James Liddy: The Poet's Soul Purified

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English at the State College at Albany and Russell Sage and taught parliamentary procedure at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations. He was a member of the postwar Citizens Committee in 1946-47, chairman of Freedom Forum and the Citizens Committee for Schenectady Public Schools; and a trustee of Schenectady County Public Library. After his retirement from Union College he offered a lecture series at the Academy for Life-Long Learning on Chaucer and Shakespeare.

The history of religious freedom and separation of church and state in America would remain an abiding enthusiasm, as did his engagement with politics. Indeed, it is impossible to separate his academic from his political pursuits. In 1948 he ran for Congress on the Democratic Party ticket, but was unsuccessful, carefully describing himself as a “sacrificial lamb in a hopeless contest”; he ran again in 1956 for the state senate, and 1959 for the state assembly, defeated both times. Undaunted, he continued his adventures in politics by working in Mayor Samuel Stratton’s “kitchen cabinet” as advisor on housing and redevelopment. These were exciting times—one night he assisted Stratton in a stakeout to bust a gambling ring. Harriet was relieved the following morning that the thump on the porch was the Sunday paper, not her husband. When Stratton moved to Congress, Bill served on his friend’s staff part-time in Schenectady and Washington. In 1956 he was a member of the Schenectady County Board of Supervisors, and from 1961-68 of the New York State Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights, serving as co-chair of a committee to investigate discrimination in the state university system. Later he became a political advisor to Brian Stratton, mayor of Schenectady like his father before him. In 1967 Union College presented him with the Faculty Meritorious Service Award. In 2007 Mayor Stratton Junior presented Bill and Harriet with Patroon Awards, the highest bestowed by the city, given to those who, over the years, have contributed to the community in an unselfish way, beyond the routine call of duty. Again academia and politics were linked, for his old friend Jeanne Robert Foster had been awarded a Patroon in 1961.

For close to sixty years Bill and Harriet, who were married in Barrington, Nova Scotia, in 1939, maintained a summer home in that province’s Shag Harbour, frequently joined by their family—daughters Deborah and Susan, son Christopher, six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren—and close friends. After his retirement they spent their winters in Pompano Beach, Florida, where Bill remained active in the Democratic Club, while maintaining close ties with his alma mater and a closer eye on Union College and Schenectady. But he never lost touch with colleagues around the world, eagerly following the ever-widening world of Yeats scholarship. Not always satisfied with what he read, he once sent me a 27-page commentary marked “Not for Publication” but adding, “If you can use any portion of this without mentioning the author’s name or book (though you might allude to it) it’s OK by me.” I didn’t have the nerve.

In early September 2001 in the Adirondacks, an international conference was held to celebrate the life of John Butler Yeats. Scholars, musicians and poets gathered in Chestertown, New York, called together by Declan Foley of Australia, to spend a weekend discussing JBY and his circle of friends and family. The symposium concluded, appropriately, at JBY’s gravesite, with a brief ecumenical service led by three representatives from the Adirondack churches. Michael Yeats sent greetings, repeating what we all felt: “Were it not for William M. Murphy and his book, this gathering at Chestertown would not be taking place.” There have since been two more conferences in Chestertown, neither of which Bill was able to attend, but quite a few of us dropped by Schenectady on the way home, to be warmly welcomed and keenly interrogated.

If only he had lived to the American election day. But he died as he wished, discussing politics, baseball and literature with visitors until the last. That night he said to his son, “I’m all cleaned up and comfortable and have no pain; now’s the time to go.” In celebrating the remarkably energetic and gregarious gentleman scholar William Michael Murphy, John Quinn’s words on JBY seem especially appropriate: “He delighted in his friends and in his art and in the art of others. He had great pride always in his children.... He was a good and loyal friend and had the instinct of kindness.”

The family is planning a memorial service for Saturday, May 30 at 3 pm at the Unitarian Church in Schenectady, which Bill and Harriet have attended for over fifty years. All are welcome.

James Liddy

THE POET’S SOUL PURIFIED

BY TYLER FARRELL

When I grow up (if I ever have to) I want to be just like James Liddy (1934-2008). I want to emulate him, profess his wisdom, write and work for the image of the poet while remaining young in spirit and at heart. I want to promote James and in the words of St. Teresa of Avila, “I wish that I could persuade everyone to venerate this glorious saint, for I have great experience of the blessings that he obtains from God.” My adoration of James Liddy even seemed to blossom at the moment I learned of his peaceful death, the morning after Election Day 2008 ended in hopeful triumph.

The reader of a poet is always a profound and triumphant occurrence. Personally, it has made me grateful and proud of our time together. Therefore, I knew I had to celebrate in classic Liddy style with drinks, conversation and reminiscence. That night (after many a pint) I exclaimed, “Let us rejoice! Our beloved love poet, James Liddy, has been born into life everlasting. Let us give thanks and be glad.” It was no small way of encouraging his fans to proclaim Liddy’s eternal Spring, his lessons foretold, his placement as our hero, friend, muse and mentor. That night was filled with stories of Liddy’s proclamation of love and poetry, his immortal instructions from Joyce and Yeats, his efforts to encourage youthful themes and formulaic styles, words from a true self. With Liddy’s example many followers stretched the boundaries of what poetry was or could be.

