

Kathryn Gray: Casting your mind back to the 1990s, did you perceive changes in the Welsh literary landscape over the course of that decade? Were you conscious of the emergence of new voices? Did it feel like a dynamic time?

Robert Minhinnick: I co-tutored, with Gillian Clarke, the first course at Tŷ Newydd, the National Writers' Centre of Wales, in 1990. I encountered promising 'younger' writers through the 1990s, and was excited by Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, Owen Sheers and others I met in Tŷ Newydd. Then, towards the end of my *Poetry Wales* stint, Zoë Brigley. Fresh voices? Yes. For me the 1990s were dynamic because of the confluence of environmental work with my writing. I used to go into Friends of the Earth Cymru charged up... We organised 'green writing weekends' around Wales, and a similar course at Tŷ Newydd. Sally Baker and Elis Gwyn Jones at Tŷ Newydd played an important role by creating a congenial centre. Without Tŷ Newydd I would have had a poorer concept of what Wales is, so I benefitted personally. I used my Tŷ Newydd – and Arvon – tutoring experience to think about *Poetry Wales*. But my experience in Friends of the Earth (1981–1994) was highly significant. The green movement became inextricable from my writing. But I noted Mike Jenkins's *Poetry Wales* editorship which was based on his own politics...

KG: How did you come to edit *Poetry Wales*? The journal has a long and distinguished history since its establishment, in 1965, by Meic Stephens... Was it a daunting task, to produce the journal of poetry from Wales?

RM: In May 1995, I returned to Wales from a residency in Saskatoon. I think Richard Poole had recently resigned as *Poetry Wales* editor, maybe without serving notice. Not that he was so obliged. Not long after this I received an informal request from Seren to become the new editor. But it was made plain there was no money. I declined.

I think five issues were 'guest-edited', and around March 1997 the vacancy was advertised. I applied and was interviewed by Cary Archard. I remember him being tough and I came out tamping. But I was appointed, with a stipend. (This had doubled by the time I left, eleven years later. But I continually had to press.)

My first issue coincided with the *Yes/No* Referendum in Wales, 1997. I was determined to begin positively if there was a Yes vote, convinced it would be momentous. I remembered the writers who described the devastating *No* vote in the referendum of 1979. How it depressed Glyn Mathias, John Tripp, Harri Webb, Raymond Garlick, Nigel Jenkins, and so on, and was a cultural cloud over everyone.

Margaret Minhinnick and I had been to the *Yes* party in Cardiff the night of the 1997 vote, and in the car on the way home we heard the last result (in Welsh) come in from Carmarthen. (My Welsh, by the way, is terrible). We thought that would change everything. I wrote lines from the first editorial in my head whilst driving home. It had to be submitted the same day.

One week earlier I'd organised a *Yes* poetry night in what was the Royal Hotel, Cardiff. John Humphrys of BBC's *Today* programme attended, and I read a poem about the *No* campaign and Carys Pugh, one of its figureheads, called 'If you don't live in our street...'. I despised what she stood for. To me, the *No* Campaign was Welsh UKIP. Indeed, UKIP wanted *No*.

Iwan Llwyd came from Bangor and performed. (It is typical that writers from north and south Wales should get to know each other in... *Saskatchewan*.) So I wrote 'A Country that Said Yes', and resolved to make editorials a gripping part of the magazine. Editorials are a magazine's first gear. They're vital. Merely listing contents is inadequate. Poetry editors have to know how to write prose. That *Yes* reading, by the way, featured Iwan Llwyd, Nigel Jenkins and the editor of *Red Kite*, Kate Baillie. All dead far too early.

KG: Did you have a very clear creative and cultural project when it came to editing the magazine? Under your tenure, the magazine was highly influential in providing a platform for women. Were you conscious of the emergence of female voices and was there a sense of redress? Were you conscious of the need to bring women's poetry and opinion to the fore? It's interesting to note that women are now central figures in Anglophone Welsh poetic culture... Quite a contrast with the past.

RM: I remembered how I felt when I had my first poems published in 1972. I wanted to replicate that for others. I'm a twin, by the way, and my sister wrote before I did. We all wrote in Penyfai. And twenty years later there seemed to be several new women writers, maybe encouraged by the burgeoning of creative writing centres and classes – but not yet universities. UK colleges never led the way but reacted to cultural change, learning from the US. (Maybe Glamorgan was different, via Tony Curtis.)

