

Addressing the Canon: AWWE Conference 2010

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When can you tell that a conference has been a really *good* conference? Perhaps when the energy it generated at the time is still with you over a month later. That has been my reaction to the 2010 conference of the Association for Welsh Writing in English – which ran under the ambitious rubric of ‘Canons and Canon-Building: Framing the Literatures of Wales’. Certainly the topic itself didn’t hurt: the concept of what makes up the material we think of as Welsh literature and Welsh writing in English is fundamental to most of us working in the field. As a result, perhaps, the majority of this year’s papers seemed especially well focused on the task in hand, and the conference as a whole thus had a very pleasing coherence.

But there were also moments which have simply stuck in my memory as points of striking illumination. Jane Aaron’s unpicking of a male-dominated origin to the Anglophone Welsh canon and her offering up of three alternative and thoroughly *female* points of launch was brilliantly done, and exposed the gendered nonsense of being blind to everything before Caradoc Evans. The sooner this particular piece of research gets published the better. (Editors, please take note!) Similarly, Geraint Evans’s suggestion that we need a whole new category in our configurations of Wales and literature was a genuinely pioneering piece of thinking. Arguing that the overarching category of ‘The Literature of Wales’ is currently divided into ‘Welsh writing’ and ‘Welsh writing in English’, Geraint’s proposal was that we also need a

third such division – one which acknowledges the existence of *non-Welsh* texts about Wales. And by this, if I understood him right, he meant either texts which are *not written from within* or which are *not primarily written for* the Welsh society with which they are concerned. For such material, Geraint proposed the term ‘Cambrian writing’, although a response from the audience suggested that the term ‘Anglo-Welsh writing’ might do the job just as well. As with Jane Aaron’s talk, this was another piece of research which richly deserves to see publication as soon as may be. Moreover, whilst keynote speaker Berthold Schoene was given quite a tough reception in terms of questions from the floor, he certainly got debate going, too. Is Welsh writing since devolution becoming what he called ‘cosmopolitan’? Is it, in other words, moving beyond issues of Welsh identity and simply getting on with *being literature*, as he put it? Moreover, if this is the case, is such a development to be welcomed or not? That particular discussion will, I suspect, run and run. Added to all this, contributions from postgraduate speakers were especially encouraging. Manifestly professional, our postgraduate and recently post-doctoral scholars indicate that the future of the field is in distinctly competent hands.

Should conference organisers Diana Wallace, Alice Entwistle, and Jeni Williams be pleased? Undoubtedly. The event ran smoothly; scholarly papers were balanced by more relaxed literary events (a book launch and two poetry readings); and the overall conference topic was substantial and hugely stimulating. Am I in danger of producing a review which covers the whole thing in a warm glow? Yes. And I make no apologies for that. The glow is deserved.