OPEN MANUSCRIPT:

A HISTORY

OF CARDIFF WRITERS' CIRCLE

1947–2022

by

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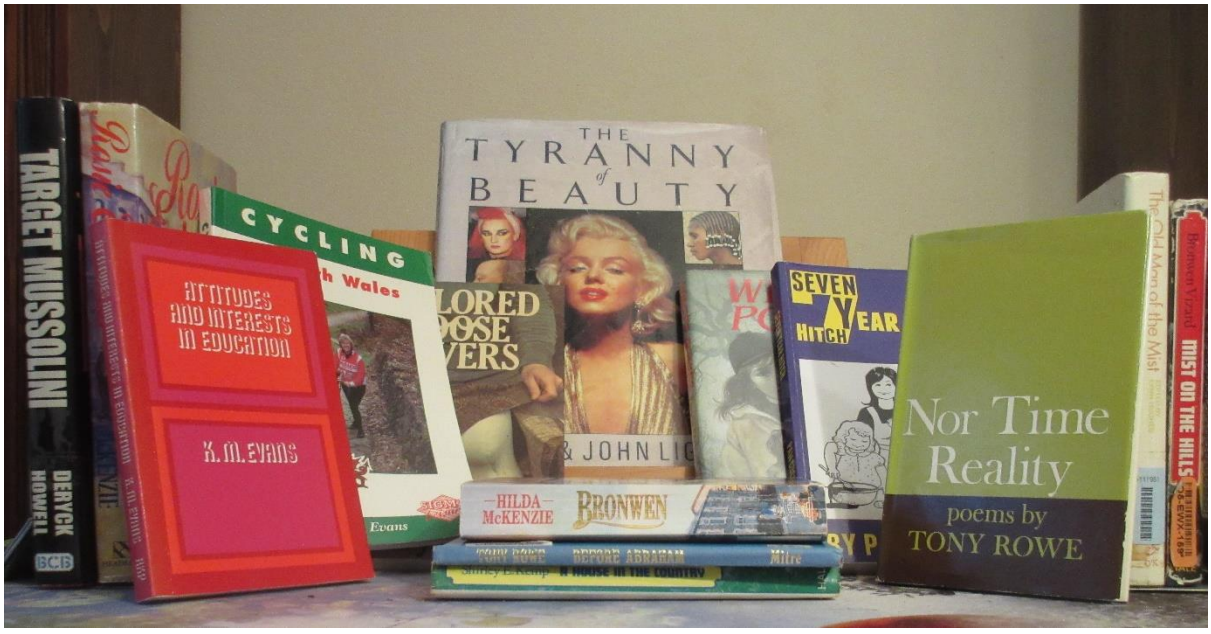

'Stimulating thought can only be of help to a writer.'

(CWC minutes, 7 July 1969)

1. Limits to Study
2. First Successes
3. The 1960s, 70s and 80s
4. The Rising of the Women
5. A Case Study: Jenny Gets Married
6. A Second Case Study: Tony Rowe, Poet; 'Liberation in a moment infinite'
7. The Peer Review Workshop
8. The CWC Today
9. Conclusions
Acknowledgements
Works Cited

On Sunday 4 May 1947, eleven people met in a small room in Cardiff Technical College. Without any protracted discussion, they decided to constitute themselves as Cardiff Writers' Circle (CWC). They chose one of their number to chair the meeting, and another as secretary, to take notes, and then four manuscripts were read out and discussed—three short pieces of fiction and an article about Caxton and printing.

Seventy-five years later, the CWC still meets regularly. It is one of the longest-running Creative Writing groups in the UK, and the oldest such group in Wales—a status which implies that it must have got something right. Much has changed in its meetings: they have become more informal, more concentrated on fiction and poetry, and they make greater use of digital media. But many aspects of the Circle's meetings and activities have not altered. This essay aims to identify the reasons why the CWC has lasted so long. I will not trace its activities year-by-year: the available evidence is pretty thin and a date-by-date narrative would lack sparkle. Instead, in approximate chronological order, I will focus on seven episodes or themes, sometimes deliberately choosing exceptional moments or people in order to illuminate the more general development of the Circle.

First, I will discuss some issues about this study.

1. Limits to Study

A brief sketch of the CWC was produced to mark its 50th anniversary: this is a useful introduction and effectively pinpoints some landmark changes, as well as reminding readers of the emotional support offered to writers by groups like the CWC. However, Eric Bartlett's *A Brief History* (1996) is a short, summary document, only about three thousand words long. I think there's much more to be said about the CWC, about how its members related to it and about Creative Writing groups in general. To my knowledge, this essay is the first study of a Creative Writing group by a professional historian.

There is one great advantage for anyone writing a history of the CWC: there is a near-complete series of minutes from 1947 to the present-day.[1] And there is one great obstacle faced by anyone writing a history of the CWC: the main source of information is those minutes. In many ways, the minutes are inadequate and misleading. Some problems are immediately obvious: until the 1990s, the minutes are usually hand-written, and the writing is generally awful. People's names and titles of manuscripts frequently have to be guessed. On top of this, the minutes are inconsistent: sometimes numbers attending a meeting are recorded, sometimes they're not. Sometime start-times and finishing-times are recorded, sometimes they're not. Usually the chair's name is given, but not always. Sometimes the room used is recorded, sometimes it is not.

But there's a more serious issue. What do minutes record? They are a formal summary of the apparently most important aspects of a meeting. They list the manuscripts which were read out: they usually note readers' names and the genre of texts. They frequently record the announcements made by the Chair at the start of the meeting. For the more specialist committee meetings, brief summaries of decisions are recorded. Are these points really the most important aspects of the CWC? What about the give-and-take of criticism and discussion following the reading of a manuscript? What about how people related to each other at meetings? The minutes barely mention these. There are isolated references to moments of laughter, enjoyment, friendship and fun, but they are almost never described in any detail. (I've frequently wanted to shout at the various secretaries: you're supposed to be Creative Writers! For goodness sake, *describe* what you're seeing.) It is clear that often the people at Circle meetings were having fun and the minutes just don't record this in any detail. Maybe writing a history based on these minutes is like tracing a love affair based on the

[1] While writing the present text, I have been able to consult minutes from 1947—54, 1961—70, 1971—83, 1984—97 and 2017—the present. Minutes exist for 1997—2017, but are not currently available. I joined the CWC in 2018.

bank statements of the two partners: you can gain an impression of who was where, but you never feel you understand them.

I am most interested in those informal, poorly-recorded yet all-important aspects of the CWC meetings. To unlock them, I have used a number of strategies. I have done what cultural historians call 'reading against the grain'—in other words, not concentrating on what the minutes are trying to say, but looking at what they cannot help saying, and focusing on the odd moments when their formality breaks down. Other members of the current CWC have helped me by either interviewing older members, or encouraging them to write down their impressions. I have consulted a number of works, fictional and non-fictional, written by the CWC members, including the invaluable autobiography by Pam Cockerill, *Seven Year Hitch*. In some places, in the absence of hard evidence, I have speculated about motivations and feelings. I have referred to studies of related groups, usually other Creative Writing circles or university-based classes, and sometimes I mention my own experiences in Creative Writing groups. I believe these supplementary techniques have allowed the production of a fuller, rounder picture of the CWC.

At the heart of this study is a sort of mystery: the CWC has been active for 75 years, effectively longer than the adult life of most people. Some practices and rituals have remained constant in its existence. Why have they not just survived but actually developed and prospered over the decades? What has the CWC got right?

Three final notes before the real history begins: firstly, at a number of points in the following sections, I'll convert historical prices into their 2022 equivalents. Readers should remember that this is a more complex calculation than it may sound, and that all sums cited are very approximate.

Secondly, for most of the first forty years of its existence, CWC members referred to each formally, as Mr Stevens, Mrs Lewis or Miss Rowe. Today, I would not choose to use such titles, but for the sake of consistency and clarity, I

have followed the CWC's practice for much of this essay. Quite frequently in those early years, women's first names were not recorded.

Thirdly, the dates in brackets refer to entries in the CWC's minutes. Sometimes these can be out of sync with the actual event: thus the December Christmas Party can be discussed at the April AGM and a publication in November can be noted at a December meeting.

2. First Successes

Frustratingly little is known about those eleven people who met on Sunday, 4 May 1947.[2] Were they practiced writers or newcomers to the craft? Residents of Cardiff or travellers, down from the Valleys? How many were men, how many women? It seems that they already knew each other: how had they met? Were they well-off or would they have found the soon-to-be-established annual membership fee of two shillings and six pence (approximately £5 today) difficult to pay? Above all, what motivated them?

One answer to my last question was quickly provided. A constitution, drawn up on 20 May 1947, listed the CWC's aims as: fostering, encouraging and improving writing. But this begs another question: why did they feel a need to do this in May 1947? Looking away from the minutes, one can see bigger social forces at work. It seems impossible not to link the creation of the CWC with the aftermath of the war, which had often been a traumatic experience for soldiers and civilians. Traumatized people have stories to tell. This is a strong argument, but in practice it is not until the 1960s that war-based stories and poems emerge among CWC texts.

A second, more positive, impulse may have motivated writers in the post-war years. This was the period of preparation of the Festival of Britain, which was much bigger than an event in London. In 1951, Britain was gripped by 'pageant fever'. There were bazaars, concerts, gymkhanas, beauty contests, floral displays, sporting events, drama festivals and parades across the land.[3] These were frequently locally-based events and carried similar messages: assertions that Britain had not just survived the war, but had bounced back, stronger and better

[2] Oddly, in the miniscule world of CWC studies, there is some dispute over this date. My predecessor, Eric Bartlett, cites 6 May 1947 as the date of the first meeting. The record of the minutes is unmistakable: they state 4 May 1947.

[3] Alexander Hutton, 'The "Quite Ordinary Man" at the Pageant: History, Community and Local Identity in the 1951 Festival of Britain' in Angela Bartie (ed), *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain* (London: UCL Press, 2020), pp. 201–25.

than ever. Under the inspiration of the Labour government of 1945–51, many of these local events had a social-democratic, left-of-centre ethos to them. The creation of the CWC was a small element in this larger wave of optimism and self-improvement.

Finally, there was a specifically Welsh context. The years after the Second World War were marked by the rise to dominance of a new Wales: based in the big southern and eastern towns and the Valleys, this Wales was industrialized, anglicized, forward-looking and—in the broadest sense of the word—liberal. In the local context, the victory of this new culture was marked by the local Cardiff referendum of 1952 concerning whether cinemas should open on Sundays. Old Wales—rural, church- or chapel-going, possibly Welsh-speaking—was for keeping Sundays special, and even had misgivings about all films. The 1952 vote was a clear victory for new Wales: 55,935 Cardiffians were in favour of Sunday cinemas, 21,542 against.[4]

There is no evidence about how individual CWC members voted in this local referendum. Some of them were committed Christians: they might have been influenced by arguments about keeping Sunday special. But in these first years, the CWC's actions mark it as part of that new Wales.

Another aspect of the CWC is revealed by that first entry in the minutes book: the immediate appointment of a chairman and secretary suggests the formality of the group and their familiarity with administrative procedures. These people did not just want to meet, they wanted a structure. At their second meeting, with just eleven people present, they elected a five-person committee. The minutes were read out at the second meeting and members were invited to signal any corrections they wanted to make. They were then signed by the Chair: in later years, sometimes the Chair would even write 'read, confirmed and signed'

[4] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: A History of Modern Wales* (OUP, 1981), p. 356.

next to the last week's minutes, suggesting the seriousness with which they were taken.

It is probable that at these first meetings they addressed each other formally, as Mr Smith or Mrs Jones. In later decades, this formal tone would sometimes be questioned, but suggestions that members address each by their first names were consistently rejected until the late 1980s, when formal titles just seemed to fade away, without any explicit discussion. The place in which they met in 1947 may have added to this sense of formality: the Technical College was one of those grand, neo-classical buildings in Park Place, completed in 1927. A contemporary guide to Cardiff comments: 'the building has been designed in a severe classical style, and relies for effect on the beauty of architectural form and proportion.'[5]

At first sight, this formality might seem to contradict my previous references to the basic *fun* of the CWC. This circle can be squared: these were people who not only felt comfortable with a certain formality, but who actually enjoyed it, or at least felt comforted by it. For the Circle, formality meant they were taking the meetings seriously and this is what they wanted.

In summer 1947, the CWC meetings moved to the Quakers' Friends House, in Charles Street. This was supposed to be a temporary measure, but the CWC stayed there for more than a decade. In some ways, the new room suited them: in egalitarian Quaker-style, the chairs were arranged in a circle, not in rows. There was central heating, and some availability of tea or coffee. Meetings were held fortnightly. Numbers attending declined—only five were present on 5 September 1947. But the CWC persevered. A short story competition was held in October, involving an outside adjudicator. At most meetings, members brought their own manuscripts to read, but even if no one arrived with a manuscript, the meeting continued. The minutes for 15 December 1947 record that although

[5] Edgar L. Chappell, *Cardiff's Civic Centre: A Historical Guide* (Cardiff: Priory Press, 1946), p. 45.

thirteen people were present, nothing was read out. Instead, it was 'more or less of a friendly gathering and most of the time was taken up by discussion... we had an enjoyable time getting to know each other.' At such non-meetings, members might also read out published stories or articles by other authors. In these early months, one gets the impression of a group coming together. It also seems likely that the Circle would have been learning—or, more accurately, teaching themselves—techniques of giving criticism and advice to each other. In the minutes, there is practically no detail about this process, apart from one comment concerning a meeting on 6 September 1948. Miss Kaye read her short story 'The Night Mr Hoskins gave silver to the Burglar'. Her story criticized for having too long a title. 'Miss Kaye replied by saying she was sticking to it, amid laughter.'

