



*Hyphen-21 (supporting community)
Registered Company No. 2925831:
Registered Charity 1040077*

*<https://hyphen-21.org>
<https://poemsforthewall.org>
<https://roganwolf.com>*

Director's Report 2020/2021

Dear Hyphen-21 Trustees,

Here is my annual "Director's Report." (I am afraid I failed to produce one last year). In the first place, I need to account to you as the charity's Trustees, in your capacity as trusted representatives of the wider community. In the second place – at least until fairly recently – I would then send the report on to Companies House, along with the annual accounts. But these days, as far as Hyphen-21 is concerned, that second stage is an anachronism. The charity's assets are now minimal, so that the format I have to follow in completing the accounts is greatly simplified. Further, Companies House no longer requires me to send in a report alongside.

But actually, I have always liked this sense of having an obligation to account for (and declare) what the charity means and does. Companies House employees (their main base is down the road from me, in Cardiff) might be surprised to learn (if I were to tell them) that I find the whole business of midwinter reports and accounts rather beautiful. This was especially true when I was based in London. Each year, on the deadline date of January 31st – often quite late in the evening – I would post the paperwork by hand into the old brass letterbox of the London branch of Companies House, in Holborn. I was never the only "company representative" to deliver my stuff at the last moment. The Holborn letterbox was kept busy all through that evening each year, right up until midnight. Mostly, it was couriers arriving on motor bikes. But then I would come along, on foot. It felt ceremonious, but also deeply principled, part of something that mattered, to which I – and in a sense Hyphen-21 and everyone involved in it - belonged.

And in principle we still do, even though Hyphen-21's profile is now very small, actually barely visible. And I continue to see the Charity's underlying values as being fundamental and essential, a reality ever more desperate for articulation and renewal, a statement frantic for a language through which to speak and above all be heard.

So, I shall begin this year's report by saying that the Charity's official address is now a village called Frampton on Severn, in Gloucestershire. It shares this address with me. I moved here with Nicola nearly three years ago.

Next, you need to know that Hyphen-21 entered the financial year 2020-2021 with £1,821 remaining in its account. It ended the year with that sum untouched, ie no expenses were incurred, although there was some activity on Hyphen-21's behalf. Should a charity hold on to any of its assets – however small – as a reserve? Most say yes. In my opinion, not this one. We should deploy everything we have, since everything we have was given for that purpose. We shall be spending well over half of £1,821 in the next couple of months. I shall explain what it will be paying for, below.

Our accounts for 20/21 were submitted to Companies House two days ago and have already been accepted.

During the year, Hyphen-21 continued to be concerned exclusively with the project "Poems for...the wall." I shall always respect the idea of this project because it is about sharing widely words of acute awareness, in

service to the truth and to quality rather than quantity, with an emphasis on empathy and connection - in stark contrast to the language of Sell and Spin, of counting and measuring, mask, disguise and blather that otherwise fills our days. And it is a way of carrying the language of poetry clear of its usual confines, citadels and comfort zones of academia and the literary world. "Here is a way of opening people's lives to each other" (David Hart, poet).

Okay, but the fact remains that, for many months now, the number of people registering on the site has fallen right away. We have to conclude that the Project's poems have generally ceased extending their good news. Even more serious, in some ways, it is likely that the name of "Poems for...the wall" has fallen off people's radar screens and we are faced with needing to promote ourselves again.

The reason for the falling-off is pretty obvious. The vast majority of registrations normally come from school teachers ; other frequent "customers" are healthcare professionals and librarians. And in the last couple of years, all these people have had more pressing calls on their attention than the chance to "open people's lives to each other" - while many of the venues associated with teachers, nurses and librarians have been left empty or at least depleted and preoccupied.

Any ideas on where or how to advertise "Poems for...the wall" again would be welcome. For if and when things settle and people are free to pause and consider, these poems will have more to say and do, perhaps, even than they had before.

In the meantime, I have been working on a new collection. It will fill what I had long suspected was a gap in our provision. While a good many primary school teachers used to register on the project's site, I had wondered how many of the poems actually catered for that pre-teen age group. The answer is debatable, but the question has led to a recent selection of 25 poems with ten-year old children specifically in mind, each poster-poem a combination of words and some visual accompaniment. The new collection is to be called either "Poems for...rising ten" or "Poems for...being ten or so." The "visual accompaniment" will not be illustration as such, but abstract work which seems to speak or respond to the words, somehow adding to them. It is being supplied by an artist I have met here in Frampton, whose work I find quite beautiful. She is offering it free of charge. However, the experienced and talented person helping us with scanning and formatting, will have to be paid. That is where most of our remaining funds will go. The setting out is almost done now. As soon as it is, I shall send it over for your consideration. I find it all quite exciting, I must admit.

