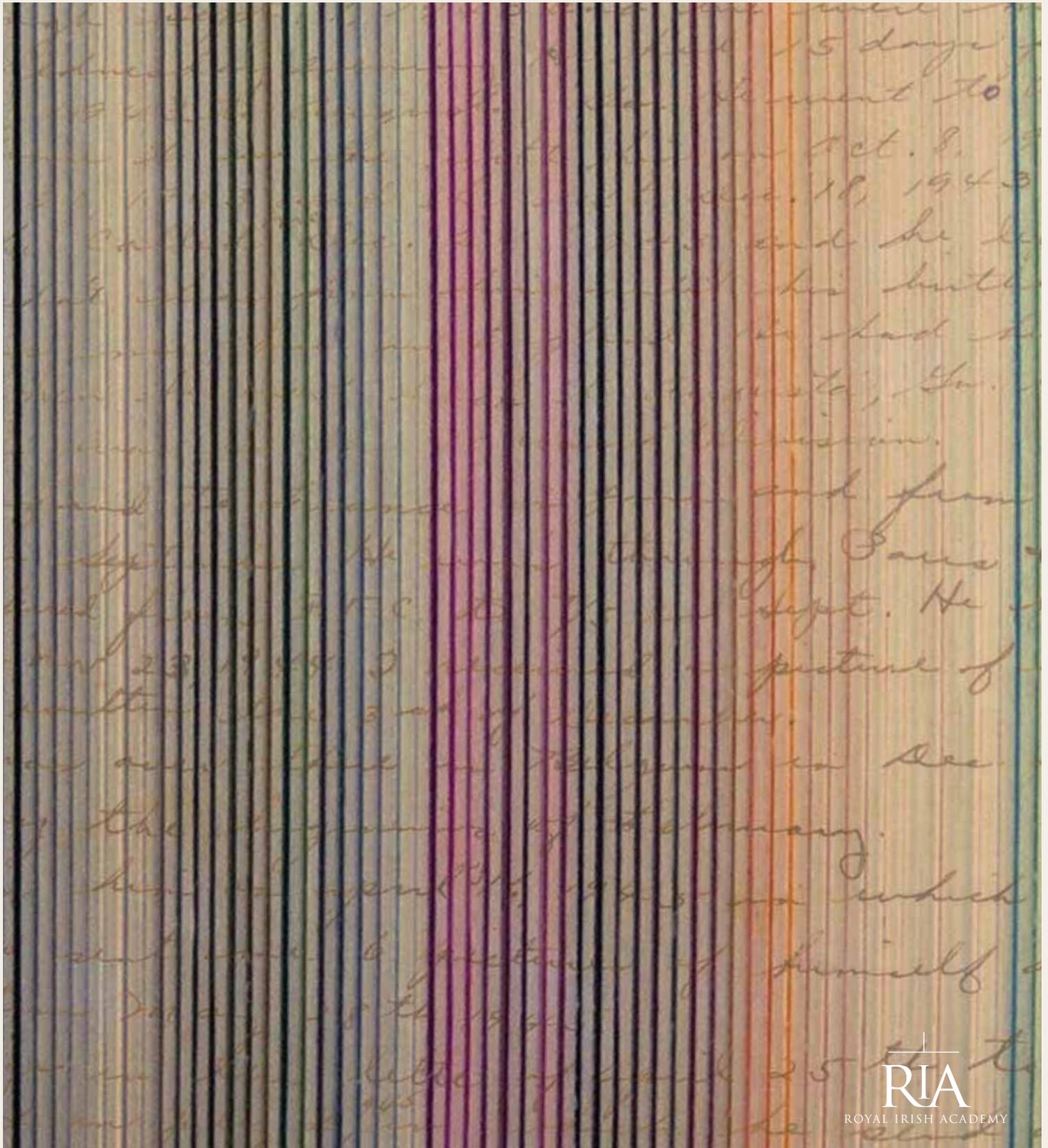


THE STATE OF THE ART LITERARY PRODUCTION IN IRELAND

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS *from the*

ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY CONFERENCE 5 MAY 2006





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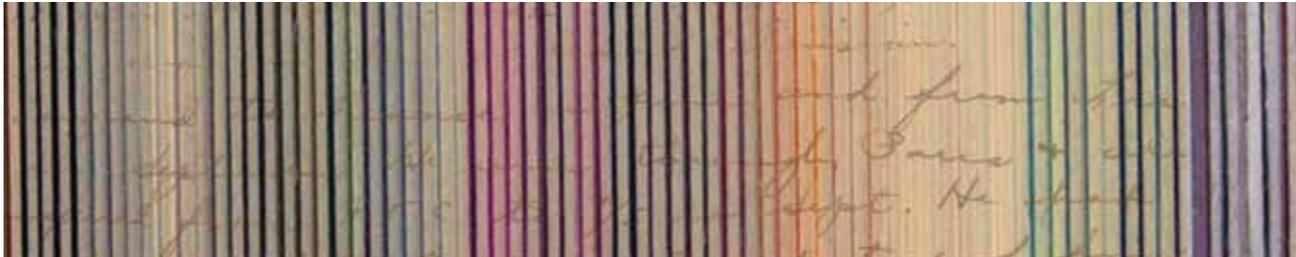
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THE STATE OF THE ART LITERARY PRODUCTION IN IRELAND



In 2005 the Royal Irish Academy Committee for the Study of Irish Literatures in English decided to host a conference on the current conditions for the production of literature in Ireland. The committee noted that it was currently assumed that the conditions for such production had never been better. It noted how Irish writers are courted by British publishers, and that Irish names appear on the short-lists of well-publicised literary competitions and book awards. It observed too that large advances to neophyte authors are reported on in the public press, while the Arts Councils are able to offer bursaries in a way that was unthinkable in more exiguous times. Aosdána confers honour upon the critically esteemed. In the universities English remains a popular subject among undergraduates as the Humanities more generally come under pressure. Creative Writing has expanded the university curriculum. The writer-in-residence is a recognisable figure in a variety of institutions.

In this context the committee judged nonetheless that no attempt had yet been made to assess what exactly are the conditions under which literary production in the English language takes place in contemporary Ireland, north and south. To this end the committee hosted a conference for invited delegates, which took place in Academy House on 5 May 2006, on *The State of the Art: Literary Production in Ireland*. The evening before, the committee also held a panel discussion open to the public, in Trinity College, Dublin, on the topic *A Living Literature?* which many of the invited delegates also attended.

