

**THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST**  
**OF AUSTRALIA**

**REPORT BY MIKE LADD, 2000 CHURCHILL FELLOW**

**To study contemporary poetry in the UK and the production of cultural radio programs.**

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## INTRODUCTION

There were three tiers to my Churchill Fellowship. The first was to study the production of poetry programs on radio, the second to meet and record interviews and readings with contemporary poets in the UK, and the third to take up an invitation from John Kinsella, fellow of Churchill College, to spend time in the College as a visiting scholar. My original application was based on spending 6 weeks in Cambridge and 2 in London, but as Churchill College could in the end only offer me three weeks' accommodation, my Fellowship was modified to 2 weeks in London, 3 weeks in Cambridge and 3 weeks travelling further afield, meeting poets and radio producers in Dublin, Glasgow and Paris.

During my fellowship I visited the BBC, RTE (Ireland) and Radio France, meeting many producers. I attended two major poetry festivals, Poetry International in London and a Colloquium of African and West Indian writers at Cambridge. I also recorded poets in Dublin and Glasgow. During my time at Churchill College, I did intensive research on the historical relationship between poetry and radio, which I will use in the writing of a work entitled "Towards a Radio Poetics". I gratefully acknowledge the support of The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust; Ms Roslyn Cheney, Arts Editor, ABC Radio; and Churchill College, Cambridge.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Fellowship revealed a large amount of information to me in both the poetry and broadcasting fields. As regards broadcasting, one important lesson was in the nature of “**don’t** do it the way we do.” I’m referring to the BBC’s system of separating the commissioning of radio programs from the departments producing them. (Unfortunately, as I write this report, that is exactly what the new MD of the ABC, Jonathon Shier, is engaged in doing.) If we take BBC Radio Drama as an example, the splitting of commissioning and production has made the production process less efficient, less flexible and with longer response times needed. It has greatly increased the stress on individual producers who must now put up innumerable “bids” to overloaded commissioning editors. Many of the bids are not accepted, thus wasting energy and resources which could have been going into program making. Furthermore, the commissioning editor’s personal taste tends to dominate, producing a homogenising effect on the output. The original split of commissioning and production in the BBC and the introduction of a bidding system was driven by the Tory government’s desire to open up cultural radio to the private sector and to increase competition. But the competitive system of bidding has not increased quality of production, precisely because so much energy and organisation goes into the bidding system. All it has succeeding in doing is increasing bureaucracy and stress on internal BBC producers. As profits are low in radio production, there is a very small private sector anyway. The quality has not gone up because the professional BBC producers (and this applies equally to ABC producers) have always prided themselves on the quality of their productions and the contributions from the private sector have been of mixed quality. The commissioning/ production split only makes sense for television where programs are one-offs or individual series which are worked on by production teams formed specially for that purpose. But cultural radio at the ABC is about weekly or daily ongoing programs maintained by small teams of experts in their fields. We should not make the error of going down the BBC road. Secondly, we should maintain creative teams of expert sound engineers and radio producers, not try to force producers to do all aspects of the program, as is the trend I observed at RTE (Ireland). The removal of skilled sound engineers in a misguided cost-cutting exercise creates “battery hen producers” who make the entire program themselves at pc work stations. In most cases quality suffers, as only one mind works on the program. Creative use of sound is less, recording quality is lower, and editing efficiency is less as the producer has too many things to think about at once. Instead of a skilled partnership, we get a less skilled one man or woman band. In summary, to guard the health of the production of cultural radio at the ABC we should keep independent specialist areas within the ABC, with their own adequate budgets. We should not split commissioning and production, and we should maintain sound-engineer/producer partnerships in purpose-built studios.

From what I have seen overseas, we could improve the profile of our cultural radio programs by making them more interactive, with more website publication, greater publicity and better links with schools, universities, libraries and sound archives. We could commission more original work and initiate more critical discourse about the production of cultural radio. All of the above require more staff and resources which in turn means a proper level of funding from the government (currently way below what the BBC gets on a per capita basis) and of course, the will of top ABC management to spend the money in these areas.