Anyway, I'm not clear how universities work, as I've never been an academic. But I thought Welsh-speaking women would be 'political' and 'engaged', and would understand what I was looking for. Sioned Puw Rowlands? Francesca Rhydderch? I didn't know them but they surely 'got it'. I saw them as commentators who enlivened the culture. Others like Frances Williams, Zoë Skoulding, yourself, Sarah Corbett, Pascale Petit, Nerys Williams came later, and some wrote essays during my tenure. For me, the essays were as vital as the poetry. I was disappointed that Gwyneth Lewis declined an invitation to be an essayist, but she was already well established. And clearly, Welsh-speakers punch harder than their weight.

Women were and are overdue to play a leading cultural role in Wales, which is *desperate* for them. I hoped some of that role might be via *Poetry Wales*. We launched one issue in New York with Eddie Ladd, the performer... She seemed pretty radical. Earlier, in Friends of the Earth Cymru around 1990, we employed Richard Morgan, who was part of *Brith Gof*. He's now part of *Good Cop Bad Cop*. So, influences bled into each other, with results that might be seen only many years later.

KG: *Poetry Wales* became a very international, outward-looking journal under your editorship. Can you talk a little about the importance of internationalism for you and how you incorporated internationalism into your aims for the magazine – and, indeed, the reception of *Poetry Wales's* contributors?

RM: For me, *Poetry Wales* coincided almost exactly with Tony Blair's period as Prime Minister and the newly devolving Wales, post-1997. Margaret Minhinnick interviewed Blair, when he was Labour energy spokesman, for the HTV *Grassroots* programme in 1995. *Grassroots* included arts pieces. She asked Zephaniah, Ifor Thomas, Ozi Osmond and others. To us, it was self-evident that 'environmentalism' and 'art' were one. So, there were all sorts of creative crossovers.

I was helping devise *Grassroots* by fax from Saskatoon Public Library, eight hours behind Wales. One of the ideas brought to Margaret was the legacy of US military bases in Wales. From that came 'depleted uranium', which meant our new charity, Sustainable Wales, interviewing UK Iraq war veterans in Barry and Birmingham, and then the American west and Iraq itself.

'Environmentalism' bled into *Poetry Wales*, thus our 'Poetry and War' issue from 1999. The cover was a photograph by Cassandra Garner from the first Gulf War, that 'Mother of all Wars'. The Arts Council of Wales paid for me to go to Baghdad, when it was dicey. But that visit will influence my writing for the rest of my life. Thank you, Arts Council of Wales. (I'd have gone anyway.)

Crucially, there was money in the arts. And the elections that brought in Blair, then devolution, were the best political days I've seen. So far. Real hope, new energy. Britpop? 'Cool Cymru'? It was in the air around that time. Phoney? For some. Maybe for me. But I wanted my *Poetry Wales* to reflect new energy.

Agencies such as the Arts Council of Wales, Welsh Literature Abroad and Literature Across Frontiers were either being revamped or gaining strength, thinking what could be achieved internationally. They wanted to work with 'national' outlets such as *Poetry Wales*. So I pushed at an opening door.

At the same time, Sustainable Wales was thriving, all through my *Poetry Wales* period. For a time we could employ people on real wages. Thank you, Tony Blair and all at the Senedd... (Don't often hear that these days.)

However, reactions in Wales to my *Poetry Wales* were sometimes unsympathetic. Lithuanian or Brazilian or Dutch poetry in translation? Issue after issue. *Jiw Annwl!* And there's the bloody editor 'launching' those issues, i.e. swanning about at the taxpayers' expense, in an aeroplane when he drivels on about climate change. (Several other writers made foreign visits because of *Poetry Wales*.)

This was highlighted when I edited *Poetry Wales: 40 Years* in 2005 and launched the book in Cardiff. Founder, Meic Stephens, and former editor Sam Adams turned up and heckled. Which was fine. Poetry should be like that, able to

infuriate... So, the night was lively. I heckled back. Some people are always infuriated. Usually ex-editors. And I'm an ex-editor. I understand.

But those years taught me a good deal about 'translation'. We always had a Welsh-language editor: Iwan Llwyd, for a short period, then Grahame Davies. But I didn't like the quality of the English translations we were getting from Welsh or other languages. Yes, they might have been *faithful*, but too often they were feeble as English poems. Translation is not 'copying' into another language, but about musical versions and experiment. It should be exciting...

But translating into English became too easy. People who possessed no poetic sensibility yet English-language proficiency were doing it. Poems were being 'translated' by the literal-minded and the doggedly faithful. That's why I wrote *The Adulterer's Tongue: Six Welsh Poets*, published by Carcanet: to make 'translation' different, and to excite myself. For the same reasons I wrote editorials which became essays. I reasoned if I was excited, others would be. I'm grateful to Menna Elfyn for encouraging my translation ideas. She was on 'the inside' and an *enabler*... Meic Stephens was aghast. He hated *The Adulterer's Tongue*...