The conference in Academy House addressed the following topics in four sessions: 'Production: Writers'; 'Production: The Business of Writing'; 'The Role of State Institutions'; 'Mediation'. The substance of the presentations to the conference and of the related discussions is summarised in the report that follows, by Mr Eugene Downes, who served as Rapporteur. From these deliberations a number of recommendations have been derived, which the committee endorsed at its meeting of 6 October 2006. The committee is most appreciative of Mr Downes's contribution to its work. It also wishes to put on record its gratitude to DEPFA BANK, to the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, without whose kind support our conference could not have taken place.

It is the committee's hope that this document will offer helpful information to interested parties engaged in literary production in Ireland and that it will stimulate discussion and appropriate action.

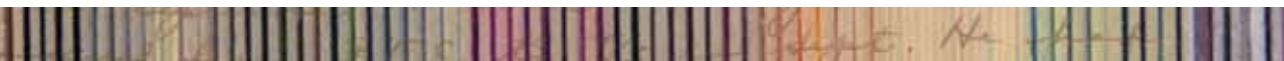
Terence Brown
Chair, Royal Irish Academy Committee for the Study of Irish Literatures in English

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



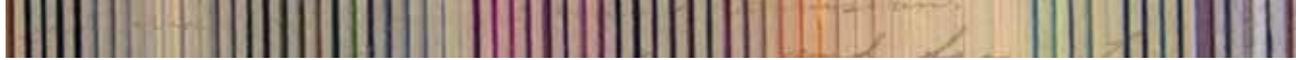
- **Commission** research on the current socio-economic conditions of Irish writers to quantify and publicise the hardships that many of them suffer.
- **Review** the quantum and the qualifying income threshold of the stipend offered by Aosdána (the *cnuas*), and ensure that revised levels are subject to annual indexation.
- **Conduct** ongoing analysis of domestic market conditions and the specific needs of different literary genres, and ensure that state interventions to support Irish writing are targeted at the weakest links in the production and distribution chain.
- **Establish** a well-organised and inclusive coordination and advocacy structure for literary production, with input from all key stakeholders, which would develop a coherent platform and lobby government and public bodies for its implementation.
- **Initiate** a forum in which convenors of creative writing courses in Ireland can meet to discuss live issues in this fast-expanding field.
- **Consider** ways of involving writers more closely in rehearsals for radio drama and, if feasible, of extending rehearsal time.
- **Support** a dedicated literary bookshop, along the lines of the London Review bookshop, or at least a website for Irish literary lists.