Finally, in the field of poetry I would recommend the establishment of a National Poetry Library along the lines of the London Poetry Library. It would be better to establish it in a cultural centre like Southbank in Melbourne, not hidden away in a university or as a section of the National Library in Canberra. I would also recommend that national bodies responsible for poetry such as the Literature Board are more active in reaching out to the young with national programs such as are run by the Poetry Society – commissions, awards, programs to help teachers teach poetry. Another good concept I saw overseas is a series of postage stamps featuring (short!) commissioned poems by contemporary poets. There’s an idea for Australia Post.

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## PROGRAMME

- LONDON 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> Oct Poetry International, Royal Festival Hall (attendance at readings, also met and recorded interviews with poets Volker Braun, Lavinia Greenlaw, Don Patterson and Liz Lochhead)
- Meeting with David Hunter (executive producer, BBC radio drama)
- Meeting with Ruth Borthwick (head of literature and talks, Royal Festival Hall)
- Meeting with Sacha Papagno, The Poetry Library, Royal Festival Hall.
- IRELAND 11<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Oct Meeting with Lorelei Harris (senior producer radio features RTE, Dublin)
- Tour of RTE facilities, Dublin. Meeting with producers and sound engineers.
- Meeting with Theo Dorgan, (head of Poetry Ireland, Dublin Castle)
- Recorded interview and readings with poet Paula Meehan, (Dublin Castle)
- Visit to Yeats museum, Thor Ballylee, county Sligo.
- GLASGOW 19<sup>th</sup> Oct Recorded interview and readings by Edwin Morgan , poet laureate of the city of Glasgow.
- SCOTLAND  
AND  
ENGLAND 20<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> Oct Travel and writing of own poems.
- PARIS 1<sup>st</sup> -4<sup>th</sup> Nov Met and recorded interview with Kaye Mortley, Paris-based free-lance producer of cultural radio programs.
- Tour of Radio France, Paris headquarters. Visit production studios, meetings with producers and sound engineers.

CAMBRIDGE 5<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Nov Visiting scholar, Churchill College.  
 Research topic, “Towards A Radio Poetics: the relationship between poetry and radio”.  
 Study in University Library, Cambridge.

Meeting with Tim Cribb, Head of English, Churchill College.

Meeting with Dr Pramod K Nayar, visiting fellow Churchill College, expert in contemporary Indian poetry.

Attendance at “The Power of the Word”, Colloquium of African and West Indian writers, Churchill College.

Recorded readings and interviews with Niyi Osundare, Lorna Goodison, Femi Osofisan, Veronique Tadjo, Wole Soyinka, and George Steiner.

LONDON 22<sup>nd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> Nov Broadcasting House. Gave seminar for BBC producers on the ABC’s production of poetry on radio.

Visit to ABC London.

Meeting with Julian May, co-ordinating producer of poetry on BBC radio.

Meeting with Janet Whitaker, drama producer BBC radio, and tour of BBC production studios.

Reading and talk about my own poetry at Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, Kings College.

Meeting with Maura Dooley, programmer of Poetry International and member of The Poetry Society and the Arvon Foundation.

Visit to British Library and National Sound Archive.

Meeting with Toby Oakes, curator of drama and literature, National Sound Archive.

## MAIN BODY

This Churchill Fellowship was very valuable to me, personally and professionally as a poet and as a broadcaster. Through attending festivals, interviewing poets and meeting festival organisers, librarians and broadcasters, I gained a much better working knowledge of the contemporary poetry scene in the UK and Ireland, as well as contacts in Indian, African and Caribbean poetry. My time at Churchill College gave me a chance to get a lot of writing and thinking done, and gave me more insight into my own work.

The trip began with a rush of excitement at the London International Poetry Festival, where more than 50 poets from all over the world were gathered in and around Royal Festival Hall at the Southbank Centre. Apart from the sheer pleasure of hearing so many powerful and unique voices reading their own poetry, I was impressed with the comprehensiveness of the festival and its attempts to attract young people to poetry. Not only were there children's events with famous poets Adrian Mitchell and Brian Patten on the main program, but numerous side events were set up. These included the commissioning of 12 short films made by poets and children throughout the UK, a poetry map of the world created by schoolchildren, and an interactive poetry lounge with audiovisual displays for all ages. Providing something for children on the main program is worth considering for the next Adelaide Writers' Week. Poetry needs future readers and writers. In another sign of inclusiveness, the festival distributed "Jumping Over Trees" a free poetry anthology for adults with low literacy skills. As well as workshops and individual readings, there were group readings – for example, 9 leading poets (writing in different dialects of English, from Cornish to Jamaican Creole) did their own translations of cantos from Dante's Inferno. At a session called "Presiding Spirits" poets read the work of poets whom they considered to be their mentors or guiding lights. This was a fascinating spread of poetry going back as far as Chaucer. As part of the festival, a set of postcards with poems by each of these presiding spirits was distributed.



