

Public Lending Right

While today's authors are grateful for their PLR, no matter how infinitesimally small, passing time means fewer each year have cognizance of the lengthy battle fought by Brigid Brophy and Maureen Duffy to achieve a worthwhile and workable PLR payment system.

In the longest perspective, it took almost thirty years to get the correct system in place. (Brigid's father, John Brophy, in the 1950s had started asking for fair pay for authors). But it was the seven or so years from the formation of the Writers Action Group (WAG) until the actual passage of the PLR Bill in 1979 that intensively occupied my mother's and Maureen's time.

Mounting the WAG/PLR campaign was an act of self-sacrifice, in that it kept her from the kind of writing she might have undertaken; however Brigid Brophy was a not unwilling combatant wherever the cause was just.

A teenager at the inception of WAG, I was wholly self-preoccupied and took only a glancing interest in the rebellion being kindled in the front room of my parents' flat. The black and white faux marble dining table, its social use largely historical by that stage anyway, disappeared under printed sheets and bundles of envelopes both out-going and in-coming.

Maureen's expertise lay in mastering the technical details of the potential data collection systems for the scheme.

My mother's was the secretarial role; she was characteristically meticulous with the addresses of the thousand or more WAG members and kept scrupulous notes of each subscription; index cards were impeccably ordered and annotated in her neat clear script. She was unfailingly professional in this, on one occasion upbraiding Iris Murdoch for failing to enclose her cheque for £3. Iris was one among many well-known authors: Ted Hughes, Harold Pinter, JB Priestly, Muriel Spark, for example, all subscribed.

The task of getting WAG newsletters disseminated to the membership was onerous, and I recall the stress it placed on my mother to type each edition with its complicated format and many last-minute additions. At one point the method of duplication - incredibly, it now seems, required Brigid to type onto a waxed sheet to manufacture a stencil. I remember the excitement we all felt at the arrival of a home photocopier, which in that era seemed a piece of implausibly marvellous gadgetry. It turned out to be less magical than infuriating; its tonal repertoire lurched from illegibly luminous to singed beyond hope.

An official-looking man from the Royal Mail arrived at our flat one day to say in rather unsettling terms that it was some sort of offence (subversive rather than practical, is what I took him to mean) to monopolise the red pillar boxes in the vicinity of Old Brompton Road, by stuffing them to near-capacity with post. He left mildly charmed, I believe by Brigid and Maureen's genuine surprise and earnest apologies. From then on, newsletters had to be put into a sack and were collected from the de facto WAG office by a postal person.

I wish I'd paid more attention to the astounding campaign growing in size and strength around me. Mainly insouciant, I did manage to attend the St George's Day protest in Belgrave Square in 1975, and I did help paint the names of every WAG member on a huge sheet for a rally. (However, I'd misjudged the effort involved and the paint was scarcely dry in time). I had lived in a household where Goodman, Eccles and Ted (Willis) (Among Peers of various denominations, some supportive, some obstructive) were commonly cited, and I'd become familiar with the terminology of late-night sittings and filibusters, of sampling and statistics, without evincing much interest, and without having the slightest inclination to probe.

I was not aloof from the success of the PLR campaign however, and was as jubilant as my father, when finally the Bill went through. As husband and daughter respectively of "the Patron saint of PLR" as Giles Gordon called Brigid, we were relieved at the outcome as well as immensely proud of my mother's achievement.