Honno: the Welsh women's press and the cultural ecology of the Welsh publishing industry, c. 1950s to the present

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Women: a cultural review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwcr20

Honno: The Welsh Women's Press and the Cultural Ecology of the Welsh Publishing Industry, *c.* 1950s to the Present

D-M Withers

To cite this article: D-M Withers (2021) Honno: The Welsh Women's Press and the Cultural Ecology of the Welsh Publishing Industry, *c.* 1950s to the Present, Women: a cultural review, 32:3-4, 354-371, DOI: 10.1080/09574042.2021.1973726

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1973726

Published online: 23 Dec 2021.

Honno: The Welsh Women's Press and the Cultural Ecology of the Welsh Publishing Industry, *c*. 1950s to the Present

Abstract: Honno: the Welsh Women's Press is the longest running independent publisher of books by women currently operating in the UK. This article situates Honno's publishing activities within the 'cultural ecology' of the Welsh publishing industry. This unique cultural and economic infrastructure is traced back to the 1950s, when grassroots organizations such as the Books Council of Wales and state-subsidized initiatives were established to support the commercial and literary development of Welsh language publishing, and the survival of the Welsh language more broadly. In the late 1960s further support for the Welsh Book Trade came when the Welsh Arts Council was created, which facilitated the cultural development of Welsh writing in English and Welsh. Contextualizing Honno within the Welsh Publishing Industry reveals how the company has managed to survive as a small publisher focused on its original publishing mission: to promote writing by women in Wales, in English and Welsh, grounded in the history and lives of Welsh women. Honno's history—and, more broadly, the evolution of the Welsh Publishing Industry in the post-war era—can also help disrupt totalizing narratives about the reach of capitalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It demonstrates that alternative conceptions of cultural and economic value

Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

Women: a cultural review Vol. 32, Nos. 3–4
ISSN 0957-4042 print/ISSN 1470-1367 online http://www.tandfonline.com https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1973726

continue to circulate, despite their apparent embeddedness within neoliberal, business and financialised orthodoxies.

Keywords: Honno, feminist publishing, cultural policy, Welsh Publishing Industry, cultural ecology

Introduction

The National Library of Wales (NLW) sits on top of a hill overlooking Aberystwyth. Visiting readers are gifted a panoramic view of the town whose crescent shape hugs the shoreline. Wild and foreboding when the wind whips the sea up and rain floods the landscape, when I visit the scene is drenched in meditative calm, graced by the good fortune of a bright, crisp November day. I have an appointment to consult the archives of Honno: the Welsh Women's Press, the longest running independent publisher of books by women operating in the UK. I settle in for the morning, admiring the tall ceilings and spaciousness of the NLW's reading rooms, before breaking in time for a lunchtime meeting with Honno's current editor and publisher, Caroline Oakley. Honno's offices are further up the hill. I ramble slowly, through the University of Aberystwyth, nervously checking google maps every few seconds to ensure my feet are moving in the right direction. I keep walking, up steps, until a row of space-age huts bursts into view, illuminated by the winter sun. The exterior padding seemingly fashioned from a bulbous aluminium material. Do these buildings express a kind of architectural unconscious, I wonder, designed to insulate their contents from the future? Am I in the right place?

A quick look at the map confirms Honno's offices are a few paces away, housed in one of the Aberystwyth Creative Units, built in 2009 thanks to a £1million grant from the Arts Council of Wales Lottery Fund, the Welsh Assembly Government and the University.[1] Tentatively I approach the office and note the logo outside. I *am* in right place. I knock and Ali Greeley, Honno's finance officer, lets me in. My visit is a brief interruption from her busy packing; as I introduce myself, she stuffs a parcel with books intended for Honno's US distributors, the Independent Publisher's Group. The office is small but well organized. There is space at the end where Oakley and fellow Honno workers hot-desk at different points in the week. Shelves stacked with boxes feature prominently. Titles peer invitingly from the open cardboard—Margiad Evans's *Creed*, recently published in the Welsh Women's Classics series and *A Woman's Work is Never Done* by Elizabeth Andrews, a book about the women's activism in the early

1 See https://dcfw.org/aberystwyth-creative-units/ for more information.

twentieth century which has acquired new market-relevance in 2018, the suffrage memorial year.

Oakley opted for exile from the hubbub of general trade publishing in the late 1990s, where she had worked for several companies, including the Orion Publishing Group. She joined Honno as a part-time editor in 2005 and helped shape its list with careful editorial skill and an injection of worldly, publishing *noûs*. Over a microwaved lunch, Oakley recalled her London experiences of the 1990s, a time when the publishing industry became shaped by short-term, venture capital investments. Such investment, Oakley recalled, created stressful working conditions for those within the industry: it placed extreme pressure on companies to return value to shareholders, even when it was not always clear if there would be enough money to pay monthly staff wages. Honno's case was similar, but different, she emphasized: instead of being accountable to external financial investors, the company's main source of finance is a yearly 'block grant' from the Books Council of Wales (BCW). Honno were promoted to an annual BCW grant in 2004, in recognition of the publisher's ability to consider market needs and support the commercial promotion of its titles. The BCW's criteria for assessing the merits of Honno's publishing, like other publishers it distributes funds to, draws on metrics established by the institutions of the Welsh Publishing Industry, which have been supporting the development of Wales's unique literary culture since the 1960s (Thomas 2019).