The process of feedback in the CWC is difficult to evaluate and I will return to it later. But, for the moment: we all know that one person's constructive criticism can be experienced by another person as a psychological mauling. So it is noteworthy that the one detailed reference to feedback in the early CWC stressed the good humour of the process.

The early CWC provided psychological and emotional support for its members. There was a discussion on 31 July 1950 'on *The Terrible Urge to Write: How Can It Be Satisfied when one has to earn a living?* Some treated the subject with levity and became hilarious whilst others—those with the terrific urge were more serious.' These notes give the impression of an open-minded group in which people were confident enough to exchange and compare opinions without argument.

Some clear tendencies emerge in these early years. Firstly, the Circle concentrates on reading short stories. Looking at the meetings held in October and November 1947, the minutes record the reading of ten short stories, one poem and one article. Secondly, while it is not recorded how many men and how many women were present at meetings, there's no doubt that women contributed more: in the

same two months, men contribute three times, women eight times. These figures suggest that the majority of CWC members were female.

Circle members constantly had one eye on the commercial possibilities of their work. The CWC Constitution spoke rather discretely about offering 'guidance... for publication,' but in meetings, members referred more directly to markets. In the example cited above, Miss Kaye was being told that no paying magazine would accept a story with such a long title. The articles that were read out could be sold to magazines—it is not clear how much could have been earnt in this manner, although this point becomes clearer in the early 1970s. The first published articles of the CWC might be termed pop-psychology: 'The Happy Ending Complex,' published in *Personality* magazine, and similar articles in *Psychology* and *The Psychologist*. Further articles followed in different fields: 'Study that Stimulates' in *Freelance Photographer*, 'So You Want to Make a Fortune' in the *Wrekin Advertiser*. Alongside these, short stories and poems were published in magazines such as *The Surrey County Journal*, *The Lady*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Poetry Review*, *The London Opinion* and *Home and Parents*.

CWC meetings openly and deliberately encouraged members to emulate each other's successes. At the beginning of each meeting, after the reading of last week's minutes, members would announce the acceptance of their poems, short stories or articles. When published, they might bring a copy of the text to the meeting; sometimes they even read it out. A conscious strategy was being followed here, which was made formal on 7 April 1952 with the decision to keep a 'success book... to prove that we were not mere scribblers, but writers of worth'. (Unfortunately, the book has not been preserved.) The CWC was providing validation of its members' efforts.

The Wrekin Advertiser in particular provided the early CWC with one of its big breaks. On 4 October 1948 the secretary recorded various acceptances of member's works in this paper: 'which makes six acceptances in all!!'. At the next meeting:

> The meeting opened with great hilarity when Miss Burman announced that she also had had two acceptances by the *Wrekin Advertiser*. This brings to date three member's work accepted. There was more laughter when Miss Burman announced... that the paper had all its requirements for at least six weeks. Apparently they are scared at what the Cardiff Writers might offer next. Each week a new writer, well how many more!!

Not only was the CWC providing its members with training in the techniques of giving feedback, in gaining confidence in their own writing, in emulating other members, but it also was guiding would-be writers along a path to success.

There is something curious about the first places in which CWC members published: *The Surrey County Journal, The London Opinion* and—most of all—*The Wrekin Advertiser*. All share one quality: they were not in Wales. The early CWC seems oddly separated from Wales: the word 'Welsh' does not appear in the minutes until March 1951. In Easter 1949, three CWC writers attended a West of England Writers Conference, held in Gloucester, without any sense of difficulty or irony. While it is hard to judge the content of short stories or poems just from the title, one trait is clear: explicit Welshness features as a means to refer to the distant past. On 16 May 1949, Mr Lewis read 'A Welsh Legend', on 1 May 1950 Mrs Llewellin read some blank verse about 'old Wales history', Mr Stevens wrote articles about 'Travelling in Old Glamorgan' (9 June 1952) and 'Old Welsh Ships' (13 September 1954). For these people, Wales was old: it was something that happened in the dim and distant past. Once or twice there is a flicker of interest in modern Wales as a tourist destination but, in general, it is safe to say that Welshness did not inspire the early CWC.

There are also some fleeting glimpses of political commitment in the early CWC. When CWC members cited established authors, they tended to be left-wing: G.B. Shaw, Somerset Maughan and the now-forgotten anarcho-pacifist

writer Ethel Mannin (1900–84). Dylan Thomas was mentioned in December 1953, when a CWC meeting was cancelled so that members could attend a Memorial Recital for the poet.

More significantly, there was a consistent strand of rather limited but still real feminist expression in the CWC. It is usually difficult to judge a short story's content simply by its title, but the meaning of the contribution by Miss K. Lorris on 17 May 1950 seems clear: 'Women?... Huh!' There was a formal discussion of a set question on 19 February 1951: 'Why Have Women Largely Failed in Literature?' For once, the minutes record some details of a lively debate in which all contributed and many ideas were shared, including: 'Women's Creative Urge was fulfilled by procreation of the race. Mrs L. James did not accept Women had failed. Her contention was that there was some very fine literature written by women, but since this is a Man's World they were pushed in a corner and not recognised. She asserted that in Art and Literature there was no Sex.' A revealing incident took place on 31 March 1952. At this point the CWC was stretching its wings and looking a little wider. There was a proposal that the group should visit Britannia Colliery. To the Circle's disappointment, the manager informed them that he would not agree to 'females' underground. 'This caused consternation among the women members, who were so disappointed that the Chairman said he would phone the manager to see whether he'd change his mind.' As far as can be seen, the manager did not change his mind, but it is significant that the CWC spoke with one voice here: men and women shared a sense of disappointment. There was similar unanimity about a change in the CWC Constitution: in the event of CWC collapsing, the original constitution stated that all its remaining assets were to go to a bookbinders' charity, in 15 June 1950 this was changed to The Society of Women Journalists Benevolent Fund.

None of these examples constitutes a militant, political stand. But, taken together, they add up to something. It seems probable that the majority of CWC members were women, and in these moments, one senses something of the

frustration they felt about the obstacles they faced. For such women, the CWC not only provided support, education and emulation, it also provided solidarity.

On the other hand, advancing the cause of women's writing led the CWC into some strange practices. On 5 January 1953 Miss Gwen Bonner-Roberts, Women's Correspondent for *Western Mail*, spoke to the Circle about freelance writing for papers. She was largely upbeat. 'Writing women's articles is not difficult—they cover beauty, fashion, the home, children and so on, and even men could write some of them.' Crime reporting and sports journalism, even for women's sports, was better done by men, while interviewing was more of a woman's skill. Obviously, the vista that was presented to CWC women was of a writing world based on rigid gender roles: if they wanted to succeed as writers, they were expected to conform to them.

In its first three years the CWC covered a lot of ground remarkably quickly. There can be no doubt that the majority of its members found the meetings and the resources the Circle offered both useful and supportive. One passage gives a strong impression of what they what looking for and—maybe—what they found. During the summer of 1949 three CWC members attended a Writers Circle Summer School in Derby. On 5 September 1949 they reported back to the CWC on their experiences.

> Miss Ray commented on the friendliness and the co-operation of all who attended from the highest to the lowest and what a fine feeling of fellowship and homeliness existed...
>
> Miss Burman felt the Summer School had been a great success and wholly worthwhile. She pointed out the benefits derived from so many and varied contacts. The social activities and the lectures being so very amenable... The Circle enjoyed the talks, since all the speakers were so enthusiastic.

Obviously, Misses Ray and Burman are discussing something *outside* the CWC. But their comments reveal their hopes of the world of writing, including the CWC.

In the early 1950s, there were a number of important changes to the CWC. In part, this was the result of a turnover of members. By April 1952 Mrs James and Miss Burman were the only ones left from the original eleven of May 1947. Violet Burman had become chair in April 1948 and was replaced in this post by Walter Bishop in April 1950. (From 1950 to 1978, the CWC was nearly always chaired by men.) The new members had different expectations of what a writers' circle might be and the CWC was adapted to meet their interests. The occasional hints of a shared left-of-centre political commitment faded away, although the implicit interest in the specific issues faced by women writers remained. Meetings became weekly rather than fortnightly. A 'library'—basically a shelf of books and periodicals—was bought with CWC funds and a Committee member made responsible for it. Above all, there was a more professional approach to organising the CWC. A programme of events was published each year, notices were placed in local libraries, and approaches were made to the *Western Mail* and *South Wales Echo*. The sense of the early CWC almost being separate or aloof from Cardiff and Wales ended: in the new model CWC, local links were valued, even courted. Curiously, it is a visiting speaker from the BBC who spelt out the implications of this. Elwyn Evans was Features Producer for BBC Wales. In a talk to the Circle on 8 February 1954, he told them: 'local flavour was almost a "must"... Welsh flavour was not to be too diluted, as regionalisation was necessary.'

The position of Vice-President was created and exploited in a fairly obvious 'win friends and influence people' strategy. Local writers were asked to adjudicate a CWC competition and then, if they were found to be suitable, they were invited to become a Vice-President. One of the most successful links

formed in this manner was with Alexander Cordell (1914—97), the author of *Rape of the Fair Country* (1959). He became a Vice-President in 1954 after giving two talks to the CWC and seemed to enjoy his contacts with the Circle. For decades afterwards he provided many members with encouragement and inspiration.

An illustration of this new tone was an occasional change in venue. Ordinary meetings continued to be held at Friends House in Charles Street. But for special occasions, such as the adjudication of a competition, a more formal venue such as a room in the Park Hotel was chosen. This suggests a CWC which was more savvy about its public image: this CWC sometimes wanted to showcase its activities to the outside world. There was a similar change in arrangements for the Circle's Christmas dinner: in 1950, attendance had cost six pence; in 1951 it cost three shillings and six pence (about £6) and was held at the Royal Hotel. In 1952 the Christmas dinner was held at the Park Hotel, and included several guests of honour, one of whom was A.G. Prys-Jones, MA and OBE, another CWC Vice-President. Frequently, the CWC of this period seems generous with its funds. In December 1951, they gave the warden of Friends House ten shillings (about £17 today) as a Christmas box; in April 1952, when Mrs James gave up the post of secretary after four years, she was given a one guinea book token (worth about £31)—significant both for the amount, and the currency used: a guinea was, technically speaking, one pound and one shilling, but it had connotations of a privileged, artistic, elite status.

Membership expanded, rising to over 20 in 1952, and 29 in April 1953. Of course, as always, not all members attended every meeting. In 1951, on average 12 people attended meetings; in 1952, 14. One result of these rising numbers was the withdrawal of tea and coffee in meetings: the warden at Friends House was not able to provide for so many.

Programmes were planned, year by year. There were about 27 or 28 meetings a year, with breaks for Easter, the summer and Christmas. There was a

formal AGM in April, and members were reminded that this was the sixth AGM, the seventh AGM and so on. In the summer, some CWCers would attend various summer schools, sometimes as formal delegates of the CWC, and so benefitting from a CWC subsidy. One odd result of this calendar was it was hard to see when the new year began: in April, after the AGM and Easter break? In September, after the extended summer break? Or in January, with the new calendar year? In practice, the Circle tended to refer to September as the beginning of the new year.

'Open Manuscript' sessions, in which any member could read a work in progress, were the most common form of meeting and were clearly the mainstay of the CWC. But they only occupied about half the meetings. In the 1954—55 programme, there were 14 open manuscript sessions, 8 competitions, 4 talks, 1 AGM and a Christmas dinner. Meetings were nearly always at least two hours long and frequently lasted three hours. The range of competitions was impressive: there were short story competitions (sometimes divided into competitions for published writers and competitions for beginners), novel competitions (usually involving a sample chapter and a synopsis), poetry competitions, radio-script competitions (which probably meant non-fictions talks rather than dramas), article competitions... One aspect of the CWC at this stage was a constant willingness to experiment with new forms.

By the mid-1950s, after barely a decade of existence, the CWC had become a resilient institution. Its members had learnt techniques of criticism, feedback, writing and even research; formats had been adapted and revised to suit members' interests; and links had been established with the local region. Things were looking good for the future.

3. The 1960s, 70s and 80s

The Sixties arrived in the CWC, but not in the forms that might be expected. If your image of the 1960s involves mini-skirted dollybirds strutting their stuff down Queen Street, a Rolling Stones LP in one hand and a joint in the other, then you will be disappointed. The CWC was not *that* sort of a group. Instead, the Sixties took other forms, for Circle members were part of a larger generational shift, both acted upon and acting in their own right.

Let's reconsider who joined the CWC. Drawing up a precise sociological profile of members is difficult, but hints are dropped here and there. Within the minutes and other sources there are references to a primary-school headmaster, a couple of doctors (probably Ph.D's, not medical doctors), one reverend, a school-teacher, a professional cellist, two nurses, a commercial traveller, a pharmacist, a secretary in a Council office, a typist for the Registry of Shipping and Seamen, a retired railway signalman and someone in middle-management. It is probably fair to say that the sociological 'centre of gravity' of the CWC was middle-middle class: people who were not noticeably wealthy, but who had careers, or were starting them. (In support of this claim, it should be remembered that the CWC began in the plebeian Technical College, rather than the elite University.) This majority was leavened or balanced by some working-class entry: usually individuals from the respectable, upper reaches of the working-class, people who had enjoyed promotion in their work and who could retire with relatively generous pensions. One linked point here is that, apart from some CWC participation in poetry competitions of the Miners' Eisteddfods in the 1960s and 1970s, the Circle never had any direct connection with trade unions or the wider labour movement. This made the CWC different from some cultural initiatives in the Valleys towns. It also means that the particular administrative structure of the CWC—minutes, committee, bank balance, chaired meetings and a constitution—was drawn from a middle-class administrative experience, not from trade union practices.

