

Culture Committee - CC-10-01(p.2)

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Time: 10.00am-13.00pm
Venue: Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth

THE CULTURE COMMITTEE'S REVIEW OF THE WELSH LANGUAGE

Presentation by the Welsh Books Council

6 June 2001

The topic I would wish to discuss with you today is reading and the importance of reading.

We can note at least four reasons why reading is important:

- The importance of reading to achieve an educated society.
- The importance of reading in order to ensure a skilled workforce and thereby a prosperous society.
- The importance of reading to an informed and free-thinking population in an open and vibrant democracy.
- The importance of reading to a civilised nation which can take its rightful place within the community of such nations.

I'm sure there would be no fundamental disagreement with this broad picture, yet it may be worth stating, as reading and writing have no place in your background documents which refer only to the oral side of the language.

For us in Wales, the lessons of history are writ large. Without the influence of one particular book, there might well be no Welsh language to refer to today. The lessons to be learned from our cousins in Cornwall and Brittany are that, without the unifying influence and standardisation brought about by William Morgan's Bible in 1588, the language would have

declined into a patchwork of dialects. Thus, despite the strength of the oral language in sixteenth century Wales, Welsh – without the printed word – could well have disappeared.

Given that we live in the Age of Information, reading must be the single most important means of acquiring information and it will remain of paramount importance, not only by means of the computer, but by the new lease of life brought to writing by e-mail and text messaging by phone.

However I would like to return to ‘sooty marks on shredded trees’ and tell you why books remain so important.

- For the child learning to read, the book is all important. Reading is a skill that requires practice if it is to be mastered. We all know what happens if, in learning to play the piano, one merely attends the lessons with no practice in between; likewise reading. Reading practice entails getting caught up in a story to such a degree that one is compelled to turn the page to find out what happens next. Neither reading from a screen, nor reading books of information, engage the reader for a sufficient length of time to turn a novice reader into a fluent one.
- The book remains the only universally free medium available to everyone – regardless of age, status or sex – that can be consulted when and where an individual chooses. This is the legacy of our Public Library System, and makes books and reading a key component of any system aimed at including all.
- There is no doubt that the electronic book will be with us sooner rather than later, but the requirements of screen technology make it unlikely that these will be available free of charge for all – at least into the foreseeable future.
- I shall not labour the point of reading as a source of information; as the raw material that fuels wealth creation in our time in the same way as natural resources and technology fuelled such wealth in the past. I would, however, like to touch on some other aspects of reading, particularly in the realms of the narrative.

I mean reading as a uniquely creative process, where you – the reader – populate the stage of your imagination with the characters and events you read about. Consider what has happened when, after reading the book, you go to see the film and are disappointed because ‘That’s not what it looked like at all!’.

I mean reading as an activity which takes place on a different plane of consciousness. As a fluent reader, you don’t read letters, you don’t read words, you directly recreate meaning, and if you think about it, the book disappears and you are only dimly aware of the medium.

When in such a state, consider the capacity one has to vicariously experience events or empathise with a person over vast periods of time or space. An empathy which sheds

light on the communality of the human condition.

Coupled to the universal experience, however, are those rites of passage that give us our own identity as to what it is to be Welsh. St David, the Old Man of Pencader, Llywelyn the Great, Owain Glyndŵr, Twm Siôn Cati, Rebecca's Daughters, the Merthyr Riots, Branwen, the maiden made of flowers and so on.

And as to me, the individual, how the sudden rush of recognition that others have travelled this path and met these obstacles before me, and how they faced these, help crystallise my own unclear thoughts.

Indeed there is a real sense in which 'I am what I read'.

I must say I have been warned not to dwell on these 'airy-fairy' musings, but I feel sure they will strike a chord, because in here somewhere lies the essence of reading. Reading as a highly sophisticated linguistic exercise that entails not only reading the lines, but also reading between the lines and beyond the lines. It lies in the observation that 'poetry is only prose with more space between the words'.

I suppose what I ask is, that in a bilingual society we ensure that its citizens are able to function at this level in both languages, and that the materials are available to ensure this. By that I don't mean text-books, but genuine creative works of narrative and verse.

To the outside world, the unique contribution of Welsh Wales is that of 1500 years of unbroken linguistic creation of the highest order that we label literature. One of the results of the deliberations of which this meeting is a part, must be the will to ensure that such creation continues for another millennium and beyond and that we as the Welsh can take pride in a society able to respond to Shakespeare and Dafydd ap Gwilym, R. S. Thomas and Gwyn Thomas, J. K. Rowling and John Owen.

D GERAINT LEWIS

Honorary Secretary. Welsh Books Council

Assistant Director of Education and Community Services, Ceredigion County Council (with responsibility for Culture and Libraries)