Honno have maintained a consistent output of up to 12 books a year since the early 1990s. This includes seven new English-language books, whose production costs are funded by the BCW's 'block grant', and reprints of 'classic' texts. Despite the continued availability of 'benign funding' (Mercer et al. 1988: 61) for publishing activities in Wales, it was nail-biting, Oakley stressed, when decisions were made about allocating finances at the end of each funding period. This was despite the fact Honno have consistently retained their funding, year upon year. Grants have enabled Honno to publish award-winning contemporary fiction across a range of genres; reprints of lost classics by Welsh women; anthologies featuring poetry, nature writing and political testimonies; children's books, travel writing and more.[2] Honno's publishing sustains a specific cultural space in which writing by women from, or with a connection to Wales, in Welsh and in English, is nurtured and celebrated. The continued existence of the company, however, remains contingent upon its relationship with an external financial environment that protects Honno from risk-taking business practices and conditions its publishing output. This is the 'cultural ecology' of the Welsh publishing industry, a unique institutional and funding environment that Honno has, over its 30-year-plus history,

2 It is not possible within the scope of this article to offer an in-depth account of all the books Honno publish. Please visit the publisher's website for a detailed breakdown of their titles. https://www.honno.co.uk.

drawn from and contributed to. This history demonstrates how capitalism in Wales, during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries when the supremacy of neoliberal, financialised capitalism is spatially assumed, has been constrained by Welsh national infrastructures, cultural policy and language politics.

Honno: The Welsh Women's Press

Honno: the Welsh Women's Press was established in June 1986 as a community co-operative and is now the longest-running independent women's press in the UK. By the mid-1980s 'the demand for feminist writing in Wales had reached marketable levels' (Reeves 1988: 221). Honno, in tune with the iconography of other women-centred publishers - think Kitchen Table Press - began with conversations held around a kitchen table. For over 30 years Honno have published fiction, poetry, plays and children's books; research into Welsh women's history and culture and reprints of out-of-print titles. Funded initially by a small grant from the European Economic Community (EEC) that supported the press to print and design publicity materials and cover administrative costs, its capital was bolstered by 150 women who bought shares in the company, an investment that totalled £3,000 when Honno officially launched in February 1987 ('Press Release' 1987).[3]

Honno was 'set up by a group of women who feel that women in Wales have limited access to literature which relates specifically to them' ('Press Release' 1987). Until 1993, when an Arts Council of Wales grant enabled the company to employ their first part-time editor, activities were sustained largely by the volunteer labour of the Honno committee. To this day, a unique atmosphere of friendship, mutual support and belief in the enterprise sustains Honno's endeavours: four of the current committee are former employees who remain invested in the co-operative's success. Another member is Lindsay Ashford, an author launched by Honno, whose involvement expresses her appreciation of the company.[4] In its early years Honno's committee was composed of women with skills relevant to publishing such as design and editing, who were embedded in Wales's independent media organizations and cultural institutions. Both Rosanne Reeves and Althea Osmond, for example, worked in advertising and marketing roles respectively for *Radical Wales*, Plaid Cymru's quarterly magazine. Gwen Davies was the editor for cultural periodical *Planet*, established in 1970 to discuss the question of Wales and Welsh identity in English, and Luned Meredith was deputy editor for the now defunct Welsh newspaper *Y Faner*. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan

3 This figure soon grew, with around 400 women responding, with the sum of £4,000 available. Personal correspondence, Rosanne Reeves, 9 September 2019.

4 Personal correspondence, Rosanne Reeves, 9 September 2019.

and Kathryn Curtis were archivists at the National Library of Wales, whose knowledge of out-of-print titles informed the Honno's Welsh Women's Classics series, and Anne Howells worked at the University of Wales Press ('Letter to Shareholders'). Connections with a growing number of soon-to-be distinguished women historians, including Deirdre Beddoe, Sian Rhiannon Williams, Angela John and the late Ursula Masson, as well as literary scholars such as Katie Gramich and Jane Aaron, provided Honno's Classic series with a willing pool of editors or introducers, resulting in collections such as *The Salt of Life: Welsh Women's Political Writing from Chartism to Suffrage* and *Parachutes and Petticoats: Evocative Women's Stories from WWII*, and new framings of novels by Amy Dilwyn, Eluned Morgan, Sara Maria Saunders and Menna Gallie, among others.

Honno's Committee members were spread across Wales, drawn from a variety of feminist and women-centred networks active in the 1980s. This included Women's Aid, South Glamorgan Council's Women's Committee and the women's section of Plaid Cymru, which had assumed a bolder political role within the party during the 1980s (McAllister 2001: 61). Plaid's Women Section 'built up of a great network of women, like-minded women' (Reeves 2018) and Honno used similar organizational methods, meeting monthly in different locations across the country, mostly in member's homes. While Honno's publishing project was not articulated in explicit Welsh nationalist terms, and many committee members did not belong to any political parties whatsoever, their activities did correspond to a particular 'state of mind' (Johnes 2012: 4) about Wales that had gained credence since the 1960s and was used to assert, indeed celebrate, a specific expression of Welsh identity. The idea of Wales as a heterogeneous, bi-lingual 'cultural patchwork' (Reeves 1988: 216), comprising of the Welsh-language communities of north and mid-Wales, the Anglo-Welsh industrial valleys of the South and the Anglicised areas of the South, Pembrokeshire and the borders, informed Honno's publishing from its inception. The first two books published by the company, *Buwch ar y Lein: Detholiad o Ddyddiaduron Llundain 1957–64* [Cow on the Line: A Selection from the 1957–64 London Diaries] by Hafina Clwyd and *Betsy Cadwaladr: A Balaclava Nurse* by Elizabeth Davis, announced the intention to publish equal numbers of books in Welsh and in English, an ambition Honno have not been able to sustain, due to the company not receiving adequate numbers of high-quality manuscripts in Welsh.[5]

