

Hwyl Fawr

Editorial

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It was a struggle to work out how on earth to write this editorial, so I took a twilight walk up Constitution Hill, to gain some perspective. From there, if you squint a little as you look down on the sweep of the bay as the lights come on, Aberystwyth looks like a city in miniature, a Donostia perhaps, or a Rio. It was a clear early evening – the indistinct blue peaks of Yr Eryri and Pen Llŷn were visible across the horizon, so Cardigan Bay looked like a vast lake as you might find in Sub-Saharan Africa, Canada or the Caucasus. In moments of crisis your desire to be very much anywhere else than where you find yourself can lead the mind to trickery. But we are, prosaically, where we are; in this case juggling packing tape and spreadsheets in wintry mid Wales, in the midst of the administrative nightmare of winding up a beloved magazine; and from there to the dole queue.

But we're not quite there yet. There is still this issue left to launch – and, thanks to our contributors, what a beautifully defiant issue it is! Jan Morris once spoke of how she admired the 'chutzpah' of a small magazine that could call itself 'Planet'. It was this Welsh internationalism, this dizzyingly liberating play with scale, which first attracted me to the magazine. From a little office on the western periphery it has bypassed the London media agenda to connect on its own terms with the rest of the world, an independent spirit also over-reaching the cramped limits of the devolution settlement to imagine different futures for Wales. It has played a significant part in helping an often tragically divided nation understand itself better, transcending so many tedious culture wars over the decades. It has been both a weathercock and a signpost, attuned to the undercurrents, the emerging tensions and possibilities within Wales and the world, while also shaping readers' consciousness about everything from the Welsh language and national identity to climate change, neo-imperialism and racism. Countless readers have told me that *Planet* has changed the way they see themselves and the world forever, from when it was founded by Ned Thomas onwards.

It has often irreverently held powerful interests to account, a brave little light burning away almost undisturbed, sometimes needing protection from the chilling draughts of marketisation and political censure. Hand-packed

by ourselves, the magazine lands on doormats in almost every corner of Wales, and arrives in postbags everywhere from prisons to New York Public Library, Guyana to Russia, Stormont to Patagonia, Ivy League universities to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and most of the stateless nations of Europe, a global reach for Welsh culture that has taken decades to build up.

In an online event in 2020 to celebrate fifty years of *Planet*, I said that I was so excited to discover *Planet* back in 2006, as it was a miracle a magazine like this was allowed to exist in such a philistine, cynical, neoliberal world. It seems this has finally caught up with us. How? The explanation is decidedly dispiriting, and much of the picture is as yet unclear, but an (abridged) account needs to be given.

Every few years there is a competitive tender for funding from the Books Council of Wales (BCW) for magazines. Magazines like *Planet* depend on this funding for their core costs, and couldn't operate without it. BCW receive funding from Creative Wales, and while BCW are formally autonomous, and responsible for decisions with regard to the distribution of grants, they receive funding from Welsh Government in line with an agreed operational plan. In November we received the devastating news that we would not receive any funding from April 2024 onwards.

Since 2009 we have experienced successive reductions in our BCW core funding for reasons unrelated to need: our current core grant is less than half what we received prior to devolution, when Thatcher was in power, even, not even factoring in inflation. The extent of the reductions were initially due to WAG cuts to BCW, then to Welsh Government misinterpreting changes to European Commission state aid restrictions as applying to magazines like *Planet* (following our research the Directorate-General for Competition in Brussels had concluded that this was an erroneous interpretation of the regulations) and finally, in 2018 as the BCW panel decided they wanted to fund a wider range of websites and magazines. During this period funding targets had got ever more demanding and interventionist, requiring additional staff hours. Business costs have also risen sharply. While we have recently been successful in applications for small supplementary BCW grants, which we were very grateful for, these were to (partially) address specific *additional* costs and losses emerging from contingencies that emerged after 2019, such as the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and ongoing cancer treatment; plus a small grant for extra activity around our fiftieth anniversary. Our editorial standards have been consistently praised by funders.

