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Time: 9.00am – 12.00pm

Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly for Wales

Policy Review: English-medium Writing in Wales

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Thank you for your invitation to contribute to this review. I am all the more pleased to see it being undertaken as a letter I addressed to the Education Committee some eighteen months ago specifically suggested that the Anglophone culture of Wales was in need of immediate attention from the Assembly. As I was subsequently invited to appear before the Culture Committee to give evidence I attach a copy of my submission, for your information (Annex 1). I should be very grateful if you would regard it as part of my response to your invitation. The following observations should then therefore be taken as additional to, and as supplementing, those made in that document.

Personal Background: I should first briefly indicate the nature of my professional interest in this subject. I write primarily in my capacity as Director of CREW, Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales, University of Wales, Swansea - internationally recognized as the leading centre for academic research in this field. But my experience of English-language publishing in Wales is considerably more extensive than the academic sector. I was for six years Chair of the Literature Panel of the Welsh Arts Council, at a time (the late eighties) when the Panel was far and away the most important sponsor and manager of developments across the whole field of literature (in both languages) in Wales. I also acted as Chair of the Welsh Academy, and was one of the main architects of the refashioning of the Academy into its present form, as the body primarily responsible for financing and organizing literary activities Wales-wide. I am a member of the management board of Seren books, the premier publisher of English-language literature from Wales, and am also Chair of the Management Board of University of Wales Press. Furthermore, I have enjoyed good and close working relations with the Welsh Books Council for almost twenty years and have taken particular pleasure in the recent expansion of the Council's work to include the administration of a budget (transferred from the Welsh Arts Council) earmarked for support of the Anglophone literature of Wales. I am also currently chair of a WBC/ Literary Publishers Wales consortium for managing a sales representative charged with the responsibility of marketing English-language books from, or about, Wales.

Importance of Welsh writing in English. The importance of this literature cannot be overestimated. It is, in so many respects, Wales's interface with other literary cultures world-wide; it constitutes a significant

example of non-English literatures in English - a worldwide modern phenomenon ranging from Australia and New Zealand to the US and Canada, and including a host of local cultures from India and the African continent to the Caribbean and beyond; it provides a unique record of Wales's past - particularly the emergence of modern Wales from the crucible of industrialization; it offers valuable insights into the country's rich cultural diversity (both geographical and ethnic - see the recent work of Charlotte Williams and others); it features figures of world reputation (Dylan Thomas, Raymond Williams, David Jones, R. S. Thomas and others); and it plays a vital part in that ongoing conversation with itself that is the lifeblood of any nation's continuing existence.

History of provision for the Anglophone literary culture of modern Wales. What is remarkable is that this literature is so rich, so varied, so widely respected for its achievements, and yet has received relatively little attention and support from within Wales itself. A glimpse of what might be possible was afforded by the Welsh Arts Council in its prime, some twenty and more years ago. At that time, enlightened state patronage was able, through the services of visionary officers, to provide English-language Welsh culture with an infrastructure that had hitherto been entirely lacking: for example, it became possible for the first time for Welsh authors writing in English to publish their work in Wales, rather than depend on English publishers and thus silently conform to English taste. The steady erosion of WAC's financial base over the last decade and more has seen a steady contraction in its programme of support for literature (always much the poorest relation compared to music, drama, etc. even when WAC was in its pomp) and a consequent loss of some of the ground that had previously been gained.

The education sector. This has - at every level - almost systematically disregarded the English-language literary culture of the country. Certainly the record of Higher Education in Wales in this respect has, until quite recently, been little short of scandalous. And it remains the case in this sector that Welsh writing in English is marginalized, with younger scholars being in effect discouraged from working in the field. The practical consequences of this negative attitude have been immensely damaging - ranging from the lack of a body of scholarship sufficient to sustain a comprehensive assessment of this culture, to a failure to provide young generation after young generation of students (the future teachers, administrators, lawyers, doctors, business leaders, politicians etc. of the society) with any real cultural understanding of modern Wales. One obvious result of this has been the production of successive generations of school and college teachers unequipped (and correspondingly reluctant) to introduce pupils, in their turn, to the English language literature that carries so much of their own country's history. This is a situation which is in very urgent need of remedy. The work now being undertaken at CREW, along with related initiatives at University of Wales, Bangor and at the University of Glamorgan, represents a significant advance. But these developments are due purely to isolated individual initiatives by senior, influential scholars, and therefore remain highly vulnerable as they are not underpinned by institutional commitments. And the purely token funding made available - by the institutions themselves and through HEFCW - is wholly inadequate for the long term maintenance and development of programmes of research, teaching, training and publication. This is an issue that needs to be seriously addressed by both the Culture Committee and the Education Committee of the National Assembly.