Honno did not see itself as separate from the politics of women's liberation in Wales—or beyond its border. Nevertheless, readers animated by women's liberation movements in English metropoles and regional outposts did not populate Honno's imagined audience, nor did such politics

5 This is certainly not to suggest, of course, that high-quality writing in Welsh is not written. Rather, it is that Honno are often not approached to publish these works. Welsh-medium writers often compete in National Eisteddfod literary competitions with presses such as Y Lolfa securing rights to publish the winning titles, often resulting in an on-going relationship with authors.

define its publishing rationale. The list of media organizations invited to Honno's launch party held at the HTV offices in Pontcanna, Cardiff, indicates that Honno's market was, primarily, a Welsh one. Publications like *Planet* and *Radical Wales*, along with key figures in the Welsh Publishing Industry, such as Meic Stephens and Tony Bianchi of the Welsh Arts Council, received invitations. Tellingly, the only women-centred publications invited to the Honno launch was *The Guardian* Women's Page and *Women's Review*, a glossy magazine established in 1985 that, while influenced by the WLM, defined itself as operating 'in the world of ideas and culture, rather than campaigns and personal experiences' (Ardill and O'Sullivan 1985: 12). This suggests that Honno were not networked with political periodicals and publications produced in England active in the late 1980s such as *Outwrite*, *Trouble and Strife* and even *Spare Rib*.

The Publishing Industry in Wales

The contemporary book trade in Wales is part of a diverse industry composed of periodical, newspaper, computer games and software publishing. Binding, print, design and retail services feature also. ('Welsh Books Council' 2018). Its existence can be traced to the 1950s when new cultural policies were introduced, and organizations established, that laid down frameworks for the Welsh Publishing Industry's unique cultural ecology. Financial support from the British state for Welsh-language schoolbooks had been provided since 1954 (Johnes 2012: 219). Textbooks, literacy initiatives and books for children and younger readers were an important area of provision. The Books Council of Wales (originally the Welsh Books Council) was established in 1961, originally a grassroots initiative funded by local authorities in Wales with the intention of supporting the commercial and literary development of Welsh language publishing. The Welsh Committee of the Arts Council of Great Britain was established in 1946 as 'a rare example of cultural devolution' (Jones 2013: 46) in the immediate post-war era. As part of the renamed the Welsh Arts Council (WAC, later Arts Council of Wales ACW from 1994), a Literature Committee was established in 1967 that would join the 'system of patronage' already in place for Welsh language publications (Stephens 2015: 95–6). WAC's brief was specifically cultural, and supported activities in Welsh and English that would enrich the culture of Wales, including provision of funds to the Books Council of Wales (BCW). In 2003, the BCW acquired powers to administer grants held by WAC/ACW and, while remaining a charitable organization rather than an organ of the state,

assumed a developmental role for the Welsh Book Industry as a whole. Post-2003 the BCW have sought to balance commercial and cultural imperatives, supporting works of distinction that also have an impact in the marketplace. For M. Wynn Thomas, current Chairman of the BCW, the publishing that took place in Wales from the 1960s onward, financially and ideologically subsidized by the British State, represented a 'cultural revolution'. Such activities helped instate a 'radical reconfiguration of the relations between Anglophone and Welsh-speaking Wales' (2019), augmenting a nascent sense of bi-cultural Welsh identity and purpose that hitherto had not existed.

Public subsidy was, therefore, used to build the infrastructure of the Welsh Publishing Industry (for comparisons with Scotland see McCleery 2007: 67–70 and McCleery and Ramdarshan Bold 2012). Publishers received support for all aspects of producing books such as editorial and design, with marketing acknowledged as a particularly important—and previously neglected—area from the mid-1980s onward (*The Book Trade in Wales* 1988). Authors received grants and literary prizes were subsidized; grants also funded book shops and book selling. In 1974 WAC supported the Oriel Bookshop in Cardiff. This put in place '*the final link*' in the 'chain of literary production' (Finch, n.d., emphasis in original) that would enable books produced within the Welsh Book Industry to be sold directly to the reader.[6] Bookshops rely on effective distribution and, early in its organizational history, the BCW established a self-financing distribution centre which connected bookshops and libraries in Wales. The BCW's relationship with libraries also helped secure guaranteed sales for publishers: Honno's first English language title *Betsy Cadwaladr* received a BCW 'Library Grade' which meant 364 copies were sold directly to Welsh libraries, just under a quarter of an initial print run of 1,500 ('Minutes Sunday 20 April 1986'). These institutional networks of production, distribution and consumption tightened the self-enforcing internal circuity of the Welsh Book Trade, constructing markets, readers and social purpose for publishing activity situated within Welsh borders.