In the 1950s the majority of the CWC members were probably women and it seems likely that this pattern continued in the 1960s. The main evidence for this is, once again, that women contributed more than men to meetings. If we focus on May 1962, we find that four women and two men contribute on 14 May, three women on 21 May, and four women and one man on 28 May. The proportion alters meeting by meeting, but the overall tendency is unmistakable. The most interesting development in the 1960s is that something changes among these women.

There is some detailed information about CWC women's lives from two sources. Pam Cockerill joined in January 1973 and, with the help of inspiration and advice from the Circle, wrote a series of successful children's books. In 2014, after many false starts, she completed and self-published an autobiographical memoir, *Seven Year Hitch*, which recalled her life at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s. It is a sharply-observed, witty text, that illuminates women's lives during these years. Cockerill married in 1959: she was 22 and her husband, Mac, 24. They had known each other for five months. Her actions worried and infuriated her parents: she was marrying too fast, too young and to an unsuitable man. She even had the wrong sort of engagement ring: a Victorian sapphire ring bought in a second-hand shop. 'The more they disapproved, the more stubborn I got.'[6]

Pam and Mac were more optimistic than their parents. After all, 'there was no shortage of jobs': a point which formed the economic base for many initiatives and projects in the 1960s.[7] Unlike her mother, Pam Cockerill had a driving licence and an office job, in the Treasury Department of Cardiff City Hall. Her husband alternated between work as a cook and shop-work. Unlike her parents, Pam and Mac did not rent a house: instead, they bought one—the first members of her family to own property. Her mother took one look at their new house and

[6] Pam Cockerill, *Seven Year Hitch* (no publication details [2014?]), p. 31.
[7] Cockerill, *Seven Year Hitch*, p. 14.

commented: 'You can't bring a baby to live in here!'[8] Pam and Mac aimed to convert their house into two flats and rent one out. (They were only partly successful with this project.) Cockerill had her first child in 1959 and two others swiftly followed.

Seven Year Hitch illustrates how women's lives were changing in the 1960s, but also what stayed the same. The reality of their experience was quite different from the colourful stereotype of sex'n'drugs'n'rock'n'roll; the changes they experienced were quieter, but possibly more significant. A new generation of women were marrying younger, and even marrying against their parents' advice.[9] They were entering the service sector, and usually office work, in ever-greater numbers. They were poorly-educated. Jenny Sullivan (née Anderson), provides an even starker, more telling example of a missed education. Anderson joined the CWC in about 1965. She had left school at 15, not by her own choice, but because her father believed that girls didn't need educating. Her brother, who worked in Penarth, then paid for her to attend Cleves Commercial College, where she learnt shorthand and typing, but never acquired the skill of book-keeping. (When Anderson told me this story, she looked directly at me and said very emphatically 'and my brother wasn't rich'.[10]) Her secretarial qualifications meant she understood sentence structure and the basics of grammar, but hardly set her up for Creative Writing.

CWC members in the 1960s had different types of educational experiences and different levels of qualification. At times in meetings, Anderson and Cockerill must have sat next to a successful academic from Cardiff University, Dr Kathleen Evans. But Anderson and Cockerill were probably more typical of the women who joined the CWC in the 1960s. This majority were not uneducated, but they were poorly or—perhaps more accurately—inappropriately

[8] Cockerill, *Seven Year Hitch*, p. 31.
[9] Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Abacus, 2012 [2006]), p. 491.
[10] Interview on 2 Dec 2021.

educated. Most importantly, *they recognised this* and wanted to do something about it. They looked to the CWC to supplement and develop their educations. (I will discuss women's experiences in the CWC in greater detail in the next chapter.)

There is a gap in the minutes from 1954 to 1961. In those seven years, much changed. The CWC left Friends House and in the early 1960s was semi-nomadic for a period, moving between different venues year by year—the Estonian Club, the Collegiate Centre of Education, the Glamorgan County Welfare Association, the British Council and a short-lived return to Friends House in 1966.[11] When looking for accommodation, the CWC faced problems: its funds were limited and its needs were exacting. It wanted a relatively large room in central Cardiff. Usually fewer than 20 attended meetings, but sometimes more were present, and numbers were growing. It wanted access to a kitchen so that tea or coffee could be made in the interval and also the room had to be available at 7pm for about 30 weeks in the year. Eventually, in June 1967, the Circle moved to the Anglican Chaplaincy in Park Place, which catered for students at Cardiff University. Some members were immediately dissatisfied with the room, but the Circle continued to meet there for about three decades.

(In passing, it can noted that over its seventy-five years, the CWC has usually held meetings in religious groups' buildings: Quakers, Anglicans, Catholics [in the 2000s] to the present location in the YMCA [and the Church of Zoom]. This odyssey is probably more a result of the limited availability of inexpensive meeting-rooms in central Cardiff than a comment on the CWC's changing religious affiliations.)

The tone of the 1960s CWC was quite different from that of the early 1950s. This is neatly illustrated by the arrangements for Christmas celebrations:

[11] The minutes are rather vague on this point. It is often difficult to be sure whether the Circle was meeting in these venues, or merely considering them as possible sites.

the earlier Circle had attempted to replicate the niceties of a middle-class social occasion, the 1960s Circle offered 'beer, skittles and song' (12 December 1966). Another shift—perhaps a development, rather than a change—was the distinctly quasi-familial tone of some CWC practices.

As before, there were parting gifts offered to long-term members when they left (usually because they were moving from Cardiff). In January 1963, Mrs Hoskins, a member of the CWC committee, left Cardiff: she was given an ornamental thermometer and a signed copy of *The Thirteenth Coach*—a novel by Eric Bartlett, one of the Vice-Presidents. Two years later, Mrs Hoskins was made a life member (25 January 1965). On 3 April 1967, Mrs Hughes relinquished the post of CWC secretary that she had held for two years. She was given a cheque for two pounds and two shillings (about £31—it is worth noting that her cheque equalled two guineas). When Mrs McGregor was taken to an Orthopaedic Hospital, the Circle sent her a bouquet of flowers (25 April 1966). When Mrs Ellis was too ill to attend meetings, she was sent flowers (8 July 1963).

The sadder occasions of the deaths of Circle members were also commemorated, usually by a minute's silence at the next meeting, sometimes also by cards and letters sent to the relatives, and attendance by some members at their funerals.

The most touching example of this type of attention occurred in 1975. Monica Edwards joined the CWC at some point before 1970. She contributed fairly frequently, first reading short stories, but by 1971 experimenting with chapters from a novel. In April 1974, she was co-opted onto the CWC Committee. In September 1974 her husband died, without warning. The Circle sent her some flowers, and she replied with a *thank you* note. Several Circle members stayed in contact with her during this time. A little later, she began attending meetings again. In March 1975, she decided to move to Australia, where her son and his family lived. At her last meeting with the Circle, she arrived with sherry and biscuits to share with the other members. The secretary recorded

that Edwards was 'a longstanding and dear member of the Circle... [Edwards] thanked all members for the warm friendship they had always shown her, this she found especially comforting during her bereavement' (27 March 1975). The Circle presented her with a volume of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (a classic poetry collection) 'as a token of the deep affection all members felt towards her.'

This type of quasi-familial practice was most firmly integrated into the CWC through the establishment of commemorative cups or plaques, to be given as awards at the various competitions. The first of these was probably created in 1960: this was the Wetzel Plaque.[12] In the late 1950s, Friedrich (or 'Fred') Wetzel lived in Cardiff and worked in Bridgend 'in the optical industry'. He was born in Germany in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1933 he worked with the German underground to create an escape network for those persecuted by the Nazis. He was detected by the German police, then arrested and tortured by them. He spent several months in prison, thankfully before the full Nazification of German prisons. He escaped in 1934 and fled to Czechoslovakia. At that point he began to write an autobiography, but left behind his unfinished manuscript following the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, when he had to flee once more, this time finding refuge in Poland. It is not clear how or when he arrived in Britain, but his wishes for himself, his wife and sister were clear: 'the hope of normal life as citizens of a free country.'[13]

After 1945 he returned to writing his memoirs. Unusually, he joined the CWC *after* his book had been accepted for publication, at some point in the late 1950s. It seems that his experiment in autobiography made him interested in creative writing. He quickly became Vice-Chairman of the Circle. He died in 1959, and it was widely assumed that he died prematurely, due to the long-term

[12] Although Wetzel is named fairly often in the minutes, there is frustratingly little hard information about him. For this section I have consulted an unpublished character sketch by Phil Beynon, *They Called Him Alfred* (written in 1967), and his own autobiographical memoir, *They Called Me Alfred* (London: George Ronald, 1959).
[13] *They Called Me Alfred*, p. 237.

effects of the injuries he had sustained after his arrest in Germany. By all accounts, he was a man of strong moral principles, and he had impressed the Circle, who were understandably shocked by his sudden passing.

The title of his autobiography was *They called me Alfred*. The contrast between the author's real name—Friedrich—and the name in the title is a neat comment on his dual identity, German *and* British. Sadly, Wetzel died just a few days before the publication of his autobiography.

They called me Alfred may mark another landmark in the CWC's history. While many members had published articles, short stories, travel-writing and poems, and while its Vice-Presidents—writers like Alexander Cordell or W.H. Boore—had published novels, this could well have been the first time that an ordinary CWC member had published a book.

For all these reasons, the Circle decided to mark Wetzel's passing with a commemorative plaque, to be awarded to the winner of one of its annual competitions—presumably in whichever competition seemed most prestigious. The winner's name would be engraved on it and then the plaque passed on to a new winner each year. The Circle contacted Wetzel's widow and his sister: both of them occasionally visited the Circle, and were invited to attend the adjudications of the Wetzel competitions. (Usually, they seem to have declined the invitation, but they may well have attended the first Wetzel competition in 1961.)

This incident in particular and, in general, this type of commemorative, caring practices, suggest some ways in which the Circle was changing. Firstly, it was acting with greater confidence and decisiveness. While the sudden loss of Friedrich Wetzel was undoubtedly upsetting, the CWC had not been paralysed by the event: its members devised an appropriate, compassionate and eloquent manner to mark his passing. Secondly, the Circle was now an institution that was more aware of its own history. The Wetzel award became an annual event, and so did the annual explanation of who Wetzel was and why he should be

commemorated. Even on 1 November 1993, thirty-four years after Wetzel's death, Phil Beynon was still explaining the story to new members. Gestures like this were a way of reminding members that they were inheriting something, even that they shared something. Thirdly, the CWC saw itself as an institution with a future. There would be no point in creating something like the Wetzel plaque, if everyone expected the CWC to fold within a few months. Finally, it was an institution which cared for its members. The *Golden Treasury* presented to Monica Edwards was not paid for by a whip-round among concerned friends; it was an official gift from the Circle to Edwards, paid for with CWC funds.

In the 1960s, the CWC was growing more ambitious. It made contact with other writers' circles, in Newcastle, Caerleon, Swansea, Gwent and Penarth. Partly as a result of contacts with the Swansea Writers' Circle, in 1969 the CWC considered organising a summer school for local writers. This involved an application for Welsh Arts Council funding, which in turn led to the creation of a new federal organisation in 1972, the South and Mid-Wales Writers' Association, which would act on behalf of the various groups. This Association took responsibility for the writers' schools which began in May 1973 and continued as annual events into the 1990s, always with prominent CWC participation in the organisation. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s there was intermittent discussion about the Arts Council providing more support for the CWC. As the CWC was often short of funds, the prospect of an Arts Council subsidy looked attractive. However, there were obstacles.

> Mr Kendal Davies [the CWC President] pointed that this would destroy the aims of the present Circle and turn it into a Literary Society. Members agreed that they would prefer to continue to run the Cardiff Writers Circle as it now stands, and that they would explore other possibilities to cut the

cost of running the Circle rather than change its friendly and informal format. (10 November 1969)

Members decided that an increase of 50p on the annual subscription would be more satisfactory that possibly having to comply with restrictions that a grant might entail. (25 March 1974)

Mrs Mick [sic] Humble queried what use the Arts Council was to the Circle as they gave us no direct aid. (28 November 1977)

Reading between the lines, it seems that the Arts Council would have wanted a more formal structure of attendance, lectures, instruction and even assessment, and was sceptical of the workshop format of the Open Manuscript meetings. Arts Council funding would have implied a radical change in the CWC practices and so it was firmly rejected by the Circle's members. By the 1980s, the CWC finally benefitted from some limited, indirect financial support from the Arts Council: it paid the expenses incurred by the adjudicators for CWC competitions, which could be claimed from its 'Writers on Tour' scheme. In 1985–86, the CWC had a total income of £660 (worth about £2,000 today), of which £120 came from the South-East Wales Arts Association (a sub-division of the Welsh Arts Council) (24 March 1986); in 1994–95, a total income of £729 (worth about £1,500 today), of which £130 came from the SEWAA (6 March 1995). This subsidy ended at some point in the 2000s.

An important point to draw from these debates is the strong sense that the CWC had of its own identity: it had developed practices and rituals it wished to defend and preserve. This was no longer eleven odd people meeting in a little room in the Technical College. The Circle had become an institution in its own right, and its members were conscious of this.

One result of this greater self-awareness was that meetings became more carefully organised and probably less spontaneous. In part, this was simply because more people were attending. In 1965–66, on average 16 people attended

(4 April 1966). But, on occasion, there were far more: on 15 March 1965 there were 22 present, on 3 July 1972, 25, on 6 September 1977, 32, which might be the all-time record for CWC attendance. Although the minutes spoke positively about these rising numbers and—in particular—treasurers welcomed the increased subscriptions, something changes when this number of people attend a Creative Writing group. If there are only ten people present at a two-hour meeting, then each of them know from the start that they will probably contribute something. If there are twenty, then it becomes more difficult for all to participate and it even becomes possible for some to attend without any wish to contribute, but simply to listen.

