The Welsh Books Council

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High on a cliff overlooking Aberystwyth is Castell Brychan – the tartan, or plaid castle. Whatever lies behind the name, Castell Brychan has the look of a fortress, and yet it was built initially as a private house for a head of the university’s music department. After that it was for many years a seminary for Roman Catholic priests until, in the 1980s, it became the headquarters of the Welsh Books Council.

The primary aim and purpose of the Welsh Books Council (WBC) is to support and encourage the publishing of books in the Welsh language. As part of this remit it is concerned with the promotion and distribution of books within Wales and provides marketing, design and editorial assistance for publishers, covering books for adults as well as for children and teenagers. Books in English are not neglected and similar support is provided for the production of materials to do with Wales and things Welsh. The WBC has recently taken over the Welsh Arts Council’s responsibility for distributing grants for books and magazines of Welsh interest, this mainly being in the literary domain.

As noted, the WBC provides specialist help, at low or subsidized cost, either through its own staff or through specially commissioned freelance editors, proof-readers and designers. Publishers are offered a complete editorial service – editing typescripts and correction of proofs; while authors are offered a manuscript assessment service, and a reader’s report can be arranged for both complete works and incomplete pieces. Thereafter the author is directed to the various publishing options available. This service is provided free of charge. With regard to the manuscript assessment service, both fiction and non-fiction, the Council draws on the expertise of a select group of external readers. The aim is to provide a fair and balanced report so that recommendations can be made regarding the publishability of the material.

The Council also arranges courses in creative writing, and occasionally in editing and proof-reading, this being done in conjunction with various professional bodies as required. (Is there a role here for the Society of Indexers, I wonder?)

Publishers are by their nature concerned with accepting and commissioning manuscripts; however, where gaps are perceived in existing publishing programmes the WBC will commission new titles. In the past, this has been evident in the area of teenage fiction and children’s books. Another venture has been in the field of detective fiction in Welsh, both of original books by Welsh authors and also the translation of established English crime fiction titles by the likes of P. D. James and Dick Francis. It has also had a significant involvement in adaptations and co-productions of illustrated non-fiction books. Such books, when commissioned, are placed with an appropriate publisher.

Most Welsh publishers are small, many are printer-publishers and publishing is often an adjunct to general printing; others are part-time ‘parlour’ publishers. This does not suggest any lack of seriousness; rather, the opposite is true. As one publisher, Robat Gruffudd, of Y Lolfa, has said: ‘No Welsh publisher is in it for the money’. Academic publishing in English in Wales is predominantly from the University of Wales Press and from specialized and quasi-government organizations. (At the present moment I am indexing a soon-to-be-published title for the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales.) Publications in both Welsh and English cover the full range of subjects and types. In the year 2000, 682 titles were published in the Welsh language, including 76 reprints and new editions. In the same year, 592 English-language books of Welsh interest were published, including 49 reprints and new editions.

In Wales, books in Welsh are mainly found in bookshops specializing in Welsh-language materials. Books in English of Welsh interest will be carried by the same bookshops, and also by national chains such as W. H. Smith and Ottakars. Aberystwyth, with a population including university students of around 20,000 manages to support five bookshops in the town, as well as a branch of Waterstones on the university campus. In addition, there are shops specializing in discounted books and an Oxfam second-hand bookshop. Of the town bookshops, one deals solely with Welsh-language materials and with Welsh-interest materials in English. It can be seen that Aberystwyth has a strong ‘book culture’. On another hill overlooking the town is the National Library of Wales, one of the six libraries of national deposit in Britain and Ireland. Further up the same hill is the university, with its library and, a mile out of town, is its Department of Information Studies. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that of the 20 or so members of the Society of Indexers in Wales, five are to be found in the vicinity of Aberystwyth.