A major force propelling the development of the Welsh Book Trade was activism to ensure the survival of the Welsh language. Such activism was an important site of politicization for women, too. A celebrated example is *Merched y Wawr*, a Welsh-speaking women's group modelled on the Women's Institute (WI). *Merched y Wawr* were set up in 1966 after the WI expelled members of the Parc branch when they withheld membership fees because forms were not available in Welsh, a common activist strategy of the time (Johnes 2012: 231). Others, such as poet Menna Elfyn, found feminist politics through her Welsh language activism, conducted as part of the *Cymdeithas yr Iaith* (Simpson 1989: 54–5).

6 The fate of the Oriel Bookshop itself is fascinating. Subsidized by the WAC until 1994 when its lease was bought out by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, in 1997 the shop was taken over by a consortium of venture capitalists. Once a thriving hub for cultural events, by the late 1990s it was reduced to economist principles: 'No question of funding for events now, no time for anything bar turnover. "Like a real shop in the real world", someone told me. Indeed', wrote founder Peter Finch, 'Oriel Bookshop: How It Was', n.d., at http://www.peterfinch.co.uk/oriel.htm (last accessed 8 August 2019). See also Lucy Delap, 'Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974–2000', *History Workshop Journal* 81, 2016, pp. 174–5, on debates relating to Arts Council and Greater London Council Funding for radical and feminist book shops in England during the 1980s.

Thus, while Johnes has argued that concern about the status of the Welsh language was not shared by the majority of 'ordinary' Welsh people, and usually articulated by those from a narrow, often middle class, social base, they did exert an important influence over Welsh public life (Johnes 2012: 226). Indeed, it is the status of Welsh as a 'minority' language, and the attendant institutions and structures that emerged to sustain and preserve it, that undergird the longevity, and relative security, of the Welsh Book Industry.

Recent policy reviews of publishing in Wales, for example, have raised the 'fundamental question as to whether provision [for English language publishing in Wales] could—or indeed should—be left to the market', given that such publishing exists in the context of a large international industry where the majority of publishers who participate in it are run 'as regular commercial businesses'. Welsh language publishing, on the other hand, would struggle to be commercially viable and 'can only realistically exist in its diversity with Government support' ('Independent Review' 2017: 39). Given the size of the book industry in Wales and its imbricated and overlapping qualities, it is not easy to separate out publishing activities that exclusively focus on Welsh and English-language publishing. As such, English-language publishing in Wales, despite its fortunate position of being able, in theory, to participate in a thrusting, global, commercial industry, retains its subsidized status. The need to preserve Welsh language and support publishing institutions and practices that secure its reproduction therefore insulates the Welsh Book Trade as a whole from cut-throat capitalist forces that subtend the Anglo-American commercial publishing industry.

The administrative capacity to articulate different funding priorities in Wales was possible, historically, due to the relative autonomy of the Welsh Office, a department created in 1964 by Labour, alongside the cabinet post of Secretary of State for Wales. The Welsh Office initially had limited powers but soon became responsible for areas such as housing, local government, roads and economic planning (Gooberman 2016: 565). In contrast to the political attitude adopted in Whitehall after the Conservatives came into power in 1979, the Welsh Office retained an administrative culture that centred interventionist policies. While this did not create, as Leon Gooberman has qualified, a state of outright 'Welsh Exceptionalism', whereby Wales was safeguarded from policies implemented in England, it did mean the Welsh Office could set their own priorities and budgets, and co-ordinate public sector activity. The existence of the Welsh Office and its administrative structures also preserved the national autonomy of Wales after 1979 at a time when subnational and regional economic approaches within England were rejected by the Conservatives (Gooberman 2016: 572).

This complex set of conditions—cultural, political, economic, administrative—has enabled the Welsh Publishing Industry to develop since the 1960s, receiving and retaining levels of state subsidy that have simply not been available to publishers operating in England, especially since the late 1980s. Like other nations, most notably Canada, Wales has maintained a 'cultural exemption' that ensures the autonomy of its cultural industries (Goff 2019). The Welsh Book Trade sits within a 'delicate ecology' (Thomas 2019), spatially bounded and aesthetically charged with *brogarwch*, the love of one's *immediate* environment, an idea drawn from Welsh language poetry (Jones 2013: 52). It is woven from the interdependence of authors, readers, booksellers, editors, distributors, libraries, schools, reviewers, designers, illustrators, publishers and associated industries which benefit from a vibrant publishing sector: TV, radio, film and the wider 'creative economy' (see McElroy et al. 2017), health care and tourism.