1. INTRODUCTION



- 1.1 Literary production may of its nature be destined to exist near the edge of viability; even in France—a country with a flourishing literary publishing industry, top-level political support for cultural and language promotion, and an extensive international francophone market—70% of all books published are pulped. Still, the last three decades have transformed conditions in Ireland—from a handful of literary publishers to a spectrum of firms; from quirky bookshops like Parsons to major British multiples, with US chainstores shortly to arrive; from a tiny to a flourishing Arts Council. Irish writers seem to bestride the globe: when John McGahern died, most of the writers contacted for comment seemed to be travelling abroad. But is all this necessarily progress? Are these opportunities just for the high flyers? Is the new glamorous Ireland taking a heavy toll on many or most Irish writers? In what conditions is the bulk of Irish literature being produced? How is the sector changing? And what interventions, if any, are needed to support it?
- 1.2 To address this challenge the Royal Irish Academy's National Committee for the Study of Irish Literatures in English held its conference *The State of the Art: Literary Production in Ireland*. The approximately seventy-five participants included a diverse range of writers, editors, publishers, agents, academics, journalists and representatives of public bodies and arts organisations. As the event was held under what are known as 'Chatham House' rules (in which no contributor can be quoted without express permission of the speaker), contributions have been reported without attribution.

2. THE WRITER



- 2.1 The conference opened with eloquent personal testimonies suggesting that despite the turbo-charged economic development of recent years, most Irish writers have not shared in the rising tide of prosperity. If anything, **the situation has for many become more precarious** as incomes fall behind the increasing cost of living, and housing in particular. Some have emigrated to countries, for example in Eastern Europe, where they can afford to write full-time. Nor do advances from publishers appear to have kept pace with inflation—one writer was recently offered the same advance as fourteen years earlier. Commissioning fees for a full-length play may amount to no more than €7,000 or €8,000, while recent research has found that in 2005 the average income of an Irish playwright was €13,700.
- 2.2 **Long-term relationships with editors and publishing houses seem increasingly a thing of the past.** The loss of financial security goes hand in hand with an irreplaceable editorial chemistry built on trust, passion and careful literary judgment. One relationship came to an end with the editor admitting that management had a new policy of ‘no more mid-career novelists’. One-book deals are becoming the norm.
- 2.3 **Some writing genres also seem to face a drop in demand;** the ubiquity of reality TV, for example, threatens to displace authored documentaries. Short fiction appears less and less marketable, and a strong shift from fiction to non-fiction is noticeable in the literary publishing lists, excepting of course the popular genre. For full-time writers who have often had to diversify to sustain a viable income, this is a serious problem, with many compelled to take on all kinds of miscellaneous work, which can leave them exhausted and short of time to write.
- 2.4 The stipend offered by Aosdána is also a vital support for those fortunate enough to be members, but **the maximum income threshold to qualify for the *cnuas* is very low.** Where does this leave the writer who aspires to a viable standard of living for themselves and their family somewhere above a level of basic subsistence?
- 2.5 **Teaching on a creative writing course is at least one income opportunity that is burgeoning.** There were ten such university courses in the UK a decade ago; there are now seventy-five. For the writer there may be difficulties in trying to adjust to the academic system, with assessments based on one’s publication record (it may be easier for a poet than a novelist to amass an extensive list). On the other hand, writers’ active involvement in literature courses was welcomed by some academic participants as an enriching and salutary experience. It seemed widely accepted that on many of these courses, notwithstanding high fees, the standard of writing was quite weak. Much depends on the quality of the teaching and mentoring, and

on the course structure; a generous, open quality of attention from the teacher can have a real impact, even in a weekend workshop.