For these reasons, the task of chairing a meeting became more important: this can often be the only way that all voices are heard. In the early 1950s, while one person was appointed CWC chair, in practice any of the leading members might take the chair for a meeting. By the mid-1960s, CWC tended to be chaired by the same person or, sometimes, by their deputy. On 21 October 1974, the minutes state 'no chairman available,' indicating that this was an exceptional event. In turn, a good chair was particularly respected. Phil Beynon joined the Circle at some point in the late 1950s, and was still an active member in the early 2000s, taking on many administrative roles and often chairing meetings. The affection and respect with which older CWC members refer to him is largely due to the skill with which he chaired meetings.

The CWC's annual programmes were as ambitious as ever. For example, in 1970—71, there were 33 sessions:

- An Opening Night
- 21 Open Manuscript sessions
- 7 Competitions, each involving one session reading out the entries, and one session adjudicating them. In 1970—71 the topics for competitions were: the Wetzel Award (for essays or stories on a set

theme), articles, humorous Christmas stories, poetry, novels (usually judging a chapter and a synopsis), short stories, radio scripts and children's short stories

- A Christmas Party
- An AGM
- A Committee meeting
- A Closing Night

In the 1960s and 1970s there was a set format to the meetings. The Circle met on Mondays (a tradition which the current CWC is still proud to observe). Meetings were meant to start at 7pm, but frequently started a little later, mainly because members enjoyed chatting to each other as they came in. There was a collection box on one table, probably where the Treasurer sat, and members paid their weekly levy as they entered. (In 1968 this was two shillings, which would be worth approximately £3 today.) Those who wished to read a manuscript would signal this to the Chair. Each meeting started with reading out last week's minutes. Occasionally corrections were suggested, but normally the minutes were so anodyne that it would have been hard to object to them. Many members must have found this practice uninteresting, but it served a purpose. Most of the poems, short stories and articles read out at meetings were never published. Reading out the minutes served as a validation or recognition, probably the only one that the author was going to get. After that, the chairman would make a series of announcements—this might concern contacts with other Writers' Circles, meetings of interest to the Circle or reminders about forthcoming CWC competitions. There would then be a rather strange ritual: members would be invited to announce any writing successes over the past week. These normally concerned acceptances or publications. By all accounts, each was positively received, and sometimes members might break into applause for a particularly impressive 'success'. On Open Manuscript nights, the Chair would devise a

running order for manuscripts to be read out. There was no formal time limit set for each reader. Criticism would then follow (a point to which I will return). My impression is that often a reading might be quite long and the following discussion correspondingly lengthy. Certainly, a relatively small number of texts were read out: choosing two months at random, one finds four readings on 30 October 1967 (a book chapter, two short stories and a poem), four on 13 November 1967 (three short stories and a curious 'love letter written as an exercise'), and five on 27 November 1967 (two poems, two short stories and one children's story). There would be an interval, during which tea and/or coffee would be served. Once again, there is the impression that Circle members enjoyed chatting, as there were regular complaints that the tea-break lasted too long and should be strictly limited to fifteen minutes. Members might also consult the Circle's library during the break. The Chair would call members back for the second half of the meeting. The minutes generally fail to record when meetings ended, but there is some impression that they often lasted more than two hours. It is hard to be sure of the overall *tone* of the meetings, but readers from 2022 would probably find them extraordinarily formal. After all, this was the organisation that in 7 May 1962 decided that the phrase 'get-together' was inappropriate for the first meeting after the summer, and insisted on the use of 'Opening Night'; which persisted in making payments in guineas into the 1960s; and which, in its 1970 programme, referred to its male officials as 'Esquire'. But I would still maintain that these formal features of the CWC's framework did not prevent a real sense of friendliness developing in meetings.

The Circle, collectively, was committed to making meetings work. This can be seen most clearly on the rare occasions when an Open Manuscript night was held, but nobody arrived with a manuscript. This happened on 17 September 1962, when twelve people turned up. There was an accepted 'emergency' practice for such moments: spontaneous writing. Everyone present wrote one word on a scrap of paper; the words were placed in a hat; each person then chose a word,

and had to write immediately on that topic. (Almost invariably, one of the words was 'sex' or something similar.) The results were then read out. On 17 September the results were judged 'interesting and amusing', on 8 June 1964, a similar exercise was judged to be 'most entertaining', and the Circle agreed to repeat it. By the 1990s, spontaneous writing was falling out of favour, but members still came with a commitment to make an otherwise empty meeting work. 'The evening was enlivened by reminiscences and personal stories from various members, which embellished a rather thin evening for manuscripts, and so the dreaded "spontaneous writing" was avoided.' (15 April 1996)

Circle members felt they were getting good at criticism. When a new member arrived, there would be a brief process almost like an induction, where they would be shown how meetings worked and how criticism operated. When Mr Dean, representing the Welsh Arts Council, visited, the Circle even demonstrated their methods by reading a poem and then collectively criticizing it (25 June 1973). It is unclear, however, exactly what happened when a manuscript was criticised.

It seems fair to assume that after twenty years some useful techniques for criticism had been learnt and passed on. Criticism was normally described as 'constructive' or even 'kindly'. It was linked to 'helpful advice' (12 March 1962). It was supposed to be substantial: when the Circle exchanged some draft articles with the Newcastle Writers' Circle, the CWC was disappointed when they were returned with comments 'which tended to be more concerned with layout and spelling than criticism of the articles themselves' (25 September 1967). The CWC expected a certain seriousness in criticism. There's a nice negative example about this: in 18 March 1963, Mrs J. Humble, a stalwart of the Circle, read a humorous poem based on 'Hail to Thee Blythe Spirit', 'which members found much too funny for criticism'. Something which was *simply* amusing therefore escaped the need for criticism. Furthermore, criticism was supposed to be 'stringent' (3 November 1969), and formal, a point which was debated by the

Committee on 1 May 1967. 'The President [said] that formality, in most cases, made criticism easier within the Circle. Some Committee Members agreed with the President, and others were in favour of informality, and there was a great deal of discussion on this subject. No firm conclusions.' Here, the Committee was specifically considering the use of formal titles (such as Mrs Hughes, rather than Bronwen), but their use of adjectives like 'stringent' and 'formal' is still significant. At some meetings, the Chairman may have attempted to sum up the collective opinion of the Circle about a particular piece.

Let us return to the two women mentioned earlier: Pam Cockerill and Jenny Sullivan. What were they getting from the CWC? Some points are obvious: the CWC were a friendly crowd. The minutes constantly stress the formal aspects of the meetings, and downplay much else: the basic *fun* of meeting old friends and making new ones, of chatting, of listening to stories and poems, and talking about them. Some members would even read out the whole draft of a novel, chapter by chapter, over months and even years: to attend with this type of consistency suggests that Circle members certainly felt they were getting something out of those meetings.

4. The Rising of the Women

In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the CWC was a bigger, more confident, better-connected organisation. It had developed a set of practices and structures which, by and large, worked well. Its meetings were well-organised and appear harmonious. Were there ever disagreements? Occasionally CWC members quibbled about rules governing competitions, and once or twice they debated points such as whether members should read published work at Open Manuscript sessions. Sometimes odd moments of tension make their way into the minutes. On 28 February 1966, both the chair and the secretary were absent, so the assistant secretary, Mrs Ellis, took the minutes. The minutes end with the comment that Mrs Ellis has resigned and does not intend to return. (Her name never features again in the minutes.) Had a feud developed about who was responsible for the minutes? It is impossible to say, but something clearly went wrong at that meeting. In 1986 there was an objection to a short story, and the majority of members seem to have agreed that it was 'not suitable for open reading' (28 April 1986).[14] But such disagreements seem very rare. Of course, the anodyne minutes stress the moments of consensus—it is certainly possible that there was more bickering than they suggest. On the other hand, if CWC meetings were constantly marked by blazing rows, would members have attended so regularly? On balance, it seems probable that meetings were generally good-natured.

In reality, there was one significant line of tension within the Circle. It is neatly revealed by the records of the 1968 Christmas Party. Once again, the Circle had gone out for beer and skittles and, once again, 'the Battle of the Sexes was carried on by means of a Skittles Match' (20 April 1969). The Battle of the Sexes? Obviously, this was intended to be funny: occasionally, there are little stabs of humour in the minutes. Back in 1965, the landlord's apparent

[14] As always, the minutes do not record the substance of the objection.

amazement that the Circle members still had not learnt how to play skittles was recorded (20 December 1965). It is also clear why skittles might be particularly suitable for such a contest: the game does not depend on physical strength, and so men and women can compete as equals. But still: why the Battle of the Sexes? Why not novelists vs poets, fiction-writers vs non-fiction-writers, Cardiffians vs non-Cardiffians, or Young vs Old?

Gender was important to the Circle, whether this was stated explicitly or not. Back in 1951 Mrs L. James had argued that 'in Art and Literature there was no Sex.' But in the 1960s and 1970s, most CWC members took it for granted that writing was gendered—often, this must have appeared blindingly obvious. It came up as an issue in competitions: on 3 September 1962 it was decided that members competing for the Wetzel Award of that year could state whether they wanted a male or female reader for their entry. This seems to imply a degree of mistrust. Were women suspicious of men's judgements? Or men suspicious of women? Comments relating to potential markets referred to the theme of gender again and again. Mrs Ellis was told her love story was 'suitable for any woman's magazine' (11 March 1963), Mrs J. Humble learnt that her short story would work better 'from the female angle' (18 March 1963). On 29 April 1963, the same woman announced a 'success': a humorous article in the *Western Mail* about decorating 'from a woman's point of view'. Mrs Josty contributed an article entitled 'It's not Cricket' (8 July 1963). It concerned 'a woman's exasperation with the game and whilst the men did not agree with much of what was written, all agreed it was well written.' The same theme was addressed by Mrs J. Humble in her article 'Sporting Life' which gave 'a woman's view of sport' (13 July 1964), published in the *Western Mail*. Mrs Prin wrote a humorous article in the *South Wales Echo* on ballroom dancing from 'the female angle' (7 October 1963).

There's something very odd about these references. Not once is a story or poem described as being 'from the man's point of view'. The logic here must be that the man's point of view could be taken for granted: it was how poems, short

stories and articles were normally framed. The woman's point of view was exceptional, and therefore worthy of comment, even in a group where the clear majority of contributors were female. It's also worth stressing the emphatic nature of these judgements: sometimes they were qualified as *a* woman's point of view, but often they presented a blanket, simplistic idea of *the* woman's point of view, as though all women felt, thought and wrote the same way.

This theme of different, gendered points of view was rarely politicized or placed into a wider social context. Dr Kathleen Evans did write one article, 'No Through Road', about the obstacles that prevented female teachers from becoming head teachers, which was published in the *Western Mail* (15 June 1964), and Mrs J. Humble noted how unreal most stories in women's magazines were (9 November 1964). But these seem to be the exceptions that prove the rule. Normally, the women of the CWC were conscious of their identities as women and even willing, in a vague and non-confrontational manner, to assert the validity of their writing. But, generally, they were not feminists.

There was one small rebellion against gender stereotyping. For competitions involving an outside adjudicator, the CWC often asked competitors to use a pseudonym to ensure the neutrality of the process. In the early 1960s, such pseudonyms were conventionally gendered: men chose names like Stewart Geddes and David Howard, women names like Amanda Peters or Katie Hibbert. In 1965, non-gender specific names began to be used: Zac, Snipe and even Brontosaurus (4 October 1965). Obviously, this is a small step, but anyone who has had to use a pseudonym will usually admit that they thought for a moment about the new identity they were creating for themselves. Choosing a non-gender specific identity, even just for one competition, suggested a willingness to think beyond strict lines of gender.

Issues of gender practically affected how the CWC was run. Predictably, there was the tea-making. 'It was amicably agreed between the lady members that they would carry out this duty on a monthly basis.' (3 November 1969) On 19

November 1971, there was a special meeting, attended by members of the Gwent and Swansea Writers' Circles. 'During the interval, the good ladies of the Cardiff Circle provided varied and delicious refreshments which were greatly enjoyed.' At the 28th AGM, the CWC Chair Derek Howell 'thanked the ladies who so kindly took over the refreshments' (27 March 1975), and at the 29th AGM he 'thanked the ladies for making the tea every week' (22 March 1976).

At first sight, readers in 2022 might find Howell's remarks offensively patronizing. It is worth pausing to consider: perhaps he *really* was grateful to them? And perhaps they felt glad that their efforts had been noted?

A gender imbalance also affected how the CWC was organised. For much of the 1960s and 70s, there seemed to be an unwritten rule that the most important posts had to go to men. The usually honorific President and the more important Chairman were almost always men. In the 1960s, there's one brief exception to this pattern. Mrs Baker became chair in April 1964, but resigned a year later 'owing to pressure of other duties' (15 March 1965). She then disappears from the CWC's minutes.

At times, this gender imbalance must have seemed almost funny. A new Committee was co-opted/elected on 21 March 1977. Its members were:

Chair: John Pitt
Vice-Chair: Mrs Mick [sic] Humble
Sec: Mrs S. Josty
Treasurer: Mrs Marjorie Humble
Asst Sec: Mrs M. Prisk
Librarian: Mrs Christine Morgan
Committee: Mrs Levey, Mrs Llewellyn, Dr Mary Jenkins, Mrs Jean Wallis

Looking at this list of names, one can only speculate. Wouldn't some of those nine women have questioned why the CWC had to have a man in its most

important role? Why did they accept this situation? Was it out of a sense of respectability? It would not have been *proper* for a woman to have taken on the post of Chair? A lack of confidence? Were the men more experienced in administrative work? Or was this imbalance due to the most basic imperatives of time and leisure: men had more free time? All that can be said for certain is that the 1960s and early 1970s CWC enacted fairly rigid gender roles: there was women's writing and men's writing, there were female officials (the secretary and the librarian) and male officials (chairman and president), there were women's roles (making the tea), and all-male sociability (going to the pub after a meeting), and then there was the annual Battle of the Sexes.

