

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales
Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / The Culture, Welsh Language and
Communications Committee
Independent Review of Support for Publishing and Literature in Wales
Ymateb gan Gillian Clarke / Evidence from Gillian Clarke

As one of four, including my husband, David, who set up Ty Newydd as our Welsh Writing Centre 27 years ago, I was shocked by the Medwin Hughes report. It is shallow and inaccurate. No member of the panel visited Ty Newydd, or spoke to the staff, or contacted me, its inaugurator and President, and National Poet of Wales for the previous eight years.

As you know, Ty Newydd is our Welsh version of the Arvon Foundation in England, established by Ted Hughes, and of Moniack Mhor in Scotland. Before setting up our Welsh Writers Centre, I had tutored 50 courses for the Arvon Foundation. Ted Hughes wrote to the Welsh Arts Council in support of my bid for a centre in Wales, and his wife, Carol, came in person to speak to them. David and I found a suitable house to rent, and, through writers' donations, I raised £25,000. The Welsh Arts Council matched it. We worked with two others to restore, clean, decorate and furnish the building. Laura Ashley donated bed linen. Other companies gave furniture. Ty Newydd held its first poetry course in April 1990.

Ty Newydd's purpose is to encourage reading and raise standards of writing by enabling people to work with the best writers. Courses in poetry, prose, fiction, drama, film, and other specialist areas are run throughout the year. I tutor two poetry masterclasses, one with the Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy (who tutors nowhere else but Moniack Mhor), and one with another poet-tutor. The report's panel members visited no course, spoke to no tutor, and no participant, and did not contact me.

TN was independent of the WAC until Dai Smith, Chairman of WAC, instructed us to unite with Literature Wales. It was difficult for Director Sally Baker to work under the new regime, so she retired. Tragic events hit the staff. One retired, one died, the newly appointed head fell ill, and after a period with no-one actively in charge, he was forced to retire. We lost customers. After much repair work we now have an excellent team, and have recovered lost ground.

FACTS THE PANEL DID NOT CONSIDER OR GOT WRONG:

1. Ty Newydd courses do have a strong record of helping writers to develop writing careers and to get published. Below is a small sample list of published poets/writers whom I first met as unpublished unknowns, either in my work as Poet-in-School, or at Ty Newydd:

Alice Oswald, Horatio Clare, Adam Horovitz, Will Owen Roberts. Bethan Gwanas, Paul Henry, Owen Sheers, Samantha Wynne Rhydderch, Liz Lefroy, Jane Clarke (Bloodaxe) Lizzie Fincham. (Cinnamon)

2. TN's equally important purpose is to get people reading, and to widen and deepen their reading. We need readers as well as writers. It is not our function to make everyone a published author, but to spread literature and literacy to all.

3. Those who come to Ty Newydd from other parts of Wales, other parts of Britain, Ireland, Europe and the USA, experience Wales and hear Welsh spoken. Many become admirers and supporters of our language and our literatures. The diplomatic power of TN is incalculable.

4. The report is incorrect in several details: there is no Writers House like Ty Newydd in Ireland, which is why so many Irish people come to Ty Newydd. A recent Irish star is Jane Clarke, who attended several Masterclasses, and whose collection, 'The River,' she worked on at TN. Published by Bloodaxe, it has won several literary prizes.

5. One of TN's most ardent supporters, who co-tutors a Masterclass with me every year, is Carol Ann Duffy, the Poet Laureate.

6. There are open courses for all to apply for (as there should be) but for the two annual Masterclasses we select the most promising applicants. Thus the remark in the report about 'retired hobbyists' is insulting and false. In fact, as well as masterclasses, Ty Newydd welcomes the young, the elderly, the disabled, the lonely, those suffering from dementia and those who help them. Language for such people, and those who work with them, has an enabling, curative power. The tutors*, all published writers, are appropriately chosen for each group of participants.

(*It should be noted that the tutor's fee gives a writer, often on a very low income, a useful small return for their creative work.

Writers-on-Tour

My own encounter with many of the writers listed above was first made in their primary or secondary school under Writers-on-Tour. Evidence from teachers could be gathered to support the success of poet visits. Why were they not asked? On a visit to read to patients in a Mental Hospital in Abergavenny, I witnessed an old

man, an elected mute who had not spoken a word for ten years, stand and recite Wordsworth's 'Daffodils'. My poem 'Miracle on St David's Day' tells this story.

National Poet of Wales

This is my other area of experience, and I wish to add detail to the bare mention made by the report: the NPW has a powerful ambassadorial role. Wales used to be invisible in the British literary scene. In my eight years tenure I was invited to represent Wales at festivals in England, Ireland, Scotland, France, Italy, Spain, Luxembourg, the USA, Bangladesh and Mexico. During the centenary years of Dylan Thomas, Alun Lewis, and others, organised by Literature Wales, I re-read every word of the writer celebrated, and was commissioned to write poems, stories, articles and to give readings and lectures in London, Sheffield, Hay-on-Wye, Dublin, St Andrews, Edinburgh, to name but a few. I judged a young Muslim poetry competition. I met the Irish President in Swansea, (Dylan Thomas year) and was invited to the Yeats 150 year centenary in Sligo, where I read in pubs, a graveyard, and on a boat to Inisfree with the Irish Ambassador to London. These encounters made friendships across borders and cultures, and the doors are open for our current National poet, Ifor ap Glyn, to continue LitWales' good work.