Training of educated readership. The failure of the education system, at every level, to introduce Welsh youth to the Anglophone literature of their country has widespread practical consequences that

perpetuate what is, in effect, a vicious circle: it helps limit the number of readers (and hence limits the market for books); it inhibits the development of an educated discourse (reflected in the absence of a serious reviewing culture in Wales compared to the quality papers not only of England but also of Scotland and Ireland); it restricts media interest, which helps reduce the number of readers; and so the circle is repeated. All this results in the reinforcement of the deeply unfortunate view that Wales has nothing of interest to say to itself, or to the world, through the medium of English. This, in turn, feeds Anglophone Wales's uncertainty of its own cultural worth and identity.

Reading and Writing. The current orthodoxy that financial support should primarily be targeted on the development of writing and of writers needs to be seriously re-examined. For one thing, to be a good writer it is first of all necessary to be a good reader. For another thing, the number of talented writers in any given generation, in any given country, is decidedly small: the number of potential readers - and of 'creative,' 'intelligent' readers, whose reading enriches them and translates both directly and indirectly into constructive social practice - is very high. It is time to pay much more attention to the challenge of producing a culturally literate general readership, which would in turn, of course, constitute a strong market for texts and thus provide the strongest possible incentive for a varied body of imaginative creative writing.

New writing versus the 'classics'. This, again, is a wholly false dichotomy. These are mutually interdependent categories, and correspondingly of equal value. New writing keeps the classics alive, not least by replenishing the life of the literary culture of which the classics remain a vital part; and the classics help make new writing possible - the past is always inescapably implicated in the present and contributes (implicitly and/or explicitly) to any new literary development. In Wales, new writing talent is being successfully fostered by organizations like the Academi, by publishing outlets such as Gomer and Seren; and by highly significant new initiatives, such as the programme of subsidy the Welsh Books Council has recently acquired from the Welsh Arts Council. (The emphasis hitherto on 'quality' literature needs, however, to be relaxed somewhat once this latter scheme has bedded down, as there is a real need to encourage new writing at a variety of levels and in a variety of popular genres. Additional resources may well be needed to facilitate this expansion of the brief.) Creative writing departments in the higher education institutions certainly have a role to play. But these senior educational institutions also need to be encouraged - not least by financial initiatives - to address the whole issue of making classic literature available to a modern audience. Initiatives needed include the proper editing of key texts of historic significance (witness the enduring popularity of the edition of Emyr Humphreys's *A Toy Epic* that I edited for a schools and colleges market over a decade ago). As for the reprinting of important texts, the on-line Books from the Past scheme currently being developed by the Welsh Books Council promises to make a revolutionary contribution in this regard, but there is also room for a print series such as the magnificent Library of America series that is a great, popular monument to the literary achievements of the USA. The natural custodians of the literary past, in all its rich complexity, are the scholars and critics: there is therefore need to train a new young generation of these, whose task it will then be to create the scholarly and educational milieu necessary for fostering a proper modern appreciation of a historic body of creative writing. There is also a need to enable quality academic presses, such as the University of Wales Press, to foster scholarship by collaborating with scholars on the preparation and publication of important scholarly editions and historical and critical studies: the

present funding arrangements for the University of Wales Press (not least the support it obtains through HEFCW) is woefully inadequate and is badly in need of review before the Press collapses under the financial strain.

In this and in other related connections, one of the main challenges facing the National Assembly is the formation, through the agency of some such funding body as HEFCW, of a Higher Education network of interlinked research centers for Welsh Writing in English. While housed within existing institutions across Wales, these centers should be co-operative (not mutually competitive) and should, ideally, constitute a single, federal structure; a National Institute for the Advanced Study of the Anglophone literary culture of Wales. And the Institute should be provided, through a properly financed University of Wales Press, with an adequate outlet for its publications: scholarship dies unless it is able to circulate.