But maybe all was not as rigid as the minutes suggest. Cracks can shatter even the biggest icebergs. On 3 April 1978, Dr Mary Jenkins was elected chair, and retained the post until 1980, when Mrs Arline Liggett took on the role. And on 9 May 1977, Chairman John Pitt *made the tea*.

At first sight, these details may appear unimportant. What did it matter who was chair and who made the tea if everyone was encouraged to write? But the external rituals and the internal practices reinforced each other: women certainly were encouraged, supported and even instructed. But they were also pushed towards a certain path. This is neatly illustrated by a talk by Carl Routledge, a London-based literary agent, who addressed the Circle on 16 March 1962. He warned of the difficulties in earning a living wage from writing, but was relatively upbeat about buoyant markets. There were more public libraries and more television dramas: writers were needed. Above all, there were 76 women's magazines, and they needed writers. However, 'to cater for these one must write in a bright, snappy, uplifting and also romantic style.'

During these years, some CWC women took these lessons to heart. For a brief period in the early 1970s, the minutes do not simply record 'successes,' they also note payments received. They show how one strand of writing developed extremely fruitfully. Mrs Sybil Josty was paid £50 (worth about £600 today) for a

'confession' story in *True* magazine, and £60 (about £700 today) by the same magazine for a second story (18 September and 13 November 1972). Mrs Shirley Kemp was paid £90 (over £1,000 today) for a similar story in *True* (16 Oct 1972). Josty had another 'confession' story accepted by *My Story*, for which she was paid £30 (worth about £350) (26 February 1973). When there was a German reprint of one of Kemp's stories, she was paid a further £25 (about £300) (1 October 1973). Finally, Kemp was paid £120 for a two-part serial in *True* (about £1,500) (3 December 1973). Both Josty and Kemp also published full-length 'romance' books with established commercial publishers, as did other CWC members, such as Bronwen Vizard and Hilda McKenzie.

Not all female CWC writers exploited the 'confession' market. Slightly later, in the 1980s, Mary Davies had a different sort of success. Her *Tailored Loose Covers* was published by Hutchinson in 1982, and as a result of its success she was given the job of Craft Editor at the publishers (25 March 1982). Also regularly attending meetings in the 1960s and 1970s was Kathleen M. Evans, a lecturer in Educational Psychology at Cardiff University. She published two successful works on education during this period, and gained her (second?) Ph.D in 1976.[15]

Planning Small-Scale Research: A Practical Guide for Teachers and Students (National Foundations for Educational Research, 1968)

Attitudes and Interests in Education (RKP, 1965), Italian translation 1978

Spatial Relations in an Infants' School (Ph.D, 1976)

Attitudes and Interests in Education was chosen as an Open University set text in 1972. In spring 1973 Evans went on a lecture tour of Australia (30 April 1973).

[15] There is also a Kathleen M. Evans who, in the same period, published *In their own tongue: an account of the work of Richard Davies, Williams Salesbury and William Morgan* (Church in Wales, 1958) and *A Book of Welsh Saints* (Church in Wales, 1967). Frustratingly, I don't know if this is the same woman.

She was able to earn significant income from writing, being paid £40 (about £700) for an article in the *Daily Telegraph* which was subsequently reprinted (16 February 1970).

Of course, it wasn't only women who earnt money through writing. Mr Hines was paid £20 (about £250) for an article in *Management in Action* (26 October 1973). Reverend Trengrove was paid £30 (about £350) for a 16,000-word book on South Glamorgan churches (10 June 1974). But the record of the minutes is clear: women published more and earnt more from their writing than the men. Unfortunately, full financial records have not been preserved, but it seems possible that in the 1970s writers like Josty and Kemp were earning a comfortable salary from their writing.

One important question arises here. To what extent was—for example—Shirley Kemp a CWC writer? Would it be more accurate to understand her as a successful writer of romantic fiction who occasionally dropped into a few CWC meetings? Probably not. Kemp joined the CWC on 8 September 1969. Just three weeks later she read a short story, 'Carol Singers,' to the Circle. In 1971 she read three short stories to the Circle, and had her first publishing success: a poem, published in the *Cork Examiner* (12 October 1971). In 1972 we see her working on a novel, bringing draft chapters to the Circle throughout the year. On 24 April 1972 she was co-opted as a Committee member, and subsequently she regularly attended Committee meetings. The evidence of the minutes is not decisive, but it seems that she took the CWC seriously.

At the opposite end of the cultural spectrum, Dr Kathleen Evans certainly played an active role in the CWC. For example, on 15 July 1968 she read a piece about the May 68 student rebellion in Paris which caused 'a great deal of discussion,'[16] on 16 June 1969 she read a poem. During 1969 she read pieces or formally contributed to CWC discussions at least nine times. In 1972, she

[16] As always, one curses the vagueness of the minutes. What did she *say* about the student revolt?

became Vice-Chair and during the 1970s, she occasionally chaired meetings. Once again, this does not prove that the CWC had a substantial influence on her writing—but there is clear evidence that she too was a committed participant in the Circle.

In general, CWC writers did not proclaim their membership of the Circle to the outside world. Once or twice, there are references. Hilda McKenzie's *Rosie Edwards* (1990) included a relevant line in the acknowledgements: McKenzie thanked 'my friends of the Cardiff Writers' Circle for all their encouragement'. A potted biography appeared in Pamela Cockerill's *Winter Ponies* (1987).

> Pamela Cockerill was born in Barry, South Glamorgan, and now lives in Dinas Powis in the same county. Over the last ten years she has won first prizes with the Mid and South Wales Writers for a short story, an autobiographical novel and children's book. She has had short stories broadcast on Radio 4 and Radio Bristol.

While Cockerill does not explicitly credit the CWC, the line of development sketched out in these lines suggests the importance of the CWC's meetings and competitions for her work.

The range of the CWC's publishing was shown most clearly at the 41st AGM (7 March 1988). At this time, the Circle had 44 members and numbers attending at meetings ranged between 15 and 27. The following 'successes' were listed:

> Gleeda Parker, short stories in *People's Friend*
> Douglas Morgan, 1st prize in the Civil Service Author's story competition
> Mary Washbrook, articles in *Country Quest*
> Eric Bartlett, *Weight-Training for the over-35s*

Arline Liggett, articles and book reviews in *Western Mail* and *Woman*

Alma Rosser, articles and short stories in *Police Journal*, *Ambulance Journal*, *Western Mail*, and Radio 4 Morning Story

Gaynor Brown, edited *Village Poets*, sold in aid of the church

Muriel Ross, short stories in *Morning Story, Cat World, The Lady*

Niva Miles, articles in *Weekly Argus*

Phil Beynon, *Manual of Survival*

Pam Cockerill, *Winter Ponies*, articles in *South Wales Echo*

Beattie Smith, poems in *Global Tapestry* and *Smoke*

John Morris, poems in *Cambrensis*

Dick Coleman, articles in *Junior Education*, and children's book *The Equinox Born*

Sybil Josty, short stories in *Secrets*

(This list was undoubtedly incomplete—it concentrated on the year's most prominent successes.) Of the CWC's 44 members, 15—over a third—had enjoyed some significant publishing achievement over the past year. In terms of publishing, this was probably the Circle's most successful year.

By anyone's estimation, these publications represent a remarkable achievement. In most cases, their authors were women who came from non-literary, non-academic families and with only the most basic of formal educations. If one remembers that the same women were publishing books and also regularly publishing articles, short stories, poems and letters in the *South Wales Echo* and *Western Mail*, then CWC members, female and male, can be credited with establishing a real cultural presence in Cardiff in the decades from the 1960s to the 1990s. The CWC provided a valuable supplementary education, which righted some of the wrongs of British schooling. For all its formality and fussiness, the Circle was obviously doing something right.

But, just as every hero has to have a fatal flaw, so there were some limitations to this Rising of the Women. One of the CWC's adjudicators noted this as early as 1963. Gareth Brown considered entries for the article competition. (I haven't been able to find any biographical information about Brown. Normally, the CWC invited people connected to the *Western Mail* or the *South Wales Echo* to judge their article competition.) Brown warned, he was 'being harsh to be constructive'. He found the CWC's articles too chatty. 'Try to look beyond the Woman's page of the *Western Mail*,' he told the Circle (25 November 1963).

This is a difficult comment to analyse. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Brown was more aggressive, maybe even ruder, than most of the CWC's adjudicators. Phil Beynon was the CWC chair and normally the soul of discretion and tact. It was his formal duty to thank Brown: he commented that Brown 'pull[ed] no punches'. There is also no doubt that Brown underestimated the successes of the CWC. Being published on the woman's page of the *Western Mail* was a real achievement for women like Pam Cockerill or Jenny Sullivan, something to be celebrated rather than sneered at. But, on the other hand, maybe he had a point.

James Tucker made similar observations in a less confrontational way two decades later when he adjudicated another article competition. (He worked for the *Daily Mirror* and used the pseudonym Bill James for his novels.) 'The bulk of the articles in the competition were autobiographical and were written in a light and pleasant way, but if members wished to go further in journalism they would have to look outside themselves.' (3 November 1986) Both Brown and Tucker suggest a significant flaw in the CWC's advance.

It's a tough criticism to make, but the evidence is there. In general, having achieved their first successes, CWC writers lacked ambition and self-awareness. They tended to repeat themselves, and to follow predictable paths. Three decades earlier, Virginia Woolf wrote a relevant essay on the topic of women's

writing.[17] A woman writer was unlikely to write like Joseph Conrad, noted Woolf, as she probably would not have his experience of sailing. She was unlikely to write like Leo Tolstoy, as she would not have his experience of war. It was probable that her life experience would be limited to 'a middle-class drawing room,' and this would shape her writing. She therefore faced a challenge: 'to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important.' To some extent, the CWC was doing this, if only in a 'humorous' way: those articles on cricket and ballroom-dancing 'from the woman's point of view' suggest such a reversal of values.

On 28 April 1986 Mrs Karen Moore, an editor for Mills & Boon, visited the Circle. She had some clear recommendations for those who wished to write romances. 'The framework of the story must be romance, conflict and happy ending. They must not deal with serious problems, and the plot cannot be too outrageous... There are few new plots...' This seems to be main pathway offered to the CWC women writers: it clear, but it was also narrow and carefully controlled. Not all women in the Circle followed it: some wrote non-fiction, some tried children's writing and—as will be seen—some were poets. But many could not resist the attraction of a well-written romance.

There were other limitations to the CWC of this period. The first CWC (of the late 1940s) almost seemed to exist in a sphere separate from Cardiff and South Wales. The Circle of the 1960s, 70s and 80s was more rooted in its local context, and much more comfortable with its Welshness. Its members wrote letters, articles, short stories and poems for the local press; they attended and organised public events around Cardiff; they made contact with other like-minded local people. But there were still gaps between Cardiff's development and that of the CWC. After the Second World War Cardiff became a multi-cultural city: CWC

[17] 'Women and Fiction', in Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays* Vol II (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), pp. 141—48.

members remained overwhelmingly white.[18] The only exceptions were a few visits by Indian students attending the University.

The CWC also remained aloof from the cultural and political ferment that we associate with the Sixties and afterwards. Of course, this theme has been exaggerated and romanticised: as was pointed out at the beginning of the last chapter, Cockerill's early marriage is more demographically typical of the 1960s than all the colourful paraphernalia of hippy-dom. On the other hand, some of those dope-fuelled dreams had lasting significance. One has to read the minutes very closely to see that any reflections of that cultural revolution. One or two CWC stories seem to address the generation gap, one or two seem to be concerned with drug addiction. One radio script (accepted by the BBC) borrows its title from a Bob Dylan song: 'The Answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind' (6 January 1969). One member wrote an article about the Aberfan tragedy just three days after it struck (24 October 1966). In the 1980s one member contributed a poem about the Greenham women's peace camp (24 September 1984). But these half a dozen or so examples constitute the entirety of the CWC's political and social commentary over three decades. Most shocking of all is the CWC's total silence about the Miners' Strike of 1984–85. This was an event which absolutely transfixed most of South Wales, but there is not a word of interest in it from the Circle. In 1987 a student wrote to the CWC inquiring about writing relating to the Strike: the secretary suggested he should instead contact the new Arts Centre, Chapter (15 June 1987).

At the end of his *Cardiff Writers' Circle: A Brief History*, published in 1997, Eric Bartlett states that the CWC was 'thriving'.[19] With hindsight, it can be seen that the peak of the CWC's publishing successes was probably the late 1980s, but

[18] I am making this judgement on the admittedly weak evidence of people's names. But I'm pretty confident about it.
[19] Bartlett, p. 10.

there can be no doubt that it was in a robust position in its 50th year. Members had learnt much: they had learnt how to hold meetings, how to book rooms, how to keep the CWC financially viable; but also: how to criticize, how to encourage, how to emulate each other, how to write in a wide variety of different forms and genres, and how to get published.

In the next two sections, I will consider two case studies which illustrate, in different ways, the successes of the CWC.

5. A Case Study: Jenny Gets Married

The experiences of Jenny Sullivan (née Anderson) illuminate the nature of the CWC in the 1960s and 1970s. While she was clearly not a typical member CWC, she can be seen as an exception that proved the rule.

Anderson came from a working-class family and was one of six children.[20] Her father was an electrician. Her mother, too sickly to go out to work, either worked at home or helped her mother. There was a tradition of reading in Anderson's family: her father read a chapter of the Bible and a couple of pages of Shakespeare every day, before going out to work. Anderson's mother had an interest in amateur dramatics and wrote short stories. She noticed a short story competition in the *South Wales Echo* and sent in some of her stories. One week her mother won and was paid £5 (worth about £100 today). In the *Echo*, she also saw a notice about the CWC and began attending meetings.