Liddy’s words and actions came from within. He was a work of art in himself and I saw it revealed when he held readings on Valentine’s Day or took a group of students to the gravesite of Lorine Niedecker, or when he sat at Jacque’s in Milwaukee surrounded by young, insuffusive poets. Once, after a reading, he received a standing ovation and immediately stopped the audience to announce, “If you stop we can get to the bar sooner.” It would be one of many occasions for which I am eternally grateful. I love to talk to students from Milwaukee.” Eamonn looked at me and said, “If only he had lived to the American election day. But he died as he wished, discussing politics, baseball and literature with visitors until the last. That night he said to his son, “I’m all cleaned up and comfortable and have no pain; now’s the time to go.” In celebrating the remarkably energetic and gregarious gentleman scholar William Michael Murphy, John Quinn’s words on JBY seem especially appropriate: “He delighted in his friends and in his art and in the art of others. He had great pride always in his children.... He was a good and loyal friend and had the instinct of kindness.”

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tion to lunch to discuss some recent poems. We went to a seafood restaurant and he said, "Fish is brain food" as our plates arrived, his hand securing a napkin under his collar as he ate like a dignified, well educated and intense artist.

His optimism was unparalleled and his amount of energy was immeasurable. After lunch we went back to his apartment on Park Place and sat in the sun on his back porch drinking a Pimm's cup and talking about poetry, publishing, Graduate school, and gossip. When I left I remember feeling a sense of accomplishment and a real admiration for my teacher. I think that day made me a better writer, although I probably didn't know it.

Excerpts from my writer James were always an educational adventure as well: bars, restaurants, the dry cleaner, bookstores, his dentist. I especially enjoyed conferences and readings. He was a showman, an idol almost. The few members of his entourage were always riveted watching him read, speak, elucidate, and captivate in different arenas. I relished those times to listen and laugh, ask questions, jot down ideas for poems or writers to investigate. I thought it was similar to the education that Liddy himself formed in his own life, from all the many writers he knew. But I knew it was only a fraction of that. Nevertheless, I looked up to James as a father, like he might have seen Kavanagh or even Joyce. I remember a line from Liddy's first Dolmen Press publication, *Essay, My Kingdom for a Drink.* "So you, James Joyce..." and this is how we looked at him, as our father, caring for us unmarried virgins who might die without kissing life." Liddy changed the way I saw writing and life, he helped me not to die a literary virgin and I felt blessed.

James was an intricate man, but his love for his friends seemed to always shine through. We looked up to him and looked for him to give us the wisdom that Liddy and then forgot about it, enjoyed a relationship that was mutual and honorable. Many of his comrades were admirers who couldn't and probably never wanted to fit in elsewhere. But James made us feel accepted. He put us together with others of our kind, our odd species with similar loves. He created a world and preached from within. We almost at times as if he sent from Dublin with a unique intensity, a kind of prophetic grace for a new generation of writers who were received with outstretched arms welcoming many faiths.

James always lived as a writer should. He embraced the moment then looked ahead. At a reading in Illinois we stayed at a boarding house near train tracks. After breakfast we sat outside as a train loudly passed by. James exclaimed, "Oh, let's hop it. I want to become a young hobo with Jack Kerouac again." He talked about the Mississippi River in a similar way, of being on a raft headed for the gulf. It was his romantic side illuminated. He entertained and acted. He made most situations a significant joy and always loved wherever he was at any given time.

Liddy is unlike most new writers. He was poet who believed in real morality, a man filled with truth and honesty. He took on his own life choices and desires, the ultimate perception of how a poet lives. He professed once in a bar "can't the world ever be serious?" as he laughed loudly in the face of na"f, unformed attitudes, at people who judge like "fatherpolities and motherchurch [from] My sea." Because of Liddy I also attempt to embrace life, to ponder issues, to create and continue to better my writing. I have taken from him the real meaning of love and trust that comes between a student and his mentor and tangible lessons about knowledge and its genesis.

Finally, the image I will remember most is James standing at a bus-stop in Milwaukee, his hands behind his back and a smile on his face. In those carefree days, when I often picked up James, I imagined he must have been deep and pondering the meaning of life and the question of existence. We looked up to him and thought, possibly writing a poem with lines tucked away to be used when his typewriter beckoned at 2 a.m. after a night at the bar with friends. Now he must be wandering the alleys of Catholic heaven looking for his idols, countless writers, popes, bishops and artists. He must be wearing his Oscar Wilde T-Shirt and having a conversation with Baudelaire and Jack Spicer over a pint. Therefore, I urge everyone who knew James (or knew of him) to go forth and be blessed, to enter a bar and raise a glass to the poet, or have "one more for the road." God knows I owe James more than a drink, but it can be a simple start to a constant devotion, our admiration of his image and words, and an everlasting toast to Liddy's faithfully poetic and generous soul. —Madison, Wisconsin

Three Irish Plays

MICHEÁL Ó CONGAHLE

Jude

BREANDÁN Ó HEAGHRA

Gaeltgeoire Deireanach Carna

CAITRÍONA Ó CHONAOLA

Incubus

Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2007, €12.00

Reviewed by

THOMAS BIDE

SOME INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES have dark secrets that continue the pain and suffering years later and into the next generation. Jude, Gaeltgeoire Deireanach Carna, and Incubus, three Irish-language plays recently published, touch on this theme. The works each honors students in the Gradam Cúimhneacháin Bháitéir Uí Mhaicín.