Current difficulties and obstacles. These are so many that I see no point in listing them here. (See my previous document for more detail.) Some of them are implicit in the foregoing remarks, but the list could be extended almost indefinitely, as it ranges across every segment and every sector, from the educational sector, educated readership and public awareness through product range, marketing and publicity, media coverage, retail outlets, etc.

Opportunities

Despite the widespread malaise briefly identified above, developments over the last few years have prepared the ground for substantial progress, given an enlightened programme of selective financial support.

- investment in the Welsh Books Council has turned this organization into a key player in the field of Welsh writing in English and the WBC has the staff, the experience and the infrastructure to manage progress, given additional resources. The Joint Marketing Strategy recently formulated by a WBC Working Group of industry representatives and relevant partners represents far and away the best blueprint available for addressing one of the most urgent, and hitherto intractable, problems facing the publishing industry in Wales - that of reaching a much wider market. The WBC has experience of managing a commissions fund for Welsh-language writers, and it needs to introduce, in collaboration with publishers, a corresponding scheme for the English-language sector to increase the range of materials available for a prospectively large general, or popular, readership. And the WBC's current piloting of the on-line Books from the Past scheme, with Culturenet Cymru, represents an excellent way of making important historical texts readily available for educational and other purposes.
- Academi has, over the last few years, proved a highly effective, flexible, resourceful organization for bringing contemporary writers to public attention, and it has been careful to diversify so as to comprehend every locality in Wales and every form of literary culture within the country. Further investment in its author-led activities would clearly seem to be sensible, particularly given the move to the Millennium Centre which is imminent, and which would provide Academi with the

means of greatly enhancing its profile and impact.

- In Seren, Wales has a publishing house, of established reputation and proven record: a very high number of the significant Anglophone Welsh writers of the present and immediate past are Seren writers. Yet (like University of Wales Press) Seren remains seriously underfunded and under-resourced, and is badly served by the marketing and publicity structure available to it. For it, and other publishers (from Gomer, to more recent enterprises such as Honno and Parthian) to flourish, considerable investment is needed both in the presses themselves and in the infrastructure that is the life-support-system of any publishing industry. In this latter respect, the Joint Marketing Strategy again clearly points the way forward. But there remains the need of financial support directly to the presses themselves, to allow them to strengthen their staff, commission new work, promote their list, and foster new talent.
- As for the Higher Education sector, with which I am primarily involved, the situation here is at once critical and highly promising. It is highly promising in that Welsh universities are currently home (very much against the odds) to a substantial body of high-level, internationally respected scholars, who are committed to the study of Welsh writing in English. Moreover, these scholars have, for some twenty years, voluntarily collaborated on innumerable projects and initiatives in this field, at the very time when the ethos of fierce inter-institutional competition was being deliberately fostered by the funding policies of successive governments. There therefore exist, at present, conditions uniquely favorable to the major initiative (the formation of a National Institute for Research) outlined above. The situation is also, however, critical. These scholars are senior scholars, currently at the pinnacle of their profession, and correspondingly influential, but the period left to them in which to introduce and manage new initiatives is accordingly relatively short. And such has been the pattern of institutional development across Wales over the last several decades that it has militated against the training up of a successor generation of scholars in this field with experience in post. It therefore follows that now is the time for investment in the creation of a major research initiative that would ensure that the Anglophone culture of Wales would, in future, be provided with a strong base in education.

It goes without saying that the National Assembly is uniquely placed in respect of all the foregoing matters. It has the capacity to make a difference - for better or for ill. I can only devoutly hope that the Assembly is now ready to devote, through its Culture Committee, some of its precious energies of mind and will to creating an enabling environment within which the unique Anglophone culture -the `majority culture'- of the country can not only survive but flourish. (If the Assembly does not, then what real reason would it have for its existence?) And an essential, precious, element in that culture is Welsh writing in English.

Yours sincerely,

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Annex 1

CREW

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

ENGLISH-MEDIUM WELSH WRITING:

BRIEFING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

by

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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 20th and 21st 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 postindustrial civilization to explorations of geographical and cultural border territories, fictive anatomies of rural Wales, in-depth portrayals, of the north-eastern and northwestern 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 jeopardize 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 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'.
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- 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-centralized 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 book 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 practice 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