The idea that culture operates as an ecology has been articulated by scholars of cultural policy in an attempt to understand how value is generated across different contexts and interconnected strata of commercial, amateur and publicly funded activities. In *The Ecology of Culture*, a report commissioned as part of the AHRC Cultural Value project in 2015, John Holden argues that '*the UK's* cultural ecology is intensively interlinked, with many feedback loops and systemic strengths, but also points of vulnerability […] Culture is an organism not a mechanism; it is much messier and more dynamic than linear models allow' (Holden 2015: 2, emphasis added). It is telling, however, that Holden does not differentiate within the UK's cultural ecology. This assumed homogeneity is significantly undermined when we take into account how a different cultural ecology has (d)evolved in Wales, and within which the Welsh Publishing Industry sits. Conceiving cultural ecology in the singular, rather than the plural, is symptomatic of how culture's 'value' within the late twentieth century has been conceptualised from the 'centre'. From Nicholas Garnham's influential work shaping the Greater London Council's (GLC) cultural industries policy in the mid-1980s (1987) through to New Labour's approach in the late 1990s (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015), the emphasis in cultural policy shifted. A new 'global orthodoxy' (Schlesinger 2016) was instituted that privileged accountability, quantitative measurement and, to a large degree, the subjugation of alternative conceptions of value to financial concerns (Papadopoulos 2018: 30–1). This shift was underpinned by an ethos whereby public sector organizations were impelled to become efficient within the terms of the capitalist marketplace, forced to prove 'they could operate like viable businesses' (Brouillette 2014: 3).

Philip Schlesinger has warned against conceiving culture as an ecology within Britain as a multi-national environment, suggesting that doing so

risks shoring up 'national ecologies' 'with profound consequences for identities' (2016: 14). This doesn't account, however, for the diverse cultural ecologies that are, in fact, already operating within administratively devolved contexts such as Wales. The presence of different cultural ecologies is evidence that diverse cultural-economic systems, when shaped by deliberate policy measures, can co-exist (and have co-existed) within capitalist economies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Furthermore, such cultural economic environments construct social, economic, financial and cultural infrastructures that preserve conditions in which heterogenous conceptions of value can circulate. This is not to suggest, of course, that cultural activities in Wales unfold in a resilient enclave, unsusceptible to the vicissitudes of free market capitalism. This is certainly not the case. At the same time, the cultural ecology of the Welsh Publishing Industry *has* insulated itself (modestly, delicately) from market dynamics that configured the external, market environment in such a way that made it difficult for smaller, less financially profitable and community-focused publishers to operate across the border in England. Due to these conditions, particular kinds of publishing and business practices have been practised in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Wales because they are, precisely, rooted in place, as I go on to discuss below.

Everyday Ecologies

> DW: When you started to think about Honno [how did you think:] 'This is how we are going to finance it'?
>
> RR: We were very aware that there would be grants from the literature committee of the Arts Council for English language books and from the Welsh Books Council for Welsh language books. *Without that security, I'm not sure we – we wouldn't have succeeded, no*. No, we are very lucky.
>
> DW: How did you know that that existed?
>
> RR: Oh well, everybody who's anything to do with publishing books knew. *It's general knowledge really*. (Rosanne Reeves interviewed by D-M Withers, 2018, emphasis added)

By the mid-1980s, when the founders of Honno Press met to discuss plans to establish a women's press in Wales, the 'system of patronage' (Stephens 2015: 121) that had been put in place in the late 1960s was an embedded

element of Welsh literary culture. While Honno solicited financial support from other sources to establish itself (shares in the company, the EEC, as described above) it was the funding available from the WAC and BCW that financed the publication of books, offering the 'security' that made it possible for Honno to 'succeed'. Reeves's quotation indicates that the funding provided by WAC and the BCW was considered part of the ordinary, everyday functioning of the Welsh Book Industry at the time, the existence of funds was 'general knowledge' that 'everybody' involved in the sector knew about. Subsidizing publishers, as well as the wider apparatus of literary culture in Wales, from dictionaries to bookshops, was how things were done: this funding ecosystem moulded the creative, cultural and economic habitus, devised its orientations and sustained practices.

Honno, and other publishers in Wales, were indeed 'lucky' to have access to such funds. From the late 1980s onwards, grants for similar kinds of publishing activities in England evaporated. The catastrophic impact that the removal of GLC funding had on cultural and social services delivered by and for minority groups is often emphasized in accounts of Thatcher's Britain. Sheba Feminist Press, who published the works of Audre Lorde, Black British author Barbara Burford and important anthologies such as *Charting the Journey* and *Serious Pleasure*, among others, described how their funding was removed 'with what seemed like a wave of a hand by Margaret Thatcher in 1986' (1988: 61). While Sheba remained committed to publishing the work of women of colour, lesbian and working-class writers until they folded in 1994, they struggled to sustain their activities in an environment that called upon the not-for-profit workers' co-operative to sharpen its 'business wits' (1988: 61) and abandon the kinds of 'developmental' publishing that had become part of the quotidian, publicly subsidized support-system for publishers in Wales.