Michael Ó Conghaile provides us with the first piece entitled Jude, the script of which composes more than half of the book. This drama, as well as recognition of O'Conghaile's *Go fo tha Goethe Rocho* in *Chomt* and his title of "special distinction" in the Gradam Cúimhneacháin Bháitéir Uí Mhaicín. Jude was first presented in the Taibhdhearc on March 9, 2007. Directed by Seán Ó Tápirgach (who was most recently seen in his role as Jackie in the bilingual film *Kings*, Ireland's foreign language film for the Oscars in 2008). Jude was played by a cast of six actors many of whom would be familiar to those watching weekly drama on www.tg4.tv, Ann Marie Horan, Peadar Cox, Margaret Horan, Tara Breathnach, Dónall Ó Héalail, and Tomas Mac Con Iomaire (Former Head of RTE Raidió na Gaeltachta).

Jude, the focus of this work, is a strong and sensitive woman who has devoted many years to her successful career. Yet there appears to be a secret in the past that troubles the family. This is a thought-provoking script that one may find difficult to put down. As a reader, you see yourself constantly questioning your judgment of the characters. In the end, one is left with many questions about values and culture. Ó Conghaile is a master at letting the story unravel and engulf the reader. His use of the Irish language is spoken locally is done skillfully so that speakers of all dialects can follow the story and yet be left with a sense that this is rooted in a community we all know.

Michael Ó Conghaile is an notable author and publisher who brings the traditional Ireland with the modern Ireland. Born and raised on Inis Trehar, an island in Cill Chiarán, Growing up in a small Irish island with limited Irish language, highly literate family, it is no surprise that his later studies in Galway City would prove successful, being awarded BA and MA in Irish language and history. His publications and success in developing what is now the largest private Irish language publishing house in Ireland, Cló Iar-Chonnacht (www.cic.ie), attest to the creativity and energy of this artist.

The second work of this volume is Breandán Ó hEaghrá's Gaeltgeoire Deireanach Carna, (last Irish speaker of Carna). This and the third drama of this book were both honored with an award of recognition through the Gradam Cúimhneacháin Bháitéir Uí Mhaicín. Gaeltgeoire Deireanach Carna was first presented in the Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe on May 12, 2005. Directed by Darach Ó DubhÈanaigh and produced by Darach Mac Con Iomaire (both of whom soon after worked on the nationally acclaimed Cré na Cille), the actors included Diarmuid de Paolí (Kings/Ros na Rín), Peadar O Tresasaigh (Kings/CrÉ na Cille), Morgan Cooke, and Micheál Mac Donncha.

Gaeltgeoire Deireanach Carna exposes us to painful revelations using at times dark humor. While this work also uncovers secrets at home, it explicitly touches on the sensitive issue of language revival and language attrition. (The village of Carna in Connemara is one of the strongest Irish-speaking areas at present, which makes the setting even more intriguing.) Those of us who are frequent New York Times readers may recall an article by Jack Hitt in 2004 which discussed the situations of many last speakers of endangered languages. We find this comes to life in Ó Héaghrá's work. The script which has sections in Irish and sections in English, seems to always shine through. We looked up to him and thought, possibly writing a poem with lines tucked away to be used when his typewriter beckoned at 2 a.m. after a night at the bar with friends. Now he must be wandering the alleys of Catholic heaven looking for his idols, countless writers, popes, bishops and artists. He must be wearing his Oscar Wilde T-Shirt and having a conversation with Baudelaire and Jack Spicer over a pint. Therefore, I urge everyone who knew James (or knew of him) to go forth and be blessed, to enter a bar and raise a glass to the poet, or have "one more for the road." God knows I owe James more than a drink, but it can be a simple start to a constant devotion, our admiration of his image and words, and an everlasting toast to Liddy's faithfully poetic and generous soul.

CAITRÍONA Ó CHONAOLA hails from Carna in Connemara. She completed studies in the Irish language and teaching at the National University of Ireland, Galway, in the first part of this decade. She teaches the Irish language in An Cheathrú Rua (Connemara) with Acdamh na hOllscoil Íollachta Gaeltge, the Irish language academy of the National University of Ireland, Galway.

For advanced Irish language learners, the dramas are quite approachable. The context and characters are well defined enabling them to focus on the message of each play. For proficient Irish language readers, the volume as a whole is thought-provoking while entertaining. After spending a few hours with this volume, readers will unquestionably want to include a visit to An Taibhdhearc on Middle Street in Galway City to their next travel itinerary. Visit www.antainbhdearc.com before leaving to see what is scheduled and to purchase tickets.

—Lehman College, CUNY
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