I am also, very slowly, adding to the number of languages represented in the bilingual "Poems for...one world" collection. This is not just a numbers game, a totting up of the languages represented in the collection. It is in recognition of the focus there has been in recent years on *translation* in poetry, a focus that goes beyond just internationalism, and is a thing of beauty and high quality in itself. I should name Chris Meade at this point. Years ago, he was an innovative librarian in Birmingham. From there, he became Director of the Poetry Society. It is Chris who – in that capacity - was responsible for "Poems for... the wall" first taking off. I phoned him at the Society and he helped me apply for funding. Now he is Chair of "Modern Poetry in Translation", a small organisation producing translated work of high quality. MPT was co-founded by the poet Ted Hughes. Chris likes the idea of MPT and PoemsftWall collaborating and has facilitated an agreement between us, ie that I shall put into poster form work produced by MPT, so that it appears on free public display, as well as in its present journal form.

Further, there have been two major regional festivals in recent years in London, one in Waltham Forest and the other in Hackney. Each festival exhibited good bilingual poetry, as a reflection and celebration of the

ethnic mix in the respective Boroughs. And there is now an agreement that I should make a selection from each exhibition to add to the Poemsftwall bilingual collection, so that at least some the work that went into these separate local initiatives will be brought together and preserved on a single website, on a permanent basis.

The above implies a lot of work, which will take a considerable amount of time to complete. But it is good work and carries hope and I shall enjoy pursuing it.

Finally here, I want to introduce, or re-introduce, the “mental health” theme. There is a hollow website floating about in cyberspace called “Better Mental Health Working.” It is waiting to have a life’s work written into it. Joe Wolf built the site and his father has spent years failing to move in. I think one reason was that I still felt too close to, and also bruised by, the whole subject. There is much to say, perhaps of value (I must *believe* it’s of value) but I have also had a strong sense that the times have simply moved on, that the language, precepts, and experience from which I would speak no longer have an audience willing or able to use what I have to say. And I didn’t want just to add rant or mere nostalgia to this fraught subject, a raking over of old ashes.

But time has passed. And there is a growing sense that mental health services in this country have not in reality moved on at all. True, there is a greater freedom, these days, especially among the safely rich and famous, to talk about, or “come out” as belonging under, one or another “mental health” heading. But does that mean that the quality of services have “moved on” ? Or that real understanding of the issues has increased ? Or that skilled empathy and holding are now more in evidence and effective ? I believe not. And has funding for mental health services achieved parity with other health services yet, a stated policy aim for years ? I believe not.

Continual and ever deeper *cuts* to mental health services and facilities have been devastating and are dangerous and inexcusable, but are also not the whole story. The cuts have been accompanied by various retreats into simplistic fundamentalist and inadequate “solutions” to the complex task of helping people with mental health problems. I will briefly name them here. (To many in the “mental health world,” they will seem a surprising choice on my part, and maybe even shocking, but I don’t have the space to explain my thinking here. I shall try to do so on the mental health site). I think the following have emerged as apparently positive and corrective developments, but in reality, perhaps through the ways in which they have been interpreted, or misinterpreted, have been deeply destructive to mental health work and services across the board : “Social Inclusion” ; “User Involvement” ; the “Recovery Model.” I see all of them now as false gods, the result of magical thinking, yet another retreat from our common reality.

In conclusion, I would like to return to this Charity’s title - Hyphen-21, its meaning and its origin.

It is a play on a phrase coined by Martin Buber in his book “I and Thou”. That phrase is “I-Thou” and Buber compares it to another phrase, or coinage, or concept, which he calls “I-It.” Two very different and often opposing positions one can take, in addressing one’s neighbour and external reality. In short, empathy, as opposed to counting, or a search for connection as opposed to detachment.

A concern with mental health services and good practice may seem very different from an interest in displaying poems in public settings. But both are about truth in connection – the difficult business of riding the hyphen between I and Thou.

Rogan Wolf, December 31st 2021