Furthermore, GLC funded projects constituted a fragile cultural ecology within which marginalized social groups—gay, lesbian, Black and Asian, women and disabled—received funding to support a range of interconnected projects (see also Delap 2021). When the GLC was abolished, financial resources from multiple points in the cultural ecology were drained; a de-plugging that radically fractured the viability of the system without destroying it completely. To offer a concrete example, Shaila Shah, who was part of the collective that ran the internationalist feminist newspaper *Outwrite*, described how the organization received significant advertising revenue from GLC funded groups and projects (2019). When funding was removed it had a significant impact on their income stream; they did not lose one customer but several because the paper was rooted in radical networks that shared similar values and practices but also received, crucially, the same sources of financial assistance. As such,

their model of working became functionally obsolete in the rapidly changing cultural and economic environment of the late 1980s, where access to public subsidy, administered through local councils, was reduced at best, stopped entirely at worst. Honno were established, then, at a time when the environment for women-centred and feminist publishing projects in England, if subsidized by public or local authority funds, became increasingly untenable. Honno, however, have survived and in a 'SWOT'[7] analysis conducted in 2000–01 the company noted they were, alongside the Women's Press, Persephone and Virago, one of the few remaining specialist women's presses active in Britain. Furthermore, 'Honno plays an important part in the publishing scene, in Wales and the UK in being a Women's Press. Being unique in Wales lends it a strong market position, and *its founding principles are still of prime concern today*' ('Development and Marketing Strategy', emphasis added).

The availability of funding for publishers in Wales has enabled Honno to retain the focus of their publishing project as we move into the third decade of the twenty-first century. In an interview I asked Reeves, founder of Honno and who remains an active committee member and an introducer-editor of the Welsh language Honno Classics, if the company had ever been tempted to become commercially independent (i.e. not drawing on grants and subsidies), especially after (the rare) occasions when titles they published realized 'mainstream' success. In 1989, for example, Honno published *Morphine and Dolly Mixtures* by Carol-Ann Courtney. While Honno did not receive funding for this title (despite attempting to), Honno's committee were convinced of the book's quality and popular appeal and 'made a considerable financial investment […] to produce an expensive attractive product' ('New Success for Honno'). Their decision was justly rewarded: the book was initially selected by Feminist Book Fortnight as one of its 'Top Twenty' titles; later it won the Wales Book of the Year award and was made into TV drama produced by the BBC, with reprint rights sold to Penguin. While the success of *Morphine and Dolly Mixtures* generated substantial financial returns for Honno (relative to its size), it did not alter how the community co-operative organized its publishing practices. Over its 30-year-plus history the aims and objectives of Honno have remained consistent. It has evolved, of course, but its focus has remained intact; changes could be introduced but '*not at the expense of, you know, what we were set up to do*. We're still sticking […] to what we said right at the beginning really, to promote writing by women in Wales' (Reeves 2018: 88, my italics).

Honno's longevity has been possible because its unique publishing activities are supported by an external funding environment that does

7 Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats.

not place pressure on the company to grow to survive or become financially self-sustaining. Within the Welsh Book Trade alternative value criteria have been adopted to assess and measure what counts as a successful or publishable book. While this value is grounded in notions of Welsh cultural enrichment and distinction, and devised to ensure titles have maximum commercial impact, in Honno's case it has also been articulated in terms of the publisher's developmental role and for its specific cultural offer dedicated to women's writing, the historical aspects of which 'contributes toward the mapping of women's history in Wales in the recent past and the contemporary world' ('Appraisal by the Arts Council of Wales' 2001). Even so, such mapping and circulation activities have not always been adequately recognized. The 2017 *Independent Review of Support for Publishing and Literature in Wales,* for example, called for monetary support and wider recognition of Honno's Welsh Women's Classics series. Such observations were made with reference to the under-representation of women in the Library of Wales series, a Welsh Assembly funded initiative that aimed to publish 'classics' of Welsh literature, and at the time had published 45 titles, 42 of which were men, 3 women (137). Honno have, however, been able to maintain a consistent level of activity over several decades, subsisting within a stable environment that cultivates its activities. '*Without that security, I'm not sure we—we wouldn't have succeeded, no*.' The 'security' Honno benefitted from contrasted sharply with the forms of 'security' that flourished in the financialising economies of Thatcher's Britain that encouraged some feminist publishers, like Virago, to take business risks through exposure to new regimes of financial discipline (see Withers 2019). Honno, in contrast, have been consistently insulated from such risks, as modes of publishing were preserved in Wales, contra to those practised in Anglo-American publishing, due to the security of WAC and BCW funding.

Place and Value

The cultural ecology of the Welsh Publishing Industry did converge harmoniously with some currents prevalent in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century cultural policy. In New Labour's creative industries policy, for example, there was great emphasis on place-specific cultural branding, aligned with the notion of 'Cool Britannia' (Allard 2007: 71–2). After Welsh devolution in 1997, cultural policy focused on promoting the idea of 'Welsh distinctiveness', a concept formalized in the 2001 publication *A Culture in Common* which laid out, among other things, how

culture and arts would be monitored, supported and evaluated (Allard 2007: 74). Within this there was renewed focus on the important role of Welsh writing in English, the medium through which Wales could communicate its unique, bi-cultural identity to the world beyond its borders. In a contribution to a policy review of English medium writing in Wales conducted in 2003, Honno editor Janet Thomas emphasized that 'English-medium books and writing are also a vital part of what the rest of the world sees and understands of Wales'. Welsh writing in English, she added, much like the success of Welsh pop music acts like Super Furry Animals and Catatonia, could help project 'a new image of Wales across the world, which would in turn have a highly positive effect on our tourism industry and our own sense of identity' (2003). While such impact is difficult to measure, the role of the publishing industry in offering a 'bridge to improving national and international understanding of Wales, its culture and its economy and society' ('Welsh Books Council' 2018: 8) remains an area through which the economic value of the Welsh publishing sector is articulated.