- 2.6 **The broader value of creative writing courses may lie more in providing a sense of encouragement, continuity and moral support that traditionally has been provided by an editor.** They can also play a key role in educating the next generation of readers, just as art or music classes give students an understanding of the arts without creating the expectation that exhibitions or concerts will necessarily follow.
- 2.7 **For a playwright, the equation of viability is somewhat different—to make a living your work must be staged.** The number of Irish theatre companies that regularly produce new work is small, although RTÉ Radio also offers production opportunities. It was claimed that not a single new Irish play was presented at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2005. The Peacock, considered by many a key space for new writing, has staged few premieres in recent years. Above all, to have a play produced a second time in Ireland is the most difficult challenge for any playwright. Much new Irish work is now premiered by UK theatres, especially the Royal Court. And playtexts are hardest of all to publish—even more so than poetry or fiction. Internet publishing of scripts, for example on the Irish Playography website (<http://www.irishplayography.com/>), offers an alternative route. For the fortunate few playwrights whose work is published, pressure is often applied to go to print prior to rehearsals—potentially a key phase in the development of the script—so that the published text often bears little resemblance to the play on opening night.
- 2.8 Several participants suggested that **female playwrights found it even more difficult to get their work staged**, and that the voices and experience of women seem less attractive to theatre companies—even though many artistic directors, programmers and audience-members are women. Others pointed out that of the 650 new plays written on the island of Ireland since 1990, about a quarter of them are by women: perhaps not such a bad record, though many would have been produced in a community arts / devised / collaborative context.
- 2.9 **The quality of new theatre writing may be a larger problem than its quantity.** Factors here include the paucity of good dramaturgs in Irish theatre companies and the lack of additional rehearsal time for new work. Inappropriate dramaturgical interventions can be very dangerous for a writer; some wondered on what basis appointments to these positions are made. On the other hand, structured initiatives like the Rough Magic Seeds Programme show what can be accomplished.

3. THE BUSINESS OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING



- 3.1 The conference heard analyses—optimistic, pessimistic and sanguine—of current trends in the business of writing from the perspectives of editors, agents, publishers and broadcasters. **There was a wide measure of agreement that the traditional model of the literary editor is on the wane.** Many of the great London imprints that were creations of individual publishers are now huge conglomerates with interests across the media. Editors have far less power within these structures than they used to, particularly in publicly traded companies, which are focussed on shareholder value and profit.
- 3.2 **Editors now have to secure the support of a wide range of colleagues in advance of a contract being offered to a writer**—indeed, they may not be doing any favours to a writer if they contract them unless the marketing department is also on side. And different kinds of people are now becoming commissioning editors, frequently more interested in spotting product or talent than in sustained working with writers and texts. Perhaps this is not all to be mourned: polite old-style publishing sometimes produced books that disappeared into the ether once issued.
- 3.3 Basic editorial ethics are still taken seriously: those who renege on agreements or mislead their writers do not represent the mainstream of the profession. **And these individual failures should not be read as structural problems.** An editor must be able to explain to his or her authors the complex contemporary process of decision-making within a publishing house. One Irish publishing house, for instance, now has an editorial board of twelve who collectively decide whether to publish, a structure that does not appear to have undermined the strong personal relationship that the individual editors have with their writers.
- 3.4 **Good contemporary publishing gains from local presence and knowledge.** But in a globalising age, it is perhaps not surprising that some Dublin-based editors have writers on their list from across Europe and further afield—just as many Irish writers work with editors in London and New York. This speaks of a confident, outward-looking Irish publishing industry and augurs well for the future.
- 3.5 **If the classical role of the editor is eroding, so too are those of the publisher and agent, as the abandonment of the Net Book Agreement in 1995 has led to a power shift towards the wholesalers and chainstores.** One British publisher is now selling 9% of its list to supermarkets. One economic impact on writers is the erosion of royalty payments, which used to be based on the list price of the book but are now mostly calculated on the net receipts, with all discounts factored in.