As mentioned before, Jenny Anderson left school at 15 because her father did not believe in girls' education. Following her year in Cleves Commercial College, her mother helped her find work as a secretary. At the same time, perhaps motivated by a wish to help her daughter, her mother introduced Jenny to the CWC, probably in 1965. Jenny had always been a keen reader and had worked her way through Dickens, Louisa Alcott and other classics at her local library. She liked the idea of listening to stories being read out.

At this time, the CWC met in the Anglican chaplaincy of the University. Anderson recalls it was a large, comfortable room, with upright chairs placed around the edge. She felt straight away that most people were friendly, although one or two were stand-offish. Phil Beynon, the chairman, was very welcoming. There was, however, one immediate problem: everyone was so old! Anderson was the only teenager there. The person nearest to her in age was Joan Hughes, who was in her late 30s. There were other challenges: the bulk of members were

[20] Most of the information cited in this chapter comes from two interviews with Jenny Sullivan on 23 November and 2 December 2021.

from the 'posher suburbs' or from Cardiff's teaching enclaves. They were also clearly better-educated than her, by which Anderson meant that most of them had O-levels (roughly the equivalent of GCSEs).

At first, the CWC readings seemed intimidating to Anderson. Listening to some of the readers, her initial reaction was 'I'm never going to be as good as that'. But as she attended more meetings, she became more discerning and more confident. After a while, different thoughts came: sometimes when she heard someone reading, she thought, 'I could do better than that.' On 7 March 1966 she read a poem to the Circle. She recalled 'I was shaking all over, really scared'. But the comments she received were 'genuine and friendly'. After that, she contributed regularly, reading poems, short stories and children's stories. In 1968, her short story 'Ace of Spades' won the Wetzel award (4 November 1968). This was one of the few CWC stories to recognise Cardiff's multi-cultural nature: it was written in the voice of an immigrant in the city facing racism. In 1966 Anderson had a short story accepted for publication by the *South Wales Echo* (18 July 1966). Once again, we get an impression of how effective the CWC had become in training and educating writers—often giving them second chances in life. One point to stress here is that Anderson took almost no interest in the CWC's library: her training in writing was overwhelmingly practical; she learnt by doing—by listening, by presenting manuscripts and by getting criticism. 'I learnt punctuation by osmosis,' she jokes.

Anderson's understanding of the nature of CWC changed: 'We were friends: not just a group to criticize each other'. She noted the distinctive mixture of tones in CWC meetings: sometimes they seemed very formal, but there was also a lot of laughter and plenty of leg-pulling. If someone was not confident enough to read their own material, another member would do it for them. If someone made outspoken or aggressive comments, others would intervene to 'soften the blow for the poor soul'. 'There was always encouragement in criticism,' she remembers. Without that element of encouragement, 'I wouldn't

have survived'. She became good friends with Joan Hughes, and they usually sat next to each other at meetings. Anderson recalls listening to one member reading out a less-than-scintillating piece, and then looking at her friend, wondering what on earth they could say. At such moments, when there was a 'drop-dead silence,' Phil Beynon would normally save the day. 'Can I ask you what you meant by...' he'd ask and a discussion would start.

Looking at the difference between Anderson's background and the CWC's nature, it would have been very easy for Anderson to have been politely frozen out. Instead, almost the opposite happened. As she puts it, 'they adopted me': a sign of the Circle's open-minded nature. At the 19th AGM, she was co-opted as Assistant Secretary (4 April 1966), at the 20th AGM she became Secretary (3 April 1967), a post which she held until 1969. She regularly attended Committee meetings and took minutes, and on 20 March 1972 was an adjudicator for that year's Wetzel award.

In the years that follow, there are strange, parallel connections between Anderson's writing, her participation in the CWC and her life story, which suggest how the Circle functioned as a friendly, quasi-familial group. Anderson's engagement was announced to the Circle on 13 January 1969 and she was then given a book token (paid for with CWC funds) to celebrate the occasion (27 January 1969). When she got married, she was sent a card and a cheque for £4 and four shillings (in other words, four guineas—worth about £60 today) (28 July 1969). Phil Beynon and some other CWCers came to her wedding. When I asked her if the CWC would have donated the same amount to any member getting married, she pointed out that nearly all of them were already married.

Anderson's writing and her private life interacted in another way: she published articles considering issues raised in her courtship, if only in a humorous way: for example, her 'Marriage vs Rugby' was published in the *Western Mail* (26 May 1969), and a 'Beginner's Guide to Married Men' (17 May 1971).

In the mid-1970s, Sullivan stopped attending CWC meetings, but her writing career continued. Tony Austin, one of the editors of the *Western Mail*, contacted her and invited her to write for the paper. Her initial reaction was to refuse, but he insisted. Without any formal training, she began work as a journalist. A few years later, she took a couple of courses at Tŷ-Newydd writing centre and was then talked into taking an MA in Creative Writing at Cardiff University in 1993. In 2002 she gained a Ph.D.

Jenny Sullivan now lives in Brittany. Before Covid, she regularly returned to Wales and during our interviews it was clear how much she missed her visits. When in Wales, she visits schools to teach writing workshops—something she really enjoys. She is a successful author, having published no less than thirty-one novels, specialising in fantasy stories for children, and also writing historical novels for adults. She has won the Tír na n'Óg award twice and been nominated eight times—more than any other author.

At the end of our talk, having mentioned her writing successes, Jenny laughed and said: 'Thank you, CWC!'

6. A Second Case Study: Tony Rowe, Poet; 'Liberation in a moment infinite'[21]

First things first: Tony Rowe was female, but in 1930 adopted a male name for her writing and in her daily life. (Her real first name was Clara.) Once or twice the minutes referred to her as 'Toni', but she normally appears as 'Miss Tony Rowe' or 'Miss Rowe'. Like Jenny Anderson, Rowe was not a typical member of the CWC. By looking at her contributions to the CWC we can gain an impression of how the Circle absorbed and integrated diverse voices. But, more than this: Rowe's work impressed me immensely—I think it's worth celebrating and remembering. Astonishingly little is known about her and these few points can be summed up in two paragraphs.

Rowe had Cornish and Irish parents, but lived in Wales for most of her life.[22] My impression is that she was probably as old as the century, and therefore in her 40s during the Second World War, and in her 60s when she joined the CWC. At some point in the 1930s, she gained an interest in amateur dramatics. She had a diploma in massage and worked in hospitals. It seems reasonable to guess that she did nursing work during the Second World War and that she retired early, in the late 1940s or early 1950s, probably after inheriting money. She rented a large flat in Druidstone House, a country house built for the Radcliffe shipping company, which today can be found between A48(M) and the M4, to the north-east of Cardiff. It was severely damaged by a fire in 1944 and subsequently repaired and redecorated. Rowe's new home was in Druidstone Lane, which an estate agent has recently boastfully described as 'one of the most expensive roads in South Wales'.[23] The area probably was not quite so upmarket in the 1950s, but was well on the way to achieving that status. In the 1950s, Rowe maintained her interest in amateur dramatics and also took a course in painting at

[21] From 'Mountain Top' in Tony Rowe, *Nor Time Reality: Twenty-Seven Poems* (London: Mitre Press, 1977)

[22] Information in the next paragraphs is taken from a mini-biography in Tony Rowe, *The Pattern* (Stevenage: Ore Publications, 1976), p. 2; comments within the CWC minutes and an interview with David who, as a child and teenager, lived near Rowe (16 Jan 2022).

[23] PA Black, advert for flat in Druidstone House, undated [2018?].

Cardiff University, driving back and forth to Cardiff in her own car. Sometimes she spent summers in Italy, during which she visited Mount Vesuvius.

In the 1960s, Rowe grew more interested in poetry. She joined the CWC in 1964 and was an active member in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For a while, she was a friend of Jenny Sullivan, and she visited the Sullivans in their new flat, shortly after their marriage. In 1977 Rowe moved to the Rhymney Nursing Home in Newport Road, Cardiff. She died in December 1979. She published at least six works, probably more.

- *Cuckoo Cage, a novel* (1930)
- *Roundabouts and Swings: a comedy in one act for women* (1958)
- *Before Abraham: twenty-two poems* (1971)
- *The Pattern* (1975 and 1976)
- *Nor Time reality: twenty-seven poems* (1977)
- *The Star Shines: a play in one act* (date unknown)

Rowe's first appearance in the CWC minutes is on 30 November 1964, when she read a short story, 'The Moon at Heel'. She won the short story competition with 'Dial 999' on 14 December 1964 and the novel competition on 16 October 1967 with an extract from an unpublished novel, *Pounds*. The adjudicator, Alexander Cordell, remarked on its 'astonishing maturity of style'. On 15 January 1973 she won the short story competition again. In those years she contributed regularly to Open Manuscript sessions, presenting poems, short stories, children's fiction, a chapter from a novel, non-fiction and articles.

Date	Poem	Short Story	Article	Children's	Chapter (fiction)	Chapter (non-fiction)	Total
1964		3					3
1965	3	4	1			1	9
1966	9	3	1	2			15
1967	13	4			1		18
1968	9	2					11
1969	12	3	1				16
1970	3						3[24]
1971	5	1					6[25]
1972	7						7
1973	9						9
1974	2						2
Total	72	20	3	2	1	1	99

Contributions by Tony Rowe to CWC meetings

While the range of her writing may seem extremely wide, it is another illustration of how the CWC worked: in this collaborative, cooperative environment, members were positively encouraged to try their hands at different genres. Sometimes Rowe presented readings very frequently. For example, in nine meetings between 20 May and 22 July 1968, she read five poems; in six meetings between 16 June and 21 July 1969, she read four poems and a short story. In 1967 she was co-opted onto the Committee as an ordinary member (3 April 1967), a position she held until 1973. While she regularly attended Committee meetings, the minutes leave the impression she was not vocal. Only one

[24] Incomplete records.
[25] Incomplete records.

contribution by her is recorded: she suggested that the tea-making should not be left to the Secretary, but should be shared by rota (14 April 1969).

It is clear that the other members were impressed by her. She was striking, 'a beautiful lady, wearing green eye-shadow while in her [70s]', recalls Jenny Sullivan, who remembers 'being enthralled' as Rowe 'read beautifully'.[26] Quite possibly, Rowe used her experience in amateur dramatics to good effect when presenting material. The clearest evidence of the power of her readings are the remarks in the minutes concerning the reception and criticism of her work. Normally, the minutes fail to record *anything* about the Circle's reaction to a particular reading: in Rowe's case, the Circle's reactions are frequently noted. When Rowe read her poem 'Passage' to the Circle, 'members unanimously felt that this needed no criticism' (26 June 1967)—the only time in 75 years that the minutes record such sentiments. The Circle was more baffled by her 'Drug Addict,' but recognised it was 'controversial and topical and... provoked a good deal of debate' (17 July 1967). Her poem 'Military Funeral' attracted discussion but not criticism (27 November 1967). Her poems were published in *County Quest, Poetry Wales, The Hibbert Journal, Ore, Envoi, The Inquirer, Scrip, Limestone, The New Shetlander, Workshop* and *Expression One*.[27] While it would be difficult to claim that Rowe was the best writer in the CWC—how could you ever prove this?—there seems a strong case for saying that she was the best-respected writer in the Circle.

By 1974, her attendance at the CWC was growing more infrequent, perhaps due to her declining health. The last time she attended a meeting was probably on 17 May 1976. In January 1977 she sent the Circle best wishes for the coming year, probably from her nursing home. The CWC sent her a get-well card on 20 June 1977 and a basket of fruit on 26 September 1977. Dr Kathleen Evans visited her the next year (5 June 1978). She was made a life member of the

[26] Interview on 23 November 2021.
[27] Tony Rowe, *The Pattern* (Stevenage: Ore Publications, 1976), p. 2.

CWC on 2 April 1979 and died in November of that year. Three members of the CWC—Mrs Humble, Mrs Prisk and Mrs Josty—attended her funeral. A Poetry Cup was created in her memory in 1980 (24 March 1980). It is still in use today.

The Tony Rowe cup, which is awarded to the annual winner of the CWC poetry competition. (Photograph by Saoirse Anton, the current holder of the cup.)

When Tony Curtis visited the Circle on 9 March 1981 to adjudicate its poetry competition, he paid tribute to Rowe. Some members of the Circle certainly remembered her after this date. On 16 January 1995, at the presentation of the Tony Rowe Poetry cup, Phil Beynon read one of her poems, 'The Guardians'.

I have been able to read just one of her one-act plays, *Roundabouts and Swings: A Comedy in One Act for Women*, written in 1958. It is interesting, but unremarkable. It features five female characters—probably too many for a 15-minute play, but maybe Rowe wanted to write parts for as many aspiring actresses as possible. While reading it, I was reminded of the garden scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play takes place in the drawing-room of a country vicarage. There are some references to contemporary issues: to young people on motorbikes, who dance in the village hall, to 'out there,' in colonial India. The main axis of the drama is the contrast between Lady Colquehoun, dressed in 'severe tweeds' and Mrs Digby-Spencer, dressed with 'exquisite taste'. Colquehoun's world revolves around the agricultural rituals of the countryside: farms, cows calving, pigs with litters. Digby-Spencer's words echo polished Wildean cynicism: 'keep a man amused and you can get practically anything you want almost without him realising'.[28] The two discuss the organisation of village fete. Colquehoun sees it as opportunity to present a positive image of a conservative rural world, Digby-Spencer as a chance to flirt with men. The point of the drama seems to be to compare two types of femininity, and maybe to suggest that both are limited. There is an implication that women can make choices: a point which is reinforced by the presence of a young, unmarried woman, Elizabeth Wade. Will she follow Lady Colquehoun? Or Mrs Digby-Spencer? Or will she find another path?