The perceived localism and therefore minority status of Wales within majority British culture undoubtedly has drawbacks and impacts on the marketability of books produced within the Welsh Publishing Industry. Minutes from a Honno committee meeting in 2005 remarked, for example, on disappointing sales figures for books distributed by the BCW: Welsh-based Waterstone's book buyers were purchasing from England or had already spent their budget for books that fell into the 'local interest' category ('Minutes 2 September 2005'). Distribution for books beyond Wales remains an issue and was recently cited as an enduring problem for the industry ('Independent Review' 2017: 117). Welsh writers also suffer from exoticism and stereotyping. Hannah Austin (2019), for example, has recently discussed how her writing was fetishized for its 'exquisite roughness' in the eyes of London's elite publishing circles, an 'edginess' indelibly shaped by her experiences as a queer, working-class woman from the South Wales valleys. Such factors reinforce 'Welsh distinctiveness', but are not able to fully transcend long-standing stereotypes and entrenched consumption practices.

The cultural ecology of the Welsh Publishing Industry, despite the vast institutional, constitutional and administrative changes that have taken place in twentieth-century Wales, remains intact. It is an ecosystem that, in reality, struggles to integrate entrepreneurial practices on a scale measured by Anglo-American, commercial publishing standards, and where its main developmental body, the BCW, has recently been encouraged to 'develop different levels of risk appetite across different functions, to allow for greater managed risk taking and innovation where

appropriate' ('Independent Review' 2017:78). In this context Honno are, most certainly, dependent on the subsidies available to them; they would no doubt struggle to survive if the environment that sustains publishing in Wales was either drained of resources or subjected to radically different valuation criteria, as happened quite dramatically with the GLC in the 1980s. This is both the strength and the weakness of the book trade in Wales: the interconnections across value chains, its embeddedness in regional and national economies would be dramatically disrupted if changes to its structures were introduced too quickly, without attentiveness to how its parts relate to the whole. Policy makers understand this and, in 2018, the National Assembly for Wales's Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee recommended unequivocally that 'the Welsh Government should continue to provide financial support to the industry in both the Welsh and English languages'. This policy recommendation was backed by a report from the Welsh Economy Research Unit in the same year which analysed the economic contribution of the Welsh Publishing Industry and affirmed the importance of providing funds for developmental bodies like the BCW. The BCW's funding supports 'value in an *important element* of the sector and seeks to encourage indigenous talent and associated industry. *In this respect the economic numbers do not show the real value of this sector*' (2018, emphasis added).

The real value of the sector is, perhaps, something more intangible, something that escapes quantification, positioned in the points were the social, economic and cultural converge to explode a reductively financialized conception of value. Retention of such value within the ecology of the Welsh publishing sector is possible due to the complex ways history, cultural politics and linguistic activism have converged to create institutions and contexts that support its circulation and insulation. The persistence of the Welsh book industry's cultural ecology, while insular and contra-entrepreneurial, developmental and preservationist, has enabled particular kinds of community-focused, minoritarian (when viewed from the Anglo-American centre) publishing practices to survive. In an era of financialised, neoliberal capitalism, such publishing was never meant to survive but has been able to because of deliberate policies implemented to discipline capital's flow and operations within the borders of Wales, ensuring culture and literary production remains as much a social practice as it is a commercial business. Without such a future-proof environment, shielded from dynamics of perpetual growth and constant innovation, it would not be possible for Honno to remain the longest running independent women's press publishing in the UK.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Honno for granting permission to quote from unpublished material in the Honno archives at the National Library of Wales; to Rosanne Reeves and M. Wynn Thomas for their detailed feedback on drafts of this article; to Caroline Oakley for providing insight into how Honno operate (and having lunch with me); to Huw Jones for sharing resources while ideas were at a formative stage; to Max Munday for sharing research findings conducted by the Welsh Economic Research Unit and to the attendees of the Modern British Studies conference (Birmingham, July 2019); to the Gender in Modern Welsh History symposium (Cardiff 2019) for their constructive comments and to Gill Tasker for discussions about the Scottish publishing industry.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Research was funded by the Leverhulme Trust [grant number RPG-2017-218].

Works Cited

Allard, Gillian (2007), 'Imagined Diversity', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 13:1, pp. 71–84. doi:10.1080/10286630701201871

Ardill, Susan and Sue O'Sullivan (1985), 'Dizzy Pace in Women's Publishing', *New Statesman*, 25 October, p. 12.

Austin, Hannah (2019), 'Exquisitely Rough: Outsiders, Social Class, and the Iceberg of London Publishing', *New Welsh Review* 31. https://www.newwelshreview.com/article.php?id=2368.

Brouillette, Sarah (2014), *Literature and the Creative Economy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee (2018), 'Committee's Findings on the Independent Review of Support for Publishing and Literature in Wales'. http://senedd.assembly.wales/documents/s72956/The%20Independent%20Review%20of%20Support%20for%20Publishing%20and%20Literature%20in%20Wales%20Report%20-%20March%202018.pdf (last accessed 29 August 2019).

Delap, Lucy (2016), 'Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974–2000', *History Workshop Journal* 81, pp. 171–96.

—— (2021), 'Feminist Business Praxis and *Spare Rib* Magazine', *Women: A Cultural Review* 32:3–4.