Yes, some people were infuriated by my *Poetry Wales*. But Seren was always supportive and never pressurised me to act differently. There was no committee. Nobody else. It's changed now. But I was free to make every decision.

At the same time I was searching for 'new' writers, as an editor must. Yes, there were the women, but where were the men? The young men, hopefully, but not necessarily, from Wales?

An early issue profiled young male poets because they were harder to find... (Where's Jon Mitchell? He used to send poems by phone from Japan.) And my search went on for writers from the Valleys or Bridgend, etc. I had dreams of finding poets in Hatchet Land (Galon Uchaf) or the Rhymney, where my father came from. Yes, I was idealistic. Still am. But after several years I suspected I was motivated by a wish to discover writers *like myself*. That's a danger for editors – wanting to clone themselves. Is it narcissism? Self-infatuation?

KG: Can you talk about some of the voices fostered in the magazine during your editorship? Your name has come up regularly in interviews with poets; many have cited an appearance in *Poetry Wales* as among their first publications or important in strengthening their profile. It seems to me that you are regarded by many as one of the architects of the post-1997 poetry scene in Wales. And you certainly evidenced a clear interest in discovery...

RM: Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, Owen Sheers... Pascale Petit who was, of course, 'discovered'. Owen too? But everybody is already 'discovered', of course. I encouraged Pascale's 'Aztechnology', my word for her essays. But writers didn't have to be a particular nationality. Simply, talented.

Maybe I badgered Samantha, who was not pushy. Owen had deliberately set out to be a writer from a very early age. Indeed, Owen Sheers is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Later, I liked Damian Walford Davies and Richard Marggraf Turley because of the musicality of their poems. I'm glad Damian Walford Davies's volumes are on sale in the Sustainable Wales shop. But these poets were academics and I always felt that academia was no real friend of the writer. That's changed since the explosion of Creative Writing.

I was very keen to use Duncan Bush, whom I think is one of the very best writers. He guaranteed good copy. I interviewed him twice because he said excoriating things about Wales. Wince-inducing truths. Bush was, and still is, necessary. Paul Henry is a fine lyric poet who I urged to write more ambitiously. Yet he seemed reluctant. Neither could Samantha write prose. For me, that's a failure for a poet.

Of course, poets just... *stop*. The cover of my first issue featured Hilary Llewellyn Williams. I admire her work but I think she's on 'sabbatical'... Yes, lots of (most?) writers stop. Or get stopped. Doesn't mean they're not writers any more. And at the end of my stint John Barnie was excellent, with poetry, essays. Simply a marvelous literary friend for a publication such as *Poetry Wales*.

KG: Do you think there are challenges for the Welsh poet writing in English? Do you feel that there can still be something of an invisibility problem for Welsh poets, in impacting on the British scene? Do you feel that there may be the natural inclination to assimilate to the British scene – you once commented in an editorial about the sense of ambition on the part of many new voices from Wales, the desire to be a part of the scene of festivals, tours, and prizes. Do you think this may have consequences – that there may be a dilution of 'Welshness', of distinction, in poetry from Wales?

RM: Wales is a state of mind and there are a thousand Waleses. A bit like the vanished hall of distorting mirrors in the old Porthcawl fairground. Editing *Poetry Wales* I learned I had to develop my own philosophy. Also, I wanted writers to mythologise the places they write about. I think of Borges with *Palermo*, Patrick White with *Sarsaparilla*, Guillelvis's *Brittany*. I write about *Porthcawl*, past, present and future. My advice is create your own mythology and thus contribute to the wider mythology. Or, be enslaved by somebody else's ideas. My Wales is political and social, influenced by upbringing, environmentalism and literature. For me the Welsh language is sheep's wool on barbed wire. The bloody sheep has escaped. I've been too lazy to chase it. Bad shepherd. That's why Tŷ Newydd opened my eyes...

Look at what motivates publishers now. Profile! A writer must be seen, must take part. Have a Twitter tag. But that's inimical to certain writers who might possess ideas about the writer's role beyond that of a publisher. Those writers manifest a moral or social concept of their role. And a good editor should possess a similar ideal. The moral and social voice is being drowned in incessant on-line white noise.

Also, after years of a diet of Facebook and literary supplements, writers can feel nauseous. I know I did, buried under an avalanche of 'author biographies'. But, like us all, writers seek vindication.