During Poetry International, I visited The Poetry Library which is housed on Level 5 of the Royal Festival Hall. The library collects all poetry written in English, or translated into English. As well as books and magazines, it has an impressive audio visual collection. I have made arrangements for our program PoeticA to access the audio holdings. We can look up the catalogue via the internet, then order the tape through the interlibrary loan system. There is no fee for this service. If we decide to broadcast the audio, we only then need to contact the copyright owner. This will be a significant new resource for us, as the audio collection features poets from all over the world reading their own work. The Poetry Library is a public lending facility and has over 20,000 borrowers in the UK. It has a wonderful children's section and offers a "quotation finding service" which also operates on the internet at [www.poetrylibrary.org.uk](http://www.poetrylibrary.org.uk)

London also revealed to me the workings of the Poetry Society, which promotes poets and poetry in a wide variety of ways. It publishes Poetry Review and Poetry News, runs the National Poetry Competition and the Simon Elvin Young Poet of the Year Awards for writers between the ages of 11 and 18. It arranges Poets in Schools and also Poetry Class, a national program which helps teachers to teach poetry. It also runs the Poetry Café in central London where readings are held and the public can browse through poetry books while they sip a cup of coffee. Poetry on the Underground is alive and well, with a series of classic poems such as Shakespeare's "Fear no more the heat of the sun" posted in the carriages, as well as a series of Young Poets on the Underground. The Royal Mail has commissioned 12 contemporary British poets to write (obviously short) poems to go on a series of stamps. I will approach Australia Post with a similar idea. British National Poetry Day is also alive and well. Although the ABC began Australia's National Poetry Day with good intentions, and the public responded enthusiastically, the departure of senior television management who sponsored National Poetry Day has seen the idea languish. It is something which was under-resourced within the resource-strapped ABC, and while we can help, I believe the cause of National Poetry Day needs to be taken up by organisations such as the Australia Council. It seems to me that Australia does a lot for poetry on a state level but not enough on a national scale – where for example is our equivalent of a Young Poet of the Year award? Overall I was impressed by the variety of ways UK poetry is reaching out to the public and by the conscious effort to include young people.

After Poetry International, I had some sessions in at the BBC's headquarters at Broadcasting House with David Hunter, an executive producer of radio drama. I have already mentioned in my summary lessons we can learn from the BBC experience of splitting commissioning and production in radio. The BBC still has approximately 80 staff in radio drama. The staff are based in London, Birmingham and Manchester. BBC Scotland and Wales also produce their own programming. The output is 350 hours per year of radio drama – 10 per cent of this comes from the private sector. The average total cost of each hour of radio drama is approximately 20,000 pounds. Because of the price of hiring their own studios within the BBC's "total costing" system, many in-house producers work in outside commercial studios or on location. Post-production is also kept to a minimum because of cost, and this shows itself in a less complex audio style. The BBC's London studios work on the same Pro Tools digital editing systems we have in the ABC in Adelaide, and their studios are of no more sophistication than our own, in some cases we have newer and better equipment. Sadly, the BBC's once famous Radiophonic Workshop no longer exists.