Finch, Peter (n.d.), 'Oriel Bookshop: How It Was', at http://www.peterfinch.co.uk/oriel.htm (accessed 8 August 2019).

Garnham, Nicholas (1987), 'Concepts of Culture: Public Policy and the Cultural Industries', *Cultural Studies* 1:1, pp. 23–7.

Goff, Patricia M. (2019), 'Canada's Cultural exemption', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 25:5, pp. 552–67. doi:10.1080/10286632.2019.1626848

Gooberman, Leon (2016), 'Welsh Office Exceptionalism, Economic Development and Devolution, 1979 to 1997', *Contemporary British History* 30:4, pp. 563–83. doi:10.1080/13619462.2016.1208567

Hesmondhalgh, David, Melissa Nisbett, Kate Oakley and David Lee (2015), 'Were New Labour's Cultural Policies neo-Liberal?', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21:1, pp. 97–114. doi:10.1080/10286632.2013.879126

Holden, John (2015), 'The Ecology of Culture', at https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/the-ecology-of-culture/.

Johnes, Martin (2012), *Wales Since 1939*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Jones, Huw David (2013), '"An Art of Our Own": State Patronage of the Visual Arts in Wales, 1945–1967', *Contemporary British History* 27:1, pp. 44–64. doi:10.1080/13619462.2012.685690

McAllister, Laura (2001), 'Gender, Nation and Party: An Uneasy Alliance for Welsh Nationalism', *Women's History Review* 10:1, pp. 51–70.

McCleery, Alistair (2007), 'Role of the Scottish Arts Council', in David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (eds), *Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland, Volume 4: Professionalism and Diversity 1880–2000*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 67–70.

McCleery, Alistair and Melanie Ramdarshan Bold (2012), 'What Is My Country?: Supporting Small Nation Publishing', *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* 6:1, pp. 115–31.

McElroy, Ruth, Christina Papagiannouli and Hywel Wiliam (2017), 'Broadcasting After Devolution: Policy and Critique in the Welsh Media Landscape 2008–2015', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 25:3, pp. 377–91. doi:10.1080/10286632.2016.1268133

Papadopoulos, Dimitris (2018), *Experimental Practice*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Reeves, Rosanne (1988), 'A Welsh Patchwork', in Amanda Sebestyen (ed.), *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminsm*, Bridport: Prism Press, pp. 216–24.

—— (2018), 'Interviewed by D-M Withers, The Business of Women's Words: Purpose and Profit in Feminist Publishing', British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue Reference C1834/04, © The British Library.

Schlesinger, Philip (2016), 'The Creative Economy: Invention of a Global orthodoxy', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 30:1, pp. 73–90. doi:10.1080/13511610.2016.1201651

Shah, Shaila (2019), 'Interviewed by D-M Withers, The Business of Women's Words: Purpose and Profit in Feminist Publishing', British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue Reference C1834/15, © The British Library.

Simpson, Penny (1989), 'Pulse of the Movement', *Spare Rib* 201, pp. 54–5.

Stephens, Meic (2015), *My Shoulder to the Wheel*, Talybont: Y Lolfa.

Thomas, Janet (2003), 'Policy Review: English Medium Writing in Wales', *Culture, Welsh Language and Sport Committee* CWLS(2)-06-03, p. 9. http://www.assembly.wales/N0000000000000000000000000019359.pdf (last accessed 28 August 2019).

Thomas, M. Wynn (2019), Personal Correspondence with Author.

Welsh Assembly Government (2017), 'Independent Review of Support for Publishing and Literature in Wales'. https://gov.wales/independent-review-support-publishing-and-literature-report (last accessed 29 August 2019).

Welsh Economic Research Unit (2018), 'Welsh Books Council', Publishing, Printing & Bookselling: Analysis of Regional Economy Contribution.

Welsh Studies Department, College of Librarianship Wales (1988), *The Book Trade in Wales: September 1986–November 1987*, Dyfed: Market Research Working Party.

Withers, D-M. (2019), 'Enterprising Women: Independence, Finance and Virago Press c.1976–1993', *Twentieth Century British History*. doi:10.1093/tcbh/hwz044.

Archives

Honno Papers, Box 2, National Library Wales [NLW], 'Minutes from Sunday 20 April 1986'.

Honno Papers, Box 1, NLW, 'Press Release – Welsh Women's Press Is Launched, 27 February 1987'.

Honno Papers, Box 1, NLW, 'New Success for Honno' 1990.

Honno Papers, Box 2, NLW, 'Letter to Shareholders, Two Years Since Honno's Launch'

Honno Papers, Box 2, NLW, 'Development and Marketing Strategy for Honno, 2001–02'

Honno Papers, Box 2, NLW, 'Honno – Appraisal by the Arts Council of Wales, Meeting 9 April 2001'.

Honno Papers, Box 2, NLW, 'Minutes of the Honno Committee Meeting, 2 September 2005'.

Mercer, Araba, Michelle McKenzie, Sue O'Sullivan and Rae Ann Robertson (1988), 'Sheba: Business Wits and Political Integrity', 3rd International Feminist Bookfair Montreal, 14–19 June 1988 Catalogue, p. 61. Sheba Press Papers, 6SFP, Box 11, The Women's Library.