the history of 'Anglo-Welsh' writing will be needed.

In the short term it is incumbent on publishers to spend more resources convincing the media in Wales to feature Anglophone writing more frequently and more prominently in its output. Publishers must also find mechanisms to increase the stockholding of bookshops, both chains and independents. However, the extent of the headway which can be made at current levels of funding is questionable. The publishers must also take responsibility for the frequency and professionalism of live events promoting books and authors. Seren's recent First Thursday series (poetry readings at Chapter Arts Centre on the first Thursday of every month) produced some remarkable results and showed what could be achieved with further resources.

Discussion Points

Barriers and Opportunities

Publishing.

Although funding improved recently and several companies maintain vigorous activity, publishing in Wales remains financially under-developed and unable to maximise the potential of both staff and writers. Despite publishing in such a widely-used language with the potential that offers for sales and promotion Welsh companies are in the difficult position of competing with the two largest publishing economies in the world. The quality of Seren's books both in content and design is, we believe, very high, but the resources available to convince shops to stock those books are, in comparison, minute. There is a certain sum which primes what ought to be a self-replenishing marketing pump: more sales would mean more money for marketing which ought to lead to greater exposure in shops and more sales (over 50% of book purchases are impulse buys). Unfortunately, for publishers in Wales funding is insufficient to both produce the book and then market it to best effect, with repercussions for the income of the author. Similarly, it is difficult to attract 'bigger name' authors to Welsh publishers without the guarantee of sales for which high bookshop profile is important.

Low levels of funding also create editorial dilemmas, particularly in the area of new writers, who may be disadvantaged if competing with a proven seller for a place on the publisher's list.

Bookselling.

Bookselling in Wales is characterised by small independent shops in the hinterland and UK chains in the major towns and cities. The former are, largely, financially limited and unable to take great risks on titles which cannot guarantee publicity and, consequently sales. Continued investment in such shops is essential. The latter, their stockholding controlled from outside Wales, give little, if any, consideration to how best to display Wales-originated titles, except perhaps at Christmas or if the store manager has 'gone native'. Neither independents or chains can be relied on for extensive stocking of backlist (i.e. books 1-5 years old, plus ongoing core titles). The experience of Seren, which maintains some twenty-five carousels, largely in non-bookshop outlets, is that depth of carousel stock unachievable in bookshops will provide sales. The problem lies in convincing bookshops that they could do the same with books from Wales. The Strategic Marketing Report represents a particular opportunity to address the whole publisher-bookseller publicity relationship and it is to be hoped that it will be supported in addressing this issue. In the meantime Seren will continue to expand its successful carousel operation and search for new markets within financial constraints.

Links with Other Sectors

Some sectors which could contribute positively towards the creation of a higher profile for Anglophone authors and publishers are independent and beyond direct influence (the broadcast and print media in Wales, for instance). However, the WAG should give priority to considering what parts could be played by other sectors, like education and tourism. The achievements and possibilities for education have already been discussed. The Wales Tourist Board has expressed an interest in promoting cultural tourism in Wales, though it is not clear, to this observer at least, quite how it intends to achieve this. But collaboration with publishers to produce material for tourists (Welsh and from outside Wales alike) would be a good beginning. The selling of books (not just guides) from Information Centres (in some locations the only places resembling a bookshop) might be another, providing a service to the tourist and income for the centre.

The book trade should consider forming its own sector, or sectors, instead of continuing its current fragmented existence. A Publishers' Association and a Booksellers' Association would help focus these two trades on their needs and development, increase professionalism and make the trade better informed.

Classics or New Writing

This is a false distinction. The prioritising of one above the other is unlikely to increase its readership or benefit the trade or the general public. The argument must be that both receive the support they deserve, classics because they show where Wales has come from and provide a context for author and reader alike, new writing because it reflects the contemporary world and because the living writer needs to be

supported to ensure the continuation of written culture.

Maintaining the Classics

Certain key works need to be maintained to provide the context mentioned above. It was with this in mind that we established the successful Seren Classics series (Gwyn Thomas, Caradoc Evans, Rhys Davies and several others) to make such important titles, both old and new, available in a recognisable form. That the series has been developed in a piecemeal fashion, with occasional additions, is testimony to the restrictions of funding. Yet the series is vital to maintain the profile of 'serious' writing in Wales.

Conclusion

The Culture Committee is uniquely placed to reinvigorate the development of Anglophone writing and publishing. Its generous commitment to those areas in the Welsh language have been widely acclaimed and seem to be producing exciting developments. The Anglophone culture of Wales is as distinctive as that of the Welsh language and perhaps equally under threat, though from different sources. Yet with the educational developments beginning to register, the many-faceted Welsh Books Council in place and a pool of talent, both publishing and writing, unrivalled for many years, the foundations are there to move English language writing forward. This welcome Policy Review should boldly seize the opportunity to encourage and facilitate a new flowering of 'the majority culture'.