On my return visit to London, I spent more time at the BBC with Julian May, co-ordinating producer of poetry programs on BBC radio. He organised a seminar where I spoke and played examples of our poetry productions to a group of 7 young producers and the head of their nightly arts program "Night Waves". The group was impressed with what they heard; comments included liking the sense of space and room to move and play with radio, and an excitement about our live and location recordings – the idea that poetry comes from life, rather than just texts read in a studio. In general, the BBC prefers poetry programs which place more emphasis on information about poetry, whereas our style is more open and performative. When I asked about exchange of poetry programs, Julian explained that with their commissioning system any swap would have to go in as a "bid" to a commissioning editor, which is more work for Julian and no guarantee that the swap would go ahead. This is another example of the lack of flexibility and responsiveness of their system. Never the less, Julian will receive our quarterly program guide and we will maintain a dialogue about getting Australian poetry on the BBC as well as PoeticA broadcasting the occasional BBC production. I have brought back two such productions, "Joseph Brodsky etc etc" and "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", which I hope to negotiate broadcast rights for.

Poetry on BBC radio tends to exist in seasons, or short inserts into magazine style programs. At 4.30 pm on Sundays, Radio 4 alternates “Poetry Please” (a series of half hour programs with poems chosen by listeners or guest poets) with a feature program called “Adventures in Poetry”. “Between the Lines” is a documentary series of poetry programs on stereo Radio 3. More experimental poetry programs are sometimes run in “The Wire” at 9.45 pm on Saturdays on Radio 3. Although we wouldn’t do it regularly, I think we could make our program a little more interactive by adding a request element, or by selecting an interesting and contrasting group of people to choose their favourite poems. The BBC commission much more original poetry than we do. Their budget is much bigger. They pay 20 pounds per half minute for commissioned poetry which would mean an entirely commissioned PoeticA would cost approximately \$4,000 in script fees – five times its current standard budget. However, where funds allow we could try more commissions. Last year, Julian May commissioned a “Book of the Hours”, asking different poets to write short works about different times of the day; dawn, dusk, noon etc. The poems were then broadcast at those times on National Poetry Day. For this years’ National Poetry Day, Julian commissioned 14 different poets across the world (including our own Les Murray) to write a sonnet. These 14 sonnets were then broadcast on the day to form one giant world sonnet.



Paula Meehan

After the first, intense week in London, I hired a car and drove with my family to Holyhead, and caught a ferry across the Irish Sea to Dublin. I recorded readings and an interview with Paula Meehan, whose poetry is full of contemporary Dublin as well as the Dublin of her childhood. She also writes about the place of the female in Irish mythology and society. I also met Theo Dorgan who is the director of Poetry Ireland which functions much like our own Writers’ Centres, except that it is exclusively devoted to promoting poetry. Poetry Ireland is located in the top of Bermingham Tower at Dublin Castle, in a magnificent circular room with massive old ceiling beams. It has a view over the whole city. Theo told me with a gleam in his eye that it was from this room that Michael Collins ordered the assassination of British spies. Today the room has a more benevolent presence watching over it, an avuncular portrait of Seamus Heaney. Poetry Ireland runs workshops, competitions, readings, poets in schools, and publishes “Poetry Ireland Review” amongst other activities. Down below the tower, Theo Dorgan showed me a sculpture based on the Heaney poem “Elegy” which tells the story of soldiers who put barley seed in their pockets for good luck. Where they were shot down, and rotted back to the earth, barley sprang up. Theo also tells me he hosted a regular Saturday night magazine-style poetry program on Irish radio (RTE ). It was on at 7pm, ran for 25 minutes and included interviews, readings and reviews. This year, the management of RTE dropped the program with no explanation, even though Theo had 120,000 listeners. It shows you that even a big audience is no protection against the philistines. Now RTE has no poetry program, only irregular five minute “spots” within an arts program. It’s ridiculous that a nation with as many good poets as Ireland should have no poetry program on its national radio. This bleak picture was further confirmed by my visits to RTE where cost cutting was squeezing the production of cultural radio programs into the “battery hen” mode I have already discussed.

My trip revealed to me just how special a station like the ABC's Radio National is, where a diversity of voices can be heard on just about any subject. Radio 4 in the UK was the closest equivalent I could find, but Radio 4 seemed to me more homogenised and stodgy with fewer programs from "the edge". It disturbs me to return home to see Radio National attacked in the Sydney Morning Herald as being "elitist" because its audience share is small and it is "Intellectual". Actually, it reaches 650,000 Australians each week – not a small number and certainly not all of whom would consider themselves intellectuals. Radio National is free to be enjoyed by anyone with an inquiring mind. It seems that "intellect" is still a dirty word in the minds of some journalists in this country. But you have to ask the question, why? In whose interest is it that anyone be less intelligent?