- 3.6 **Where once the publisher held sway, the trade now influences decisions on cover designs, or even whether to publish.** Publishers sometimes now pay bookshops for window-space, front-of-shop displays or book-of-the-month choices. It is increasingly difficult to engage with individual buyers. (A small Irish publishing house reported that two large bookstores, who were major customers for its poetry list, will no longer stock these titles, especially collections by younger poets; local bookshops are also increasingly reluctant to take them. The web has therefore become their key sales outlet.) Such a centralisation of buying, inimical to personal taste and interest, threatens to lead to cultural homogenisation.
- 3.7 Meanwhile, the rate of manuscript submissions to agents has accelerated—to several thousand a year in some cases. More extensive higher education, the availability of word processing, media coverage of huge advances and the growth of creative writing groups probably all contribute to this growth (there are apparently 180 such groups on Ireland, each with six to ten people). **As a consequence, publishers are effectively passing on to agents the burden of talent spotting; some publishers will no longer read unsolicited manuscripts unless sent in by agents.**
- 3.8 **There is also a striking mismatch between supply and demand: two thirds of submissions, but only 7% of the 120,000 titles published annually in the UK and Ireland, are fiction.** Many Irish firms will not publish fiction. In more general terms, there is an increasing view that 120,000 new books each year is excessive, and many imprints are now cutting their list by up to half.
- 3.9 **This analysis of the print publishing industry was complemented by an account of radio broadcasting, another major traditional outlet and source of work for writers.** RTÉ is a key national repository for written culture, from broadcasts and recordings of classics to lecture series and documentaries. Radio in particular is also a midwife to new writing throughout the country, with 4.5 hours of new written material each week on Radio One. While the fees are not large, it does offer writers the opportunity of developing an ongoing relationship, and of reaching a large audience: as part of the recent Francis McManus short story competition, the 20 shortlisted stories (from a total entry of 750) were all broadcast. It is hard to think of a comparable print showcase—which raises the question of how important it is for a writer to have their work heard or read. Some writers felt that RTÉ should be more proactive in inviting writers to attend rehearsals and in offering feedback after broadcast. Longer rehearsals, if they could be resourced, would also be a major step forward.
- 3.10 **Varied views were offered on the quality of writing for radio.** Some felt that the standard of radio drama is in marked decline: perhaps because it is no longer seen as a genre in its own right or a sufficiently prestigious platform, perhaps also owing to the influence of television drama, a very different genre. The sense of a general decline in writing was contested by others, who argued that with so many more people producing work, the proportionate quality has dropped, but there have always been very few good writers in absolute terms.

- 3.11 **Other participants presented a more positive picture of current publishing trends.** In the last 25 to 30 years, the number of books sold in Ireland has increased by 500%. The number of individually owned bookshops has also increased. Irish publishers should exploit the enormous recent expansion in new media opportunities, including in local radio and print media. Irish publishing firms have sold international rights all over the world and publish a large number of first-time authors.
- 3.12 **Negative trends in fiction were also contested.** While fiction publishing in general may be in retreat in the UK and Ireland, children's fiction (not always recognised as a genre in its own right) is flourishing in Ireland, and a lot of good fiction, especially genre fiction, is being published in the US. In any case, not everyone can get published in book form, and aspiring writers should not necessarily look down on web-based publishing. A new Irish initiative involves a plan to make out-of-print books available online.
- 3.13 **Non-English-language publishing, including fiction and translation, is expanding in many other countries, including Central and Eastern Europe and China;** while only 3% of books published in the UK and Ireland are translations, the figure is up to ten times higher elsewhere. Ireland Literature Exchange offers valuable opportunities for Irish writers and publishers to take advantage of this, and the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon will initiate research on supports for the promotion, marketing and distribution of Irish contemporary literature in international English-language markets.
- 3.14 **There was a division of view on the appropriate public policy response to these trends.** Some participants argued that no market solution was available, and that a far greater commitment of public funds was needed to create a protected space for literary writing and publishing to flourish. Others cautioned that the sector could be waiting a long time for a major increase in public subsidy, and that in any event literary publishing is already subsidised by sales of so-called popular fiction (which should not be seen as 'the enemy'), though some were sceptical that media conglomerates do in fact reinvest those profits.