The direct consequences of these reductions in core grant levels (and

nature of the targets) were ever-increasing unpaid overtime hours for staff like myself who were also company directors. While we could only afford to pay me for twenty-seven hours, I usually work between fifty and seventy hours per week, sometime well over eighty to keep the magazine viable. Staff have been paid £12 per hour since 2012; and while we fulfilled all our obligations as employers within our desperately restricted means, the funding cuts had other impacts on working conditions as detailed in an editorial I wrote in issue 248. We have been alerting BCW to these issues for over a decade in our annual reports and franchise applications, as funding worsened further and further, to no avail. In light of this, in 2019 we staff weighed up whether the magazine should continue, and decided it should, due to our love for it as a collective endeavour, alongside more vigorous lobbying for better funding. What has prevented us from quitting has been the support we offer each other as a grassroots micro-organisation with a progressive ethos, whereby staff are always in a majority in board meetings and are all paid the same wage per hour.

The working conditions determined by funding reductions had become unbearable for a number of publications in both languages, and many of us could no longer balance our budgets at all, despite strenuous income-raising activities. So collectively we publishers (most prominently *Planet* and *New Welsh Review*) worked with authors to launch an open letter addressed to Welsh Government, Creative Wales and BCW campaigning for adequate grant levels to enable ethical working conditions. It was signed by 174 authors plus the NUJ, Wales PEN Cymru, Society of Authors Wales, Cymdeithas yr Iaith and the Association of Welsh Writers in English. The campaign was initiated to halt this race to the bottom in working conditions, and done so in order to uplift everyone – all existing publications and those that may emerge in the future. In my editorial in issue 248, I expressed the anxiety publishers feel about speaking out about these issues, as they fear the magazines they love will lose funding as a consequence. However, we were encouraged that some BCW staff expressed their support for the letter and wished the campaign luck in lobbying Creative Wales.

This autumn we drew up our application for our core funding, submitting two budgets – one for the (very approximate) maximum per annum, ‘anticipated’ to be ‘c. £55,000’ in the tender documents (but with no sum ringfenced), and having liaised with BCW, another for an amount we demonstrated in our report would enable much more sustainable working conditions and the ability to withstand rising costs (£75,500 – up from £45,000 we currently receive, but less than the £93,892 we received in 2008).

During this period, Wales Arts Review announced in an editorial that they would not be applying for their core funding at all and would thus wind up their own website, citing BCW's unsustainable 'Slow Death Grants', a 'status quo' that would 'kill us all'.

We were notified by BCW that the franchise panel had concluded £75,500 was beyond the maximum we could receive due to the limited funding available and the quality of the applications across the scheme, noting we had demonstrated that £55,000 would not enable sustainable working conditions, and that our funding was to not be continued. We were then surprised to learn from a BCW announcement released a few weeks later that the panel had decided £85,000 of the overall £180,000 budget per annum for English-language periodicals would be kept aside for a brand new magazine 'with a sustainable business model' (yet to be launched, that hadn't submitted an application in 2023). This would have a narrower remit and be less ambitious in scope than *Planet* (a literary magazine, rather than a cultural/literary/political magazine like ourselves). The 'precise vision' for the new venture will be drawn up by the BCW Subcommittee in February 2024.

There has been an outpouring of disbelief and outrage, including expressions of what can only be described as grief, from the reading public, writers, organisations, publishers and politicians at both *Planet* and *New Welsh Review* losing funding. There is further dismay that the extent of this 'cultural vandalism' is needless – with £85,000 left to disburse. We have been overwhelmed by calls for petitions, investigations, lobbying, protests and fundraising efforts. We are very grateful for all support and ideas, which have really lifted our morale. However the legacy of the funding cuts, combined with illness and the administration needed to wind up the magazine leaves us with little capacity to campaign, challenge or commentate further at this stage, without risking severe burnout.

Beyond our immediate situation, there are wider issues with regard to the current funding environment that would need addressing before it would be feasible to consider relaunching the magazine, that there is not space to critique here. It's our hope that the open letter campaign can evolve into a platform for constructive analysis of present problems with the system and proposals for how these can be overcome.