After Ireland, we took another ferry back to Scotland and drove to Glasgow. There I met a personal hero of mine, Edwin Morgan, the poet laureate of that fair city. This was a highlight of the trip – I have admired Morgan's work for a long time, his keen eye, warm sense of humour, his humanism and his crusade against censorship and dogma. He is a great technical experimenter, writing in many modes from concrete and sound poetry to traditional sonnets. Now in his eighties, his voice is still strong and his wit as sharp as ever. The interview and readings I recorded with him will be broadcast on PoeticA on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> February, 2001 on Radio National. After Glasgow, I mixed a few days' holidays in the highlands with some time for my own writing. I produced about 20 new poems on the trip – and realised a few of my strengths and many of my weaknesses in comparison to poetry I had heard read by the poets I met during my fellowship. This was of great value to me, a challenge to my own standards and understanding of the craft.

I next visited Paris where I toured Radio France's headquarters and recorded an interview with Kaye Mortley, a freelance producer of very poetic radio. Her ideas on her own work will form an important part of my essay "Towards a Radio Poetics". Cultural and literary radio programs are given their own station in France – France Culture. Discussion type programs seem to dominate, and the more experimental works of the Atelier d'Creation Radiophonique are confined to later time slots. The main operating system in the studios is again Pro-Tools.

After Paris my family returned home and I headed to Cambridge to take up my position as "Visiting Scholar". Cambridge is a highly ritualised sort of place, full of traditions and pecking orders, and ways of getting things done which are known by insiders but not shared with everyone. At first I felt I had gone back to boarding school. I had my room, my research (the relationship between radio and poetry) and my daily routine of dining in hall with the students. It was a fairly monastic existence. My small triumph in the first week was gaining access to the UL, the great University Library which loomed at me out of the mist like a giant English telephone box. It held all the rare books I needed and I was determined to get in. I subsequently discovered the reason the library looks like a telephone box was that it was designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the same man who was the architect of those wonderful red creations. Later, when I had found my way around, and borrowed a bicycle (essential in Cambridge) there were invitations to High Table (Latin prayers, French wine and much better food) readings, lunches at which PHD students would get up and give an outline of their theses, and above all, stimulating conversations.

This is also what Cambridge is, a network of minds, all pursuing their degrees or research. The city is a maze of 31 different colleges with hundreds of thinkers – at Churchill I met George Steiner, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, Nigerian poets and playwrights Niyi Osundare and Femi Osofisan, Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison, and Veronique Tadjo, a poet from Cote d’Ivoire. I also met Dr Pramod K Nayar, an expert in contemporary Indian poetry. In my last week at the College, I attended the Millennium Colloquium of Francophone and Anglophone Writers from West Africa and the Caribbean. This was a really exciting series of dialogues and presentations, a number of which I recorded for ABC radio.

After Cambridge I returned to London for the final week of my fellowship. As well as the visits to the BBC and the seminar on PoeticA I have already described, I did a reading and a talk about my own poetry at the Menzies Centre, Kings College. It was very instructive to write a talk about your own poetry and poetics. It helps you to realise what you have been about and where you are going. What was supposed to be a 45 minute session, turned into a 2 hour conversation around the table with lecturers, PHD candidates, poets and Julian May from the BBC. The question of “what makes your poetry Australian” is always difficult. Is there a recognisably Australian style in poetry as distinct from contemporary European or American styles? In general, I don’t think so. Speaking for myself, what makes my poetry Australian – or South Australian, is the use of specific place names, animals, plants, the use of local slang and idiom. Stylistically I could only cite some rare borrowings of Aboriginal rhythms, and perhaps (as was pointed out to me by a reader) a certain sparseness and dryness which is like the place itself.