4. THE ROLE OF STATE INSTITUTIONS



- 4.1 Policymakers from a number of relevant State institutions spoke to the conference on recent developments in public support for literature in Ireland. **The recent creation of Culture Ireland, the government's new agency for international arts and cultural relations, was hailed as a major step forward in the infrastructure of State support for Irish writers and publishers, and a spur towards professionalisation.** The agency's mission is to promote and advance Irish arts in a global context, helping to create international opportunities for Irish artists and cultural practitioners and leading to a deeper mutual understanding between Irish and other cultures and communities. Relevant goals also include developing new and diverse international markets for Irish arts, enriching Ireland's cultural life through outward and inward flows of creative work and ideas, and bringing Irish experience and ideas to bear on global cultural challenges.
- 4.2 **There is a conscious desire on the part of Culture Ireland to ensure that Ireland is represented by a diverse range of work.** In practical terms, during this interim phase while the agency is being established, funding applications are welcomed for the costs of writers' participation in international festivals and symposia, and also for arts-based Irish Studies events. Together with the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, Culture Ireland also provides core funding to Ireland Literature Exchange.
- 4.3 **The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon is also in a process of change, and its bursaries and awards for writers in residence are this year being revised and developed.** The Council's annual revenue spend on literary resource organisations, publishers and festivals totals approximately €2.5 million, not including funding for individual writers or for theatre, which is also relevant. Some 25 publishers receive support, for the most part small presses and literary journals. The Council aims to work more closely with the Library Services on the challenge of reader development. Urgent action was sought on the Arts Council's promise to put pressure on arts organisations and businesses to provide fair pay and conditions for artists, including writers. The retention of the tax exemption scheme was also seen as vital, and a significant victory for the advocacy of the sector and the Council.
- 4.4 To put these developments in historical context, it was recalled that until the 1970s, the Arts Council refused to support individual artists at all, preferring to channel funds to 'accountable' institutions, and even then focussed its funding on the dissemination of existing work rather than the production of new work. **This lacuna in support for the ongoing work of creative artists led to the creation of Aosdána.** The Council's concerns at the time—that an ongoing stipend might have an adverse incentive on the artist and that it could impinge on freedom of expression—serve to emphasise the innovative nature of the new structure. The system of self-election

has been controversial, but the alternative of some official involvement in selection is surely worse. The charge of elitism has also been widespread, although curiously one not often heard levelled against organisations such as soccer teams.

- 4.5 **On a more practical level, there was a broad recognition that Aosdána's *cnuas* income support should be increased, particularly as it started from a low base and was not index-linked as it should have been.** An intriguing structural parallel was drawn with Irish agriculture and the recent decoupling of CAP subsidy from production towards a form of direct income support. It was suggested, only half in jest, that the Irish Writers Union could do worse than model themselves on the IFA to promote the welfare of writers as guardians of the cultural, rather than physical, landscape.
- 4.6 **In Northern Ireland, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland makes available funding to literature of circa £800,000 per annum, and also has a support programme for 'language arts', i.e. Irish-language or Ulster-Scots-based work.** There is some coordination between the two Arts Councils, including occasional joint Council meetings and committee meetings at executive level. There are no more than four or five literary publishers in Northern Ireland, producing some 25 books per year. London is the behemoth of the publishing world for writers on the island of Ireland, with Dublin next and Belfast some way behind; indeed, a rather provocative rule of thumb was suggested that the more remarkable the writer, the less Irish the publisher. **There is a need to instill self-respect and confidence in the Irish publishing sector—all the more so North of the border.**

