

Culture, Welsh Language and Sport Committee CWLS(2)-06-03(p.9)

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Time: 9.00am – 12.00pm

Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly for Wales

Policy Review: English medium writing in Wales

From Janet Thomas, Editor, Honno Welsh Women's Press

Honno Welsh Women's Press was set up in 1986 by a group of women who felt strongly that women in Wales needed wider opportunities to see their work in print and become involved in the publishing process. We publish book by and for women of Wales, including fiction, poetry, children's books, autobiographical writing and reprints of classic titles. We are a community cooperative with over 400 shareholders. We are run by a committee of volunteers, and employ three part-time members of staff, thanks to a grant from first the Arts Council of Wales and now the Welsh Books Council. Our grant is dependent on our publishing at least seven new English-language books a year, as well as our Welsh language publishing. We were awarded the Pandora award for contribution to women's publishing in 2001.

Honno clearly believes strongly in the development of English Medium Writing in Wales and is very glad to be able to contribute to this policy review.

1) The contribution of English-medium books and writing in Wales to Welsh culture

While it is very important for everyone to share the culture of all communities, and while arts should in one sense be without nationality, it is vitally important that people see their own communities, experiences and stories being reflected in the arts, so that they respect and value their own experiences and so they feel that their voices are being heard. It is vital that the English-medium Welsh arts reflect all communities in Wales, men and women, from all ethnic backgrounds, and all areas of Wales, north, south, east and west.

This doesn't happen without effort and will. Honno was set up to promote classic Welsh writers of the past and to give modern Welsh women a path into print, by volunteers who believed in the importance of such publications. We have shown that there is a market for the Welsh women's fiction and non-fiction, which was not being catered to before. It is only from determination like that of our founder members, to say what is not being said, that anything will change, and when that energy is there, bodies like the National Assembly need to encourage and support it.

English-medium books and writing are also a vital part of what the rest of the world sees and understands of Wales. To other countries, where Wales is not seen as a county of England, it is still an all-white world of coal mining, rugby and Dylan Thomas. The success of Welsh music in the last 20 years has proved the potential for Welsh artists to communicate to the world community. With the same standard of funding and support, Welsh writers could have an equal impact and start creating a new image of Wales across the world, which would in turn have a highly positive effect on our tourism industry and our own sense of identity.

Wales is not seen as a commercial setting for books by the big British publishers. There are many cases of writers being encouraged to move the settings of their stories from Wales to another area of Britain to increase sales, particularly in mainstream popular fiction. Because of this self-fulfilling belief, we can only look to the Welsh publishers to produce fiction and non-fiction that will develop a Welsh and an international market for these stories. The danger is that because of the level of marketing possible for Welsh small presses, they are actually reinforcing the idea that Welsh stories are ‘small’ and of limited interest. It is very important that Welsh publishers can afford to commission and develop projects they believe in, produce them to a high standard and market them with more impact.

Success creates more success. If authors saw more books with a Welsh identity in the shops, they would gain the confidence to write more and experiment. A few success stories would create a lot more support from bookshops and from the English-language Welsh media, who tend to focus on the national bestsellers, if they discuss books at all. Many things hold us back, including:

- **Marketing:** this is the greatest need of Welsh publishers – more funding for marketing; more sources of support in the media; more training; more national campaigns. I discuss detailed ideas for funding later.
- **Funding commissioning:** small press publishers are very limited in the books they can produce because they cannot afford to commission books or pay any money before the book is written. More needs to be done to fund prospective books, if the publishers can justify the importance of the project.
- **Popular Fiction:** While Welsh-medium publishers are encouraged to look for ‘popular’ titles to promote the language, the Arts Council of Wales has been unwilling to give grants to English-language titles that are seen as too commercial, feeling that the mainstream British publishers can do these. But they don’t do them with Welsh characters or settings. Consequently, with the exception of a couple of ‘saga’ writers, there is little popular English-medium literature with a Welsh identity. We would like to see Welsh settings and characters seen as a positive thing in all genres of writing by the funding committees, as all genres of Welsh-language publishing are seen as positive. Also more popular titles and more popular promotions would give the Welsh small presses some much needed cash which would support the rest of their publishing programmes. (‘Popular’ fiction does not mean without literary merit – Honno’s Morphine and Dolly Mixtures which was turned down for a grant later won an Arts Council of Wales award, as well as being one of our most successful titles.)

ii) The support mechanisms available to writers in Wales, including the playwrights and screenplay writers:

The Academi does vital work in developing and supporting Welsh writers. Almost all Welsh writers, however, face severe financial hardship in developing their work.

