

A joint anniversary: PEN and the Institut Français

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On 16 September 2010, a packed audience in Queensberry Place attended a round table discussion on the role of writers in society today, bringing together Lisa Appignanesi (President of English PEN), Sylvestre Clancier (President of French PEN), and the publisher Christopher MacLehose (MacLehose Press). The event ('The Hundredth Anniversary of the Institut Français de Londres: Heritage for the Future') was organised by the French Studies Department of the University of Birmingham, together with Philippe Lane and the Institut Français du Royaume Uni, as a contribution to the Institut's centenary celebrations.

It was a reprise of the important 17th International PEN Congress, 'Literature and the World after the War', organised in September 1941 by Storm Jameson and Hermon Ould, and held in the Institut at the invitation of its Director, Denis Saurat. [Jennifer Birkett \(staff/profiles/french/birkett-jennifer.aspx\)](#), author of the first biography of Storm Jameson (OUP 2009), set out the historical context of the 1941 Congress, a public statement of Anglo-French solidarity against the Nazi threat, which rallied PEN writers and writers-in-exile to set out together the role of literature in the world after the war. Martyn Cornick, a specialist in Anglo-French exchanges in the 1930s, sketched the career of the writer and scholar, Denis Saurat, an Honorary Member of the London Centre of PEN since 1935, under whose leadership the Institut Français in wartime became home to La France Libre, the great journal of the Free French, and who in 1940 introduced General de Gaulle to leading British politicians and the British public.

The issues raised in 1941 provided interesting analogues and contrasts to those raised at the round table, skilfully chaired by the Gide specialist, David Walker (University of Sheffield). Christopher MacLehose described the contemporary publishing context, difficult terrain nowadays for the cross-fertilisation of ideas. This is a world of conglomerates, radically different from the wartime context in which love of books was more important than the bottom line (and paper rationing ensured that all books printed would be sold), and different too from the post-war world in which European writing in translation flourished. The MacLehose Press, publishing translations in 18 different languages, is today unrivalled in the UK. Sylvestre Clancier compared the position in France, where governmental support enables translation to flourish, and Jack Lang's legislation limiting book price discounts limits the commercial potential of the best-seller cult. Lisa Appignanesi underlined the importance of the PEN Writers in Translation programme in maintaining the exchange of politically and aesthetically important ideas and forms.

Sylvestre Clancier said that in the 1970s, the emphasis of PEN Clubs was mainly on issues relating to freedom of expression. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the formulation of these issues was being reassessed. In the wake of discussions at the 40th Writers' Congress of 2008, in Slovenia, he had drafted the first collective writers' declaration on the environment, which was approved in 2009 by the PEN International Committee for Peace. The declaration pointed to the political implications of the degeneration of the environment: increasing inequity in the distribution of resources, access to education and healthcare, work, leisure, and culture, and in all questions relating to human rights and freedom of conscience. He saw the primary responsibility of the modern writers as 'to be a demanding observer, a witness, an ethical conscience, [...] a defender of the oppressed and underprivileged [...] . All that must be done without any sacrifice of imagination, individual talent, personal predilection for fiction, utopia, creative invention.'

Lisa Appignanesi, quoting from Harold Pinter's celebrated Nobel Prize speech, also declared that writers must be both citizens and dreamers. English PEN was now legally designated as a charity campaigning for freedom of expression. The 'noisy intellectuals' in English PEN spoke out effectively for writers abroad silenced or imprisoned by oppressive governments, from China to Cuba, working with over 100 active PEN Centres around the world. At home, PEN was equally concerned to clean out our own stables, most recently campaigning to reform the libel laws which chill free expression in investigative journalism, science, biography and much else. English PEN had also in recent years campaigned successfully to amend the religious hate speech legislation and to abolish the blasphemy and seditious libel laws, dusty remnants of bygone eras. In December, PEN, in collaboration with Index on Censorship, is publishing a special edition book to mark fifty years of work with persecuted writers around the world.

The closing consensus was that the deliberations of the Congress of 1941 stood as a reminder of the importance of literature to an earlier generation, that of Gide and Storm Jameson, concerned with both writing and the transmission of values, and of the imperative for their heirs to 'continue the adventure'.

This is a summary report, written for the PEN Newsletter. A fuller version of the statements and discussion will be posted later.

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*PEN (Poets, Essayists, Novelists) is the international organisation of writers. For the work of the English Centre of PEN, see the website at <http://www.englishpen.org> (<http://www.englishpen.org>).

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