Thus, in the Foreword to Elzbieta Wocik-Leese's translations of Krystyna Milobedska, *More Nothing* (2013), I've written:

The last poem [...] seems a cod bio. An unexpected satirical flourish? Its target is those self-written biographies that writers are compelled to publish, listing awards and defining their place in the litbiz pecking order. This poem could be a subversion of what contemporary 'poetry' has come to mean: 'celebrity poets', poetry 'readings', poetry 'festivals', poetry 'tours', websites. The whole sickening gallimaufry. Such biographies are present in this book. Because that's the way we do things. Now.

KG: In 2001, you wrote in an editorial that poets in Wales were 'no longer subordinate to events'. It would seem that your analysis of the role of the poet in contemporary Welsh society stands up well some thirteen years on. The political project seems to hold little value for our contemporary cohort of poets. There is little explicit political interest registered in their work. While poets must speak for themselves, is there still a role for poetry in exploring politics and setting out political concerns, do you think? Or could it be that the Assembly has simply rendered this issue redundant now, for the poet?

RM: Good writers learn that polemics make poor poetry. Look at a good novelist such as Ian McEwan, whose *Solar* is disappointing. He wanted to do the right thing, but... Yet polemic can be a beginning. The *Yes* vote excitement died quickly. It created relief (for some) but no euphoria. Maybe people were scared. The expected further powers for Wales (on the back of Scotland's 2014 referendum) should make life more politically vital here.

But bureaucracy suffocated the green movement, that's for certain. The idealistic campaigners dropped away or adopted practical projects. Sustainable Wales now runs a shop in Porthcawl, with an office upstairs that becomes a performance space. But a small shop? What good is that? Being a literary type, I think of H. G. Wells' short story, 'The Magic Shop': 'I had seen the Magic Shop from afar several times; I had passed it once or twice, a shop window of alluring little objects.' That shop is my political statement on an insane high street. Because as you get older you realise you will be compelled to make your stand. And it's not where you do it but how. Shops are an important image in my new novel, *Limestone Man* (Seren, 2015).

Anyway, on successive days in 2014 I celebrated Friends of the Earth Cymru's 30th anniversary and *Poetry Wales's* 50th. (And on the latter I proposed the toast to Meic Stephens because I owe him a great deal. We all do. Including *Devolved Voices*. And while we're at it, what about a drink for Cary Archard?)

Poets wish to develop their 'careers'. But a poet's career at 30 or 40 is far different from that career at 60. For the young, fame is often the spur. Many writers are egomaniacs and tremendously needy, wanting reassurance. Look at Facebook. The damaged 'friends' there I have are all 'poets' and require 'high

maintenance'. But some writers also see themselves as artists and understand it's a lifetime commitment, not your latest poem...

Yet I also know about 'mental illness', having been brought up in what Dylan Thomas wrote about in 'Love in the Asylum'. I've just written an essay called 'In "the Nightmarish Room"', concerning 'madness'. But you have to come to terms with 'damage'. All of us are 'damaged'. Sometimes we make art out of it. Usually we don't.

What a shame I never got round to an issue of *Poetry Wales* about poetry and madness. That essay would have served as an editorial. We could have launched it in Penyfai or Denbigh. Maybe Amhurst. Penyfai was interesting as it created employment for women in a world of relentless pitwork. Yet my mother met my father when both worked for the National Coal Board. Coal and madness made me.

The writer who used her 'damage' brilliantly for *Poetry Wales* was Pascale Petit. In the Jardin des Plantes I convinced her she should write essays, and these proved superb. I used to advise her not to use the word 'penis', because it lacks psychic power. 'Cock' is far better. She refused. In an ideal world I'd edit Pascale's essays...

KG: What are your views about the scene now? Back in 1999, you set out your desire that Welsh writers should be cultural commentators, to avoid becoming 'culturally invisible'. It seems to me you wanted Welsh writers credible but relevant. How did this correspond with your editorship? You commissioned many lively think-pieces from poets – dispatches from abroad, a series of comment on the growing movement of the creative writing programmes, first-person explorations of cultural identity and so on... Poets as thinkers, too, in prose. Do you feel Welsh poets have lived up to your hopes?

RM: Scenes are for the young. Not for people my age. At *Poetry Wales* I became disappointed poets didn't think beyond the poem and into the essay. Maybe that's naïve. Editors have to learn how to nag and maybe subsequent editors were not prose writers... I brought an essayist's sensibility to editing poetry. For instance, as *Poetry Wales's* editor, I found myself in Auschwitz and determined to write about it. How could I not?

But like everyone else, editors require time and experience, which must be afforded. Learning to edit takes years...