- As mentioned, the inability for small press publishers to commission work in fiction and particularly non-fiction is a great limitation on the books being produced in Wales. We have been trying, for example, to develop a list of biographies of important Welsh women, as a sister series to our 'Honno classics'. But we cannot find writers who can afford to devote so much time and research to a book with no payment, on the hope it will be published but with no guarantee of a grant. We are convinced there would be a strong market for these books, and that they would make an important contribute to Welsh culture, but cannot fund them without subsidy. We can currently only submit bids for books already written and the grant is paid on publication. It could be possible to bid at the same time for a limited number of commissioning grants – even only one a year per publisher would be a significant improvement on the current situation.
- Supporting beginning writers – We feel that developing writers should be an important part of the work of all Welsh presses, and that it should be reflected in the grants. Honno tries to give constructive, detailed feedback to all the scripts it receives, because we feel that developing and supporting all the writers who contact us is a very important part of Honno's aim to give women a path into print. However, as our publication list increases, it becomes more and more difficult to justify the staff hours it takes to assess the scripts. Unless we can find funding for our manuscript assessment scheme, we may have to stop offering feedback – even though we believe that this feedback is one of the most important ways in which we support writers and make a contribution to the community in Wales, by giving all writers who contact us support and honest advice. The Welsh Books Council does offer a reading service, which is very valuable, but their scheme is really intended to encourage, and from what we have seen, tends to be positive. Our feedback intends to give a more realistic view of the needs of publishers, while giving advice on how to progress. We are currently looking for extra funding for this, from any source available.
- Competitions and book awards can be very effective for promoting new writing and could get private sector support. The 'Book of the Year' award is gaining more attention, but more could be done to promote awards in Wales. Private sector support is always likely to be created by success – the more attention we can bring to English-medium Welsh promotions, the more private sector support we are likely to gain.

iii) The support mechanisms for the production and marketing of new writing, including private sector support:

Our funding has just moved from the Arts Council of Wales to the Welsh Books Council, and we wait to see if this is going to change the basis of our grant funding. Currently, we bid for each individual book – setting our book production costs against sales (we must estimate sales of 65%-70%) with a fixed limited amount for marketing. The grant covers any shortfall between the production costs and the sales, but of course the production costs have to be paid either before or on publication, while the sales come

in slowly over time. Consequently there is a constant cash flow problem, and it means that at the point of publication, when we most need money for marketing, all our money has gone on production costs and marketing has to be cut back to the bone. We urgently need:

- Greater marketing funding on the bids.
- Separate marketing funding – there should be a separate source of funding for marketing projects, where we could submit our plans for events, point of sales material, advertising, etc – and if it passed the expert assessment it could be funded. This might be for special projects rather than every book – eg a Christmas campaign, a campaign to promote Honno as a publisher, a promotion of our classics list, etc. Marketing is the great failure of current Welsh publishing – it just isn't happening – and any attempt to bring new life to English Medium Writing in Wales needs to find new financial support for marketing.
- A bookshop policy for the promoting of Welsh writing. Any visit to Scotland or Ireland shows the incredible difference in attitude to national writing by the bookshops. They believe their customers are interested. The chain bookshops in Wales have no confidence in Welsh books, particularly in English-medium Welsh books, and this is obvious in the way they present and promote them. The National Assembly needs to bring pressure to bear on the national chains to have a policy for promoting English-medium writing in the shops. The Welsh publishers should be able to promote their books directly to the central buyers – and meet them early, so that books can be altered or covers developed to the buyers' needs. The success of small specialist bookshops, in comparison to the chains, shows that the market is there for the books, if the bookshops are willing to take them seriously.
- Since the end of the net book agreement, discounting has been a key part of all bookselling. But small press Welsh publishers cannot hope to offer significant discounts. How we put these deals through our distributors is also unclear. More training is needed for the Welsh publishers in discounting and related marketing.

iv) The mechanisms of raising awareness of English-medium Welsh literature and writers.

A great deal of the problem here is communication between the groups involved, particularly for publishers or writers not based in Cardiff.

- Far more could be done to build links between the tourist organisations and the publishers, eg –
 - Meetings where publishers could promote their work to the tourist sites.
 - Joint promotions between historical sites and related books – eg authors' birthplaces, etc.
 - Getting the publishers involved in literary-related tourist promotions, with advertising of linked publications.
- Similarly with schools, there is very little communication between Welsh publishers and schools, so publishers can find out what material would help schools, what subjects they lack material on, etc. They can contact schools in their area, but are reliant on mailshots to all other schools, which is expensive and shows little return. Far more could be done with the internet to build links between schools and publishers, setting up a general site for all, where all publishers could

promote their work and build up a dialogue between teachers and editors. We have had more success with universities and been able to get many of the Honno titles on reading lists, particularly the classics. This again is due to communication, as we have more contacts with universities thanks to the members of our committee.

- Classics – Honno has a thriving classics list, which is one of our great achievements. It needs corresponding promotion of the writers as important Welsh women by the national media, and in their local areas. We try to do this, but our budgets are limited and it would be wonderful to build up more support from local authorities, schools and tourist associations, to back up this promotion. Your invitation to submit raises the issue of classics or new writing - classics and new writing are equally important and feed each other. Without an awareness of the rich untold history of Welsh writing, new writers have to ‘invent the wheel’ all over again, or may feel drawn to writing about other countries to get heard. We have found at Honno how productive it is to combine both areas. Promoting both is essential.

Honno would like to congratulate the Culture, Welsh Language and Sports Committee for looking at this issue and look forward to hearing their conclusions.

Janet Thomas

29 August 2003