Rowe's writing changed radically in the late 1960s. The nature of this transformation can be illustrated by considering her choice of a flat in Druidstone House, for it suggests the two sides of her personality. The first was leisured and wealthy, and familiar with the world of the country vicarage and rural elites. The second was symbolised by the Druidstone itself: an 8-foot-tall Bronze Age

[28] Tony Rowe, *Roundabouts and Swings: A Comedy in One Act for Women* (London: Deane & Sons, 1958), p. 8.

standing stone, three or four thousand years old, just a minute's walk from Rowe's flat.

The Druidstone (photograph by Sharif Gemie)

Her poetry of the 1970s left the country vicarage and entered a pantheistic world. It is impossible to know what caused this radical transformation. One stimulus was clearly an awareness of her own mortality and frailty: in 'A Plea Against Blindness' (in *Before Abraham*), she wrote that she would prefer

deafness or 'twisted limbs' to losing her sight. But these fears alone cannot explain the revolution in her writing.

While researching this history and thinking about a section on Tony Rowe, I asked some writing friends to read some of her poetry, which I also discussed with Jenny Sullivan, because I wanted to see if other people were as impressed as me. Thankfully, they were. I will refer to their reactions and comments in the following paragraphs. (Because Rowe's poems are still covered by copyright, I cannot quote from them at length.)

Rowe normally wrote in free verse, although a few of her poems are more formal in structure, such as 'Fortitude' (in *Nor Time Reality*). Most of her poems are less than twenty lines long. They are 'elegant, ethereal and beautiful,' comments Sara Hayes, a member of the contemporary CWC.[29] They are also concise and marked by sudden changes in focus. One notices immediately the confidence of her writing: she sounds like 'a habitual long-haul writer' remarks Philip Gross.[30] Often it is hard to seize the meaning of one of her poems on first reading: subtleties and complexities emerge on subsequent readings—a point which Alan Roderick noticed several times. (It is easy to feel some sympathy with the occasional bafflement of the CWC audience in the 1960s and 70s.) It was only on my fifth or sixth reading of the volume *Nor Time Reality* that I realised that the first nine of the twenty-seven poems presented a sort of narrative of the break-up of a relationship, told from a variety of points of view and in different tones.

If there is a standard plot to Rowe's poems it would be this: a mundane setting, and then a meeting (or confrontation) with something much greater—I'd use the term 'the infinite'. I was reminded of Blake:

[29] Private communication to author.
[30] Private communication to author.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

My reader-friends tended to agree: her writing is 'spiritual but not religious,'[31] 'spiritual and mystic,'[32] it is 'quite philosophical',[33] it 'turns over spiritual/philosophical ideas that are heartfelt to her'.[34] However, in Rowe, the narrator or the narration usually does not simply contemplate the Infinite, but interacts with it in some way. There a fine example of this in her 'Military Funeral' (in *Before Abraham*), which begins with 'the slow walk' up the long hill to the cemetery, with soldiers carrying the 'unloved' body as 'another duty'. Then, notes Suzy Hobson, 'one brief flicker, something stirs, there's a connection.'[35] For a moment, 'their fingers fleetingly/Fumbled the locks of heaven'. But the moment passes: the coffin-bearers forget him as they march lightly down the hill.

This other sphere—the spiritual, the infinite—suffuses the subject-matter and the tone of Rowe's poems. 'I shall become part of the Pattern' she wrote in 'Preview' (*The Pattern*). In 'Affirmation' (*Nor Time Reality*), a wild seashore provides her with the equivalent of a religious service.

What need have I of candles or of pence
Whose prayer has run before me
In the green turn of wave
And the grave wind scudding the clouds of sky?

[31] Hayes.
[32] Alan Roderick, private communication to author.
[33] Suzy Hobson, private communication to author.
[34] Gross.
[35] Hobson.

At times, this quest for the Infinite leads to a fascination with the traces of non-Christian forms of spirituality around Rowe. One poem concerns Twyn Barllwm (now spelt Twmbarlwm), the Iron Age hillfort north-west of Newport. Almost inevitably, Rowe wrote about the standing stone in Druidstone Lane: 'Do not proclaim it dead, it surely lives' (in *The Pattern*). A footnote, written by Rowe, links the stone—'possibly'—to a leyline stretching to Stonehenge. The last line of the last poem in her last book regrets that she lived 'in a world not given/to myth'.[36]

Was Rowe religious? Gross hears something 'Quakerish' in the stillness of these poems, I find them close to the spirit of Sufism, particularly in their intimacy with the Infinite. There are references to formal religion and Biblical lore: the church service in 'Affirmation,' the usurer and the saint in 'Cover,' the burning bush in 'No Star.' 'Bread on the Waters' (in *Before Abraham*) explicitly refers to a line from Ecclesiastes 11:1, 'Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days'. From this, Rowe draws a lesson in charity and compassion. In 'Drug Addict,' a comparison is made between an addict's crucified flesh and the experience of crucifixion of Jesus, although the addict is 'lacking the glory'.[37] The poem even paraphrases Mathew 26:42: 'O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.' The comparison is awkward, and it is no wonder that the CWC were confused by the poem when Rowe read it to them in July 1967.

Rowe was certainly deeply familiar with Christian lore and referred to Biblical themes in many poems. My best guess is that she was a sort of Christian, but a heterodox one, rather like Blake, often using Christianity more as a stock of familiar but arresting images, rather than as a guide to living.

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[36] 'Woman' in Tony Rowe, *Nor Time Reality: Twenty-Seven Poems* (London: Mitre Press, 1977).
[37] 'Drug Addict' in Tony Rowe, *Before Abraham* (London: Mitre Pres, 1971), p. 10.

Other poems refer to landscapes, seascapes and nature, often with references to birds—Rowe was a keen bird-watcher, and this may have been part of a deeper connection she felt to the natural world. In her will, she left the largest part of her estate to anti-vivisectionist organisations.

There are some short-comings to her poems. 'Farmer' (in *Before Abraham*) provides a rare link with Rowe's earlier writing—the caricatured Lady Colquehoun. There is a similar depiction of agricultural workers being tied into a mindless cycle of drudgery. 'The laboured motions of his brain/Bear scant resemblance to thought.' Some of these lines sound pretty close to simple snobbery.

'Drug Addict' has a worrying vagueness. One could compare it with a number of contemporary song-writers' evocations of the horrors of addiction: Bert Jansch's 'Needle of Death' (1965), John Lennon's 'Cold Turkey' (1969) or Neil Young's 'Needle and the Damage Done' (1972). Even after only listening to these songs for a minute or two, it is immediately clear that the song-writers knew what they were talking about. They aimed their anger or sadness at heroin addiction; Rowe's addict is more akin to a non-specific stereotype, rapidly and clumsily transformed into a religious image.

Two poems refer to black people, and in each of them Rowe turns to a heavy mythologized romanticism, in 'Negress' (*Before Abraham*) seeing this woman as the 'mother of races,' in 'Dark Glory' (*Nor Time Reality*) transforming an 'ebony' figure into 'God Himself,' with 'sable and emerald, ebony and gold'. Again, there is a weakness here: black people do not exist in Rowe's poems as flesh-and-blood individuals, but as colourful symbols of some greater mythology.

Finally, there is humour in many of the verses. Jenny Sullivan remembers: 'occasionally there were some naughty twists in the final lines... Twists that a person could take two ways and that not everybody "got".'[38] One of my favourites

[38] Interview, 2 December 2021.

is 'Except the Snow' (*Patterns*), which first evokes an empty white landscape, devoid of any activity, 'except the mind,' which enjoys this empty silence, and presumably contemplates the snow, which is a sort of activity, and so the poem begins again. I can only describe this as punning, although it obviously is not laugh-out-loud funny.

Rowe achieved some limited success in her day. She clearly enjoyed the CWC meetings, or at least found them useful. Why else would she have presented almost a hundred texts over ten years? Her presence at the meetings obviously added something: alongside Pam Cockerill's pony stories, Kathleen Evans's educational textbooks, Shirley Kemp's true confessions, Jenny Anderson's apprentice journalism and Eric Bartlett's hard-boiled thrillers, the CWC also opened its doors to a home-grown mystic, whose words were opaque but intensely lyrical. The presence of these various strands, listening to each other's words, interacting with each other, tells us something about the success of the CWC in these decades.

7. The Peer Review Workshop

The term 'Peer Review Workshop' (or PRW) is educationalists' jargon. It is their word for the Open Manuscript sessions, when members of the Circle arrive clutching papers and read them out to other members, and get comments. It may seem strange to see a formal term being used for such an apparently informal process, but it is precisely this contrast that I want to discuss. One's initial impression of a PRW is that this is just a bunch of friends chatting, laughing and occasionally swapping stories. At its best, a PRW appears non-confrontational and even easy: this appearance is useful for drawing in and reassuring new people. As PRWs have been central to the CWC throughout its seventy-five years, it seems appropriate to end this history by considering them in some detail. In this section, I will refer mostly to the 2000s, when the CWC was meeting in the Catholic Chaplaincy of the University of Cardiff. Rather than using CWC minutes, I will draw on nine interviews with or statements from CWC members from this period.

I have mentioned the difficulties the Circle had in finding suitable venues. The space in the Catholic Chaplaincy was adequate, but far from perfect. It certainly lacked the neoclassical splendour of the Technical College, where the CWC began. 'The venue itself, with its shabby furniture and unwashed crockery, wasn't exactly inspiring... [there was a] general air of disorder and neglect.' (Jan Marsh) Members have vivid memories of the 'saggy old' sofas (Steve Pritchard): they lost small change down the backs of them (Graham Edwards), they got backache from sitting on them (Jo Griffiths). The central heating in winter was 'erratic' (Jo Griffiths). Louise Walsh actually liked the 'informality' of the room—after all, it was designed to welcome new students—but found it strange to be surrounded by Catholic posters, books and the odd crucifix. Her first impression was how 'old-fashioned' it all seemed, 'like tapping into something much older, from the days before television and internet'. The room was big enough for 15 or so people to sit comfortably, but if 20 arrived, some had to sit on the arms of the

sofas or on the floor. The chairs were arranged in a horseshoe shape, with a kind of High Table for the Secretary and Chair.

Many of the rituals in the 2000s were the same as the CWC in the 1960s. While members no longer addressed each other as Mr Pritchard or Miss Walsh, they still paid their weekly due as they came in and meetings still began with a reading of last week's minutes. For a while there was still a 'success book,' in which members recorded acceptances or publications, but this seems to have had less impact than in previous decades. There was still an interval, in which tea or coffee was made, and sometimes there was a raffle to raise extra income for the CWC. The annual programme looked pretty similar. In 1998—99 (the last year for which I have records), the CWC offered 29 Open Manuscript sessions, plus five competitions (poetry, article, short story, mini-Christmas ghost story and 50-word mini-saga) and a Christmas party.

As ever, it is difficult to construct a clear sociological profile of the membership. My best guess is that the previous pattern—a core of middle-middle class members, leavened with a few upwardly-mobile working-class writers—continued. The majority of members were still women, but the gender-balance was probably slowly growing more equal. As in previous years, there was no formal admission criteria, beyond a commitment to creative writing.

Perhaps the one important change in the membership during the 2000s was that the age range was more varied: at least for a while, more young people attended. There were also some people who had taken up creative writing on retirement. Whatever their formal educational qualifications, many new members came with a sense of being poorly prepared for the task they had set themselves. One big change of this period was that members now had a range of possible courses to choose from: the WEA in Penarth offered a Creative Writing course, and there were degrees in Creative Writing at the University of Glamorgan and Cardiff University, plus extra-mural courses at Cardiff University. All of these other courses would have involved PRWs, plus stand-up lectures, formal

direction from a teacher, recommendations of essential texts to read and formal assessment. When compared to them, the CWC stands out for its single-minded focus on the PRW.

On that point about the diverse forms of learning about writing, I'd like to pause for a moment to consider the CWC library. Throughout its seventy-five years the CWC has made a collection of key texts, magazines and reference works available to its members at meetings. I have not found a single reference to someone being deeply influenced or inspired by them. When I've questioned interviewees on this point, they always reply that other people may have consulted the library, but not them. I'm reminded of an old joke which circulates among Anglican vicars: when a young couple are considering which house to live in, what they really like to see is a nice, friendly, old-fashioned church on the corner, for them *not* to go to on Sundays. The CWC library seems to fall into this category: everyone thought it was a good idea but very few used it. When interviewees were pressed on the point of Creative Writing books in general, a certain anti-intellectualism often creeps in: 'no book can teach you how to write'. Of course, this is true: but it is also true that no PRW can teach you how to write—you have to do that for yourself. It is also true that some books can help you along the path. The key point to stress here is how central the PRW has been to the Circle throughout its history, and it is this that makes it distinct from other courses.

There is an expert witness on PRWs who is worth considering closely. This is Farrukh Akhtar, a senior lecturer in Social Work at Kingston University who signed up for an MA in Creative Writing in the early 2010s.[39] Two points make Akhtar a privileged and valuable witness: as a senior lecturer, she had years of experience in teaching, and so came with expectations about how classes ought to

[39] Farrukh Akhtar, 'Reclaiming the "Wounded Storyteller": The Use of Peer Feedback as a Pedagogical Tool in Creative Life Writing', *Writing in Practice* 1 (2015) https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/article-search-2/articles/reclaiming-the-wounded-storyteller-the-use-of-peer-feedback-as-a-pedagogical-tool-in-creative-life-writing.html

be organised. Secondly, Akhtar had some unspecified psychological problem earlier in her life: this meant that fairly obvious tasks like recounting her life experience were difficult for her. In a word, the life-writing classes made her feel *vulnerable*: exactly the opposite of her expectations.