I sometimes wonder where are the pupil-writers whom I tutored in the 1970s, 1980, 1990s during those endless school workshops? What's Mike Jenkins's line – 'an answer waved like a greeting'? School visits were good for writers because we earned money before the Blair years. Then, poets set out like missionaries, with their maps and sandwiches, and learned how to do the job. Making it up, like poetry itself. My father used to drive me around because he loved exploring places he once knew. Albert Minhinnick went back to Pontlottyn and Fochriw while I was teaching...

Years earlier we'd all gone to see Pant-y-Waun, which was about to be destroyed by opencasting. My malarial father looking for roads that had changed, villages that had vanished, was a big influence. If memory is indistinguishable from dream, what is real? That's a theme for my writing now. A typical subject for a man my age.

I wanted poets to learn how to use prose, which is the medium of mass communication. A few seemed wary and I found that irritating. When you edit you discover there are so many American, English, Australian writers, etc., who will give their guts to be accorded space in a magazine. To learn of writers 'at home' lacking confidence was, er, infuriating.

My conception of the 'essay' was close to my idea of what a 'poem' might be. The 'unexpected combination of familiar things'. I sought writers who could describe a street in Neath or Nice. Ideally, together. Make them alive.

Also, *Devolved Voices* should not be confined to 'poets'. *Poetry* keeps Wales in a ghetto. *Devolved Voices* should include 'writers' and 'critics'. For an editor a good critic is gold dust, more important than the latest young Turk, male or female.

Did I want Creative Writing satirised? Yes, it was fair game. *Poetry Wales* tried out a series called 'Chewing the CWD'. Pretty mild. But the time for satire is gone as CW is everywhere. Like woodworm in an expensive antique. But people *hated* it if I said something derogatory like that in *Poetry Wales*. I used to wind up certain readers and receive irate letters. I once described creative writing as an American import, like 'drive-by shooting'. Ridiculous, but had to be done. Satire is a part of poetry.

I'm aware Creative Writing classes change people's lives. I know people who travel down the road to Swansea to fulfill a daunting dream, a life's ambition. After all, I followed an MA English course in Cardiff.

Trouble is, there's no one left outside that CW world. The snake has swallowed itself. And vanished. No, there remains a handful of writers. Kristian Evans of Kenfig is one who has deliberately chosen a different path. But that's also caused by the economic situation post-2008. Today, I'd ask him for an essay about zero-hour contracts. Not Nice. Eventually I think he'll follow a CW degree.

I hope the future is much less dominated by arts bureaucracy, and that writers learn to work independently of it. Easy for me to say? Indubitably. But the generous monies for Literature Wales should be channeled to the permanently impoverished publishers. Wales has become like those countries where I used to launch *Poetry Wales*: Croatia, Serbia, Lithuania, Hungary...all with literary bureaucracies with a whiff of a communist hard-line years after the regimes were 'westernised'. These days our bureaucracy insists it knows better than the writers. But it's still toeing a political party line – that of Welsh Labour. Look at the Dylan centenary, and 'Dylan Day', from 2015 forever. Essentially political constructs. What do they say on Facebook? *Whoop, whoop!*

But I remember those East European writers' union bars...and the knowing expressions of the men who served the drinks. In Vilnius the writers' union became one of my favourite places. I danced till dawn with a schoolteacher on a night of wild celebration. What were we celebrating? Being alive. Vilnius possessed 'Uzupis', the notional 'gypsy/anarchist quarter' but really a state of mind... Hardly Pontcanna. Thank you, Kerry Shawn Keys, for introducing me to it.

Places like that form the basis for some of my own work. I knew *Poetry Wales* wasn't forever, and ensured it gave me experiences I might write about. Because an editor has to learn to survive after he's taken out and shot. If you do it properly, editing an 'international quarterly' (as I began describing *Poetry Wales*) becomes a big part of life. But you have to survive it, as I survived pneumonia in California on tour with *Poetry Wales*. And my clothes and the box of magazines being lost after a flight to São Paulo. The box turned up half way through the launch. The clothes remained lost.

We all get older and I could not remain a 'young poet' or in a boy band forever. Prose demands the most serious attention. A book of poems is less ambitious than a novel, so poetry has to develop. Editing a novel is like editing a film...

Now, the bureaucracy seems bloated, yet the publishers in penury. It's harmful. But ten years ago I had plans to take *Poetry Wales* to Russia. I also wanted a launch event in Maesteg Town Hall, under the paintings of Christopher Williams: my 'Poetry and Art' issue. Williams's 'The Red Dress' would have been the cover. Look, I'm still doing it. Stop, you fool...