There are also concerns that BCW may potentially no longer fund (or substantially fund) political coverage in English. Small amounts of funding had been granted to *Poetry Wales*, and to Nation.Cymru and *Welsh Agenda* for 'cultural content including book reviews and providing a digital free at the

point of use platform for the publishing sector in Wales', with a tiny amount for *The Paper* (the remit for which is as yet unknown). By far the largest amount of funding has been put aside for a future literary magazine. Any narrowing of the parameters of English-language magazines and websites would not only mean a lack of parity with Welsh-language magazines and websites, but would have far more profound effects.

It is inherent to Welsh identity, democracy and internationalism for politics and culture to be seamlessly enmeshed. Periodicals like *Planet* are in an unbroken radical tradition reaching back to the eighteenth-century 'revolutionary pamphlets' celebrated by Robert Minhinnick in this issue, via titles such as the *Red Dragon* and *Welsh Outlook*. This was upheld by everyone from Richard Price to Raymond Williams, and latterly through, for example, literary activism for Palestine from our National Poet Hanan Issa. Whether through hybrid forms that animate political issues – such as the English-language equivalent of the *ysgrif* and more recent developments in creative non-fiction – or through juxtaposing together current affairs articles with cultural features within the pages of an issue, this material continues to be vital. Now that earlier platforms for radical politics and self-taught education such as chapels and working men's institutes are largely defunct, periodicals are key contributors to a secular, post-industrial public sphere. In small yet indispensable ways our periodicals collage together a collective conscience through their debate on culture and current affairs, far more meaningfully than via social media and click-bait.

Zooming out away from the specificities of BCW, why did a number of readers on social media express their dismay at the funding decisions in terms of 'the failure of devolution'? We are not so self-aggrandising to believe that the demise of a small magazine represents the height of disillusionment with the devolved professional-managerial class and its associated bodies; rather it was just one sad and wretched example of the contradictions between neoliberalism and social democracy that beset our institutions, as discussed in relation to magazine funding in my editorial in issue 248, and which require further analysis elsewhere in light of the latest decisions.

Part of the answer is that so many organisations that were once part of the fabric of a civil society that took an oppositional approach to the British state – campaigning for and incubating a different, better kind of polity – have post-devolution become co-opted into a state that increasingly resembles the neoliberal one it was devolved from, and are tasked with enforcing its austerity (with a veneer of progressivism and Welsh cultural specificity). This tugging at the communal fabric is often experienced as a

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painful tearing within institutions, and indeed within the consciences of many of those who work for them.

What now? There is a compulsion to retreat to the grassroots, to abandon hope in our devolved institutions, to gather round a campfire of funding paperwork, and start zines from garden sheds, crowdfund for podcasts, go rogue as renegade pamphleteers. The maverick spirit of the grassroots lights up this whole issue (as do numerous fires – spot them!): salvaging human agency and expression from AI, building bridges at community level as peace activists; and answers to the crises of our time from folklore, radical anthologies, Danish notions of egalitarian ‘enlightenment’, and everyday ‘structures of feeling’.

However, not only would periodicals be financially unsustainable without public funding, it would be premature to give up on the prospect of radical, independent media being adequately supported arms-length via the state, as it once was. The open letter campaign not only exposed the blatant contradictions between the current funding regime and the Welsh Government’s Fair Work and media deficit agendas, but garnered support from influential figures including politicians. Furthermore, institutions evolve, and values are often deeply contested within them. Alternatively, funding responsibilities can shift to other institutions. Partly in response to the BCW decision regarding the Newsquest-owned Corgi Cymru, the NUJ are lobbying for a Wales Media Institute to fund our media, and for public interest journalism to be redefined as a public service to receive adequate funding, and to end the punishing pretence that this activity could be commercially viable in a small nation. The creeping marketisation of Welsh magazines is *not* inevitable – indeed is increasingly anachronistic, against the tide of so many other European nations who achieve sustainable media subsidy: for example the Irish government recently started funding a far greater number of cultural magazines, with significantly higher grants to each.

Until we can go back to the future, *Planet* goes dormant. We’ve been here before: shutting down in 1979 and re-launching in 1985, and we dearly hope that we can one day land on your doormats again.