Her initial reaction to a PRW was 'feeling baffled'. There was no explanation or preparation for the sessions, and no discussion of what constituted useful feedback. Akhtar floats the idea that something more could have been done: perhaps students could have watched videos of good and bad PRWs, perhaps good and bad practices could have been identified. These are all sensible proposals, but they would have destroyed the useful illusion that the PRW is just a set of informal interchanges—just a bunch of guys chatting. An element of formal preparation might actually cause more nervousness among students.

Akhtar records her initial feelings.

> I felt terrified, exposed, and was aware that others felt similarly. There was a paradoxical sense, on the one hand, of feeling impotent at having my peers pushed into commenting on my writing, and at the same time a cruel sense of omnipotence, at the feedback that I could give in return.

She cites a passage from her diary which records her feelings during the first classes.

> I am aware of feeling despondent, hurt and misunderstood in my interactions with the MA writing group. It seems that there is no basis for good behaviour—we are all so disparate. I begin to find common ground and enter into some kind of relationship with them, only to be foiled by some stupid misunderstanding. There are constant misses in communication. It feels as if there is genuine warmth and good will in the group. Then the feedback of each other's work starts and the shutters

> come down. The expectation—actually, the requirement—that students share and discuss their writing makes the process unbearable. There has to be a better way of giving and receiving feedback.

I think anyone who has ever attended a Creative Writing group will identify with at least some of these sentiments. One key change that people experience when they join such a group is the experience of their writing being transformed from a private act—even an *extremely* private act—to a public act. 'It's one thing sitting in the spare bedroom, creating imaginary worlds peopled with make-believe characters,' notes Jo Griffiths, 'quite another exposing them to public scrutiny.' In theory, nearly all writing is a form of communication between oneself and the outside world. (The only exception would be a private diary or journal.) But, in practice, it is easy to keep that outside world at arm's length, or even to simply imagine an outside world receiving one's work. The PRW puts the audience under your nose. This can be terrifying.

Members' experience of the CWC follows some of the patterns outlined by Akhtar. At first it seems 'straightforward enough' (Jan Marsh). However, very quickly two things happen. The first is the experience of standing up in public and reading your work. Everyone finds this nerve-wracking: I had been lecturing for almost 30 years when I read my first piece at a PRW, and I was just as nervous as anyone else. The second thing, which might be a slower process, is the realisation that this is not just a bunch of guys chatting. Jan Marsh recalls her initial surprise: 'Comments went far beyond the "very nice, looking forward to what happens next". Issues were raised about narrative technique, viewpoint, choice of words, continuity, pace.' I would second this: when I joined the CWC in 2018, one point which immediately attracted me was the serious, methodical nature of much of the feedback.

More importantly, in the feedback, there are rituals, codes, patterns—call them what you will. Akhtar cites one attempt to codify the different forms that feedback can take:

> Red Pen: editing, correcting or 'fixing' another's writing by offering suggestions.
> Back Pat: complimenting the writer's efforts.
> Analysis: interpreting the different layers of meaning in the writing.
> Seed Gathering: highlighting and sharing what works well from the reader's perspective.
> Power Notes: feeding back the personal impact the writing has had on the reader.[40]

Obviously, one could sketch out a different list of types of contributions to PRWs, but the most basic point cannot be denied: *there is a pattern*. Reactions are not simply informal and spontaneous, they follow certain paths. Backgrounds—people's age, class, gender and ethnicity—affect how they react and how they express themselves, as well as their personal experience of and success in writing, and their educational status. Rather than being egalitarian, it would be more accurate to see PRWs as marked by shifting centres of authority. Often in the CWC, the main authority is that of the Chair. Niva Miles, with 15 years experience as a CWC Chair, remembers how difficult this could be: 'I would advise anyone to take up this role as you have to concentrate on all the readings and provide at least one suggestion—especially when there is that awful silence at the end of a reading!' But, rather like in a Quaker meeting, ordinary members often will feel moved by the Spirit to speak, and so briefly assert their authority in the meeting. Even those who usually stay silent, will suddenly want to say

[40] Original source: J. Klassen, *Tools for Transformation: write your way to new worlds of possibility in just five minutes.* (West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2004).

something about a particular piece or a particular point. Their reasons for doing so are astonishingly diverse. For example: because, I too, have had a baby... because, I too, have been to Morocco... because, I too, have a grandfather who was a Spitfire pilot... In some meetings (outside the CWC), as the resident academic, I've served as punctuation-guru and have given mini-lectures on the wonders of hyphens and the beauty of a well-placed apostrophe.[41] While the Chair is the most obvious source of authority, sometimes he or she exercises that authority almost in Taoist style: by not exercising it, by allowing others to speak. I've also seen Creative Writing groups where one non-official person takes on the role of 'first responder,' and provides immediate feedback on each piece which is read out, whether poetry, fiction or non-fiction. Sometimes they do this week after week, and other members know to expect this. And sometimes they just flare up for one evening.

Usually the Chair (and/or the informal first responder) is vital in setting the tone of the meeting, and this goes some way in explaining why the various Chairs are remembered with respect and affection. (Old CWC members tend to be particularly warm in their praise for the long-serving Phil Beynon.)

Despite the appearance of spontaneous informality, new members have to learn something if they want to communicate effectively in a PRW. 'You're absorbing a code of behaviour,' notes Louise Walsh. For a while, the CWC had a rule that members had to attend for two weeks before they could present a piece of their own work—obviously, this was the time in which they would learn how PRWs worked.

Another process unrolls in those first weeks. Everyone goes through the same experience: the tension of the first reading, the experience of feedback and—nearly always—a sense of relief afterwards. In other words, this is a rite of

[41] I am a founder-member of the RSPCA: Republican Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Apostrophes.

passage, almost an initiation ceremony. A first reading has an emotional quality, and it is that shared emotional experience which binds the Circle together.

This process is not easy. Many people will turn up once, and then not return. Some stay, get as far as their first reading, and then react extremely negatively to feedback. (Thankfully, this is only a very small minority, but they do form a recognisable type.) The main issue here seems to be that such people are unable to make the transition from writing as a private activity to writing as a public activity. Their argument usually boils down to 'I know what I've written is what I want to say: why should I listen to any criticism?' The obvious rejoinder is: 'if that's how you feel, why come to a Creative Writing Circle?' Presumably such people are looking for some form of validation from the Circle, and not finding it.

Giving feedback is an art. Akhtar notes how her class—like all PRWs—had to learn how to do it. Everyone always stresses that feedback should be 'friendly' or 'constructive,' but it is clear that you can only go so far within those limits. Akhtar notes that sometimes students who only got good feedback would then stay away from the classes: there was no point in them attending. There is a place for challenging and even confrontational feedback: by this, I do not mean being deliberately rude, but something more like telling a fellow-writer that there is a fundamental fault in their work. Obviously, to do this effectively (ie without causing a blazing row), it needs to be done at the right time and in the right way.

When a PRW works, it works really well. Interviewees were unanimous on this point. In all the following comments, there is a clearly positive current. 'An evening out with like-minded people gave me the impetus to carry on writing while looking after my lovely family.' (Niva Miles) 'I trusted them... It was a privilege to go there.' (Louise Walsh) 'I was welcomed warmly and it was the beginning not only of learning and improving my writing skills but of lasting friendships.' (Angela Edwards)

> I found it daunting when first reading my work out loud to other members, but their critiques have always been fair and helpful. And I know without their help and encouragement I would not have found it easy to continue writing. Attending the weekly meetings has driven me on to finish books I have started. I know that during the breaks we have throughout the year my desire to write will fall off until the circle restarts with my writing enthusiasm refreshed. (Graham Edwards)

The interviewees found the CWC a valuable source of support and encouragement.

Finally, the experiences of the CWC stay with members. 'Stories *heard* imprint on memory in a very different way from those read silently and although it's been ten years since I was a member of CWC, I can recall so many of my fellow members and the mini-worlds they created.' (Jo Griffiths)

When I'm expecting to read a piece at the CWC, I tend to practice it first, if only to see how long it will take—today's CWC is a bit stricter on time-keeping than the CWC of previous decades. I've found that even in this preliminary run-through, I anticipate what reactions might be, and therefore make last-minute changes. I suppose this is a sign that we can internalize the PRW in our minds.

It is not clear where, when and how the PRW started.[42] Certainly, they existed before 1947: the CWC adopted an existing practice. The most basic justification for them is that the experience of reading aloud reveals to the writer faults that are not obvious from reading on a page: put simply, if it's hard to read out a sentence, then there's something wrong with it. But the more serious justification is its ability to transform writing from an isolated, individual activity into something which is more shared and communal. To achieve this, participants have to accept

[42] For some interesting speculation on this question, see D.G. Myers, 'The Rise of Creative Writing,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1993), 54:2, pp. 277—97.

some direction, even some rules, and have to learn—informally or formally—some practices. Over its 75 years, the CWC has refined this structure into a fairly simple, easy-to-learn format, which still 'stretches' the participant.

One objection sometimes raised about small-scale, informal groups is that they can fall victim to an iron law of social practice: Like Attracts Like. With no external stimulation or formal supervision, the group creates its own culture, and then enforces it. (In the jargon of political science, this is sometimes called The Tyranny of Structurelessness.) At times over its 75 years, there have been some echoes of this conservative drift: I'm thinking of the way that women-writers in the 1960s were semi-deliberately pushed into writing romantic fiction, while the men were pushed towards thrillers. On the other hand, anyone attending a CWC session today would be struck by its diversity: the gender balance is approximately equal and there's a wide range of ages (although few are younger than 30). Most of the faces are white, but the group as a whole is certainly open to other voices and cultures. The range of material is perhaps not as diverse as in previous decades—there are fewer non-fiction articles and almost no scripts. On a typical Monday night, one could expect to hear poetry, short stories, extracts from novels and writing for children. The various competitions also ensure that external voices address the group (through the adjudicator), and these are supplemented by two or three workshops each year, also run by people from outside the Circle.

Over the decades, the CWC's strategy has been to rely on the PRW as the central focus of group development. By and large, this has worked.

The CWC Today

As part of the 75th anniversary celebrations, the CWC organised a questionnaire of members' experiences.[43] Seventeen members responded. Their responses record members' attitudes to Creative Writing. One of the most interesting questions concerned the meaning of Creative Writing. Members responded extremely positively:

- when I write creatively, when inspiration really hits, it's like riding a lightning bolt
- [it helps develop] a better understanding of myself
- it liberates my brain from the mundane
- a compulsion
- it is definitely the thing that kept me sane through lockdown

It's worth stressing, these comments concern the experience of *writing*, not publication. For many members, writing has become a freestanding activity in itself, for the log-jammed condition of British publishing mean that for many publication appears effectively impossible.

Comments specifically on experience of attending Circle meetings were equally positive. Members noted: support, friendship, reassurance, the exchange of ideas, a sense of discipline, a learning experience, drive, stimulus and inspiration.

[43] Sara Hayes and Nick Dunn, *Cardiff Writers' Circle member survey* (unpublished document).

Conclusions

Why has the CWC survived for seventy-five years? Because it provides a resource that people in Cardiff want and cannot find elsewhere. The training it offers is cheaper than that offered by University and extra-mural classes, and is arguably presented in a friendlier, more approachable manner. The CWC can even be credited with leading in teaching Creative Writing: it pioneered PRWs in Cardiff, even in Wales; other institutions followed.

The structure of the Circle and Committee ensure some self-conscious reviewing of its performance: through this, decisions are taken concerning whether to explicitly encourage specific forms of writing (such as flash fiction or children's writing) through competitions and workshops. By and large, the Circle has responded well to members' interests in such matters. It is also clear that the CWC's formal structures have aided its longevity: the committee, AGMs, minutes and bank balance mean that when one energetic, charismatic individual leaves, the group does *not* collapse, but re-makes itself.

The Circle's near-total independence (both practical and financial) from institutions such as the University or the Arts Council has guaranteed the group's autonomy, and ensured the elements of formal assessment have not been introduced into its meetings.

How should the Circle survive for another seventy-five years? The simple answer would be to continue what it's doing.

However, there are some areas in which the CWC's performance could be improved. While the PRWs work well, it has to be questioned whether the over-riding concentration on them as almost the only method of encouraging writers and writing is such a good idea. Would it not be possible to introduce some elements of other forms of teaching, encouragement and education alongside PRWs? Obviously, to an extent, the workshops do this—but, for example, could not CWC structures also encourage the circulation and discussion of how-to books?

Secondly, it is noticeable how emotionally draining most people find their first experience of participation in a PRW. While the idea of a formal induction in PRWs would probably backfire and could actually create more tension and more expectations, are there not other techniques and tactics available? For example: a new member's first manuscript could be read anonymously by an existing member.

Thirdly, given the centrality of the PRW to the Circle, the experience of members of the PRWs, both of feedback and in reading, should be formally reviewed at each AGM. It would be useful if this review was accompanied by a consultation with the membership via a questionnaire, which could also be used to—at last!—construct a sociological profile of CWC membership.

Finally, the occasional aloofness of the CWC from its immediate context is probably a mistake, making it sometimes distant from the local people it seeks to attract. (I'm thinking here particularly of the CWC silence on the Miners' Strike.) Could not the supplementary instruments of the CWC—the competitions and the workshops—be used to encourage links and connections? For example: imagine if, in 1984, one of the CWC competitions had taken as its theme the Miners' Strike.[44]

In weighing up the Circle's successes and its shortcomings, there is no doubts that the successes vastly outweigh the shortcomings. My hope is that this essay will help members become more aware of their successes, and so aid the Circle reach its centenary.

[44] By this, I don't mean that the CWC should have taken a position on the Miners' Strike, either for or against. But, at a more basic level, it could have acknowledged its importance to the immediate community in which it is based.

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