5. ENGAGING THE READER: MEDIA, EDUCATION AND LIBRARIES



- 5.1 Fresh perspectives on Irish literary production were offered by some of those who engage the reader directly: the media, practitioners of outreach and education, and the public library service. Although top-down cultural control may be on the wane, and many publishers now seem as interested in advertising as in editorial coverage, some still act as if reviews can make or break a book. Titles often arrive at newspaper offices with gifts enclosed. The characteristics and personal story of the writer are promoted almost as much as those of their work. With many writers pursuing a diversified ‘portfolio career’ to make ends meet, a steady flow of leading authors is available to review for the broadsheets and journals. **But with websites like Amazon now offering anyone the chance to become a reviewer, a book can gather web-based momentum without reference to the verdict of the press.**
- 5.2 With publishers often looking for the next bestseller on the model of the last one rather than for a genuinely new book, the writer’s own faith in their new work is both vital and often painfully tested. Anxiety is a normal condition of artists and writers. Their comforters are twofold: constant readers and the wise individual buyer—for example the public librarian. **More than half of all books sold in Ireland are bought by public libraries, an invisible but hugely powerful player in opposition to the forces of centralised selling and marketing.** Librarians also have a particular care for the book as a physical artefact and an amazing technical instrument; in the next five years, a priority for Irish public libraries will be to restore the book stocks, many of which have been deteriorating while investment focussed on IT services.
- 5.3 **The future of literature also relies on a healthy young readership—and on securing literacy.** Research indicates that primary and post-primary children are particularly influenced by the title, cover and design of books; an extant film version is also a huge attractor. Boys pose a particular challenge in fostering a positive attitude towards books and a habit of regular reading. On the positive side, children’s fiction is flourishing in Ireland as a genre, while the advent of Harry Potter has created new possibilities to grow a reading culture.
- 5.4 **Although the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon is now focussing on the issue as a priority, the push for a more dynamic national approach to arts in education is still hampered by a lack of clear policy and effective coordination between the relevant government departments.** A number of resource organisations are strongly engaged, for example Poetry Ireland’s Writers in Schools scheme.

- 5.5 **Some moves towards coordination and collective advocacy have been initiated.** An Author Rights Agency for Ireland is in place, while Clé, the Irish Booksellers Association, is promoting the development of a national book and reading policy, to include all stakeholders. Others, however, drew attention to the small membership of the Irish Writers Union and the lack of success to date in campaigning for the introduction of public lending rights, which the State is obliged to enact under EU law. **The conference concluded with participants proposing the establishment of a lobby for literature, which could draw together all the diverse and sometimes fragmented players to present a coherent platform to government.**

6. RECOMMENDATIONS



- 6.1 The harsh reality of current living conditions for many Irish writers needs to be quantified and publicised. **The Arts Council/An Chomairle Ealaíon should be encouraged to commission research on this as a follow-up to its widely-publicised 2005 report on the socio-economic conditions of Irish theatre practitioners.**
- 6.2 **Taking into account the outcome of this research, Aosdána should review the quantum of the cnuas and the qualifying income thresholds.** Revised levels, once agreed with government, should be subject to annual indexation.
- 6.3 State interventions to support Irish writing should be targeted at the weakest links in the chain of production and distribution on the basis of rigorous, constantly updated analysis of changing market conditions and the specific needs of different literary genres. **The Arts Council/ An Chomairle Ealaíon should consider supplementing its recent tender for research on the international promotion, marketing and distribution of Irish contemporary literature with research on domestic market conditions.**
- 6.4 **A well-organised and inclusive coordination and advocacy structure is needed for literary production in Ireland, drawing together writers, readers, publishers (both editors and commercial management), agents, trade/wholesalers, retail bookshops, libraries, literary media, academe, resource organisations and funding bodies.** It could develop a coherent platform, including a proposed national book and reading policy, and lobby government and public bodies for its implementation. It could also facilitate the exchange of information and advice between practitioners. It could also fulfill a watch-dog role. Clé and/or the Arts Councils could convene an initial meeting of the key stakeholders. Seed funding or modest administrative support may be required.
- 6.5 **There would also be value in establishing an appropriate forum in which convenors of creative writing courses in Ireland can meet, together with others involved in literary production, to discuss live issues in this fast-expanding field.** Relevant questions include course objectives, expectations of students, quality of work, and international practice and links. A university or other appropriate institution could play an initiating role.
- 6.6 **Given the importance of radio drama as an outlet for new writing and an artform in its own right, RTÉ Radio should, in consultation with writers, consider ways of involving playwrights more closely in the rehearsal process and, if feasible, of extending rehearsal time.**
- 6.7 **The Arts Councils should support a dedicated literary bookshop, along the lines of the London Review bookshop, or at least a website for Irish literary lists.**

PROGRAMME



State of the Art: Literary Production in Ireland

5 MAY 2006 ACADEMY HOUSE

- 9.00—Registration
- 9.30—Conference opens—Session I—Production: Writers.
- 10.45—Coffee Break
- 11.15—Session II—Production: The Business of Writing
- 12.30—Lunch
- 1.45—Session III—The Role of State Institutions
- 3.00—Coffee Break
- 3.30—Session IV—Mediation
- 4.45—Reception
- 6.00—Ends