Where does indexing stand in the realm of Welsh-language publishing? In all the material I received when I visited the Welsh Books Council, there was no mention of indexing. It is of course part of the editorial process, along with proof-reading and copy-editing, but there is only one indexer in Indexers Available who claims familiarity with the Welsh language, and he has yet to index a book in Welsh. Yet indexes are prepared, mainly by authors, and whoever the author can persuade to take on the job – the author’s wife, or husband perhaps? I was told that there is a librarian in the town who indexes Welsh books. I know of people in the area, with Welsh as their first language, who have been, but are no longer, members of the Society of Indexers. As far as Welsh-language publishing is concerned, indexing could hardly be seen as even a part-time job; and if that were the only material indexed I can well believe that someone might not see the value of joining the Society when they may not index even one title in a year.
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Where’s the recipe?

My only complaint about the French editions of the Dictionnaire (Le grand dictionnaire de cuisine by Alexandre Dumas père) is that they lack a good index. You find a likely recipe, forget to mark it, and then wonder what entry to look up. In the end you are obliged to leaf through the whole thing. A mighty task with some editions.

Jane Grigson, Food with the famous (Atheneum, New York, 1980)

Authorial powers still perilous

In Will Self’s short story ‘Flytopia’ (quoted in The Indexer 22(4), p. 196), we are shown a fictional ‘indexer’ by profession at work:

Jonathan had reached the term ‘nef’ before going out to do the shopping . . . He plugged the three letters into the word-search and hit the control key. The computer went about its work, chomping through the text, looking for instances.

The Author (Spring 2003, p. 4), in a note headed ‘Indexes’, commented on the ‘quality’ aspect:

There are various indexing computer programs . . . Some at least are very unsophisticated. They may well be not much more than a word-search service which then gives the page number for the word wherever found. Clearly an index compiled by such a programme [sic] will be lacking in complexity, and . . . will probably be far from lacking in spurious listings of casual mentions of key words.

Equally clearly, there are authors who believe that word-searching is the method by which indexes are compiled, and indeed compile indexes to their own books that way – indexes ‘lacking in complexity’ and abounding in ‘spurious listing of mentions of key words’, indeed.

Most disturbingly to the professional indexer, authors seem also to be using the word-search facility to ‘check’ indexes compiled to their works by professional indexers – then complaining of indexes’ having ‘missed’ any references not included. As I wrote in The Indexer in 1999:

They have the PC-bestowed capability to flag all terms they choose in their text and have the results printed out in alphabetical order. They may then compare these pseudo-concordances with the selective indexes supplied as commissioned by their publishers . . . This automatic production of a pseudo-index can prove a very dangerous tool in the hands of an author who does not understand the principles of indexing or accept that any word he has written can be regarded as insignificant – not meriting a place in an index. (Bell, 1999: 122)

I there recounted an example of this mispractice, writing of a biography of a playwright to which I had compiled the index. At sight of the index, the author appeared to have called up on his PC screen all occurrences of particular words, printed out the lists of (typescript) page numbers, and sent them to the publisher as ‘references the indexer has missed’. They included references for ‘Christ, Jesus’ to pages where characters in the plays said, ‘Oh, Christ’. Long, useless strings of minimal page references cluttered the top lines of my carefully selected and subdivided main entries.

The crucial issue in this misjudgement of indexes by (some) authors seems to me to be the assessment of ‘significance’. Besides the possible reluctance to acknowledge insignificance in any part of their own text, there may be such misapprehension as illustrated in the following episode. Recently I indexed an academic book by a first-time author, and found to my horror that she had added to my index several names that appeared only in lists in the footnotes, where no proper information was given about any. I protested, explaining:

‘Indexes go by the significance of individual items in the text rather than by categories of “in”, “out”:’ The author replied: ‘The additions I made refer to names such as Mitford, Nancy, Huth, Angela, and James Wilmot, Earl of Rochester – hardly insignificant.’

It seems to me that the great need at the moment for professional indexers is to convince authors that the criterion for making an entry in an index is that, by turning to the place cited, the reader will find significant information about the person or topic entered – NOT to compile a complete list of ALL references to them; and that a special skill of the indexer is the making of a judicious selection. Otherwise we remain liable to receive complaints, either directly or passed on by the publishers – ‘the indexer has missed all these references . . .’


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