In my final days in London, I had a meeting with Maura Dooley who has been the programmer for Poetry International for six years. Maura is also involved with The Poetry Society and the Arvon Foundation. The latter was established by Ted Hughes to give new writers expert tuition at a Yorkshire retreat. Lastly, I visited the British Library and the National Sound Archive where I spoke to the curator of drama and literature, Toby Oakes. (Now that’s what I call an English name.) He told me that it is a constitutional right of the British public to audition on demand any program broadcast by the BBC, and to this end the National Sound Library maintains a giant electronic archive of all BBC programs. I would like to see something like this set up with our own National Sound and Film Archive in Canberra. Toby collects literature-based sound from outside the UK and is interested to receive our program guide for possible source material. The British National Sound Archive is massive – a quick search on the name Samuel Beckett revealed 114 recordings ranging from full length plays to brief items of Beckett reading his own poems or talking to his actors on stage. We can access the catalogue on line at [www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive](http://www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive). However it is expensive to retrieve audio from the Archive as there are handling and dubbing fees, and for PoeticA we would be better off starting with the Poetry Library.

## DISSEMINATION

I plan to disseminate the information gained through this Fellowship in a number of ways. Firstly, at least seven full length radio programs will be developed from recordings I have made personally and other recordings I discovered along the way. These are programs on the Irish poet Paula Meehan; the poet laureate of Glasgow, Edwin Morgan; a feature on The Colloquium of African and Caribbean Writers at Churchill College, and already existing BBC features on the poems of Wallace Stevens, and the Nobel Prize winning poet Joseph Brodsky. All of these programs will be broadcast on PoeticA on Radio National. Other recordings I have made with Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, and the literary critic and cultural theorist George Steiner, will be offered to Lingua Franca and Book Talk, also on Radio National.

Secondly, I will be writing two articles on aspects of my Fellowship. The first, about my time at Churchill College, will be published in the South Australian Writers' Centre magazine, "Southern Write" early in 2001. The second, an analysis of the London International Poetry Festival, will be published in the literary journal "Sidewalk".

Thirdly, I will be discussing the information gained through this Fellowship with my colleagues in ABC Radio Arts, and also giving copies of this report to the Arts Editor for ABC Radio, Ms Roslyn Cheney, Richard Buckham, Executive Producer, ABC Radio Drama, Barbara McFayden, Director of the South Australian Writers' Centre, and Anne Marie Adams, Secretary of the Poets' Union.

Fourthly, I will continue to research "Towards a Radio Poetics – a study of the relationship between poetry and radio". What began as an essay is now developing into a larger work, due to fruitful research in Cambridge and interviews conducted elsewhere on the trip. Dr Andrew Crisell, Professor of Broadcasting Studies at Sunderland University has asked me to write an essay based on my research. The essay will be included in a book entitled "More Than A Music Box; Radio in a Multimedia World" to be published by Berghahn Press, New York.

Finally, after meeting and discussing poetry with so many fine poets and thinkers, I have gained many new insights into the poetic craft. I now understand aspects of poetry which I had not seen clearly before, and I have been challenged to take my own work onto another level. This new understanding I hope to pass on in the many readings and workshops I give.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **In terms of literary/cultural radio programs made within the ABC in general, I recommend;**

- Not to split production and commissioning.
- Not to break up sound engineer - producer partnerships.
- To keep independent specialist areas with their own budgets.
- Better links between ABC literary cultural programs and National Sound Archive, Canberra. eg. automatic digital recordings of all programs accessible to the public for auditioning only. I will discuss this with Arts Editor, Roz Cheney.
- More critical discourse about the production of cultural radio. The writing and publication of "Towards a Radio Poetics" will be a contributory step for me to take myself.

### **In terms of PoeticA I recommend;**

- Genuine exchange with the BBC. Again I will discuss this with my Arts Editor and I will exchange information regularly with the BBC about our programs. Some useful bridges have already been built.
- More commissioning of poetry and more interactivity in poetry programs. This is largely budget dependent but much can be done with creative thinking as well.
- More publication on our website of poems. Again this is budget dependent.

### **In terms of poetry in general I recommend;**

- Establishment of a National Poetry Library.
- More co-ordinated National Poetry Day such as is done by UK Poetry Society.
- Commissioning of a series of short poems by contemporary Australian poets for our postage stamps.
- The inclusion of children's events in poetry at the Adelaide Writers' Week.

I will speak to the Poets' Union, The Australia Council, Australia Post, and the Adelaide Writers' Week committee about these ideas.