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## Review of *The Doctor's House: An Autobiography*, by James Liddy

Tyler Farrell

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James Liddy | *The Doctor's House: An Autobiography* | Cliffs of Moher: Salmon | 2004  
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In her 1951 article "Autobiography As An Art" Elizabeth Bowen writes, "The 'I' in the narrative stands for something more than consistent viewpoint or continuity; it provides the visionary element, in whose light all things told appear momentous and fresh—though they may not be new, though they may have happened before."<sup>1</sup> In James Liddy's new memoir, *The Doctor's House*, the Irish poet recounts many aspects of his life with a similar kind of visionary element. The small tales and vignettes contained therein tell us of Liddy's Irish upbringing, his Dublin education, his American journeys and his often poetic lifestyle in vivid detail, a vision of dialogue in description. There is a strong voice in this memoir and one that shows the reader a sense of fun and development, an intellect that spills onto the page with an artistic diction drowned with people and places, pubs and writers, reflections and recordings.

Honest reflection is both prominent as well as important to our understanding of Liddy's life. *The Doctor's House* suggests and examines while also conversing like language from a human and humorous perspective. Each tale invests in love, life, wit, and personal development. The scenes recover a compassionate past, an interest in broad perspective and delight suitable for even the novice historical reader. Liddy's style is occasional, a narrator who moves from a child to an adult, an exploration into the complex, yet entertaining Irish/American soul. *The Doctor's House* is a poetic autobiography, (somewhat unconventional) but filled with upbringing, formation, and humanizing description that fulfills a unique experience.

Liddy's first autobiographical installment allows entrance into the historical placement among the new generation of Irish writers. We come to see him as a new poet of gathering and gossip, a poet influenced by previous generations, and a poet who wanted his own time and voice. The writer expresses a fondness for his subjects that are comic and spontaneous, never savage. Liddy's sense of style and tone is not unlike the Irish autobiographies before him. (e.g. Elizabeth Bowen, Austin Clarke and George Moore). However, Liddy uses description that adds more gaiety, light discussion, reverie, delight, and gossip. We see fractured tales of bar stools, literary figures and a company that has had a keen impact on the author.

The biggest questions that seem to surround the subject of autobiography have to deal with the notion of art and the notion of truth. As Janet Varner Gunn states, we must strive to see "autobiography as literary and not just (an) historical activity."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Bowen questions, "Is it that the scales are tipping in favor of truth as against fiction, of the actual against the invented?"<sup>3</sup> With Liddy's memoir we see both questions addressed. The artistic and real sides of *The Doctor's House* are superb, telling of Liddy's childhood home in Coolgreany Co. Wexford in a youthful and innocent vigor. There are visions of the surrounding gardens, flowers, white stones, trees and a tennis court. It seems rather magical, somewhat opulent, in a simple light colored by the author's hand. There are blissful, small tales of his mother in the kitchen, (a New York born socialite prone to stories and drink) his father at a world's fair, (a Dispensary doctor filled with constant work and opinion). There are echoes of religion, childhood and upbringing. These are followed with stories and thoughts of friends, relatives, neighbors. It reads as a bygone era of artistic gatherings placed in a historical context. Liddy is exalted by history, art and religion, an inquisitive mind that leads to literary Dublin, America and beyond.

In *The Doctor's House* the names and stories of the past come alive in four parts. Liddy shares family history and a sense of community, decision, influence and identity. The attitudes and actions of the poet are told without regret, a self-making narrative unapologetic for its seeking and wandering. We see Irish festivals, travels to Spain, readings, adventures and American connections to Ireland. Liddy looks fondly on his links to Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh, John Jordan, Michael Hartnett, Liam Miller and Richard Riordain. He fills the reader with a sense of adventure in mid-century Dublin, 1960's San Francisco, New Orleans and its French Quarter and finally the surprisingly poetic Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The book is revealing and generous to its subjects. Its stories have a flow and lucidity that send the reader into an enthralling world described with a distinctly charming wit and a poetic and proud tone.

Liddy's brief story about the making of *The Dolmen Miscellany* reminds us of his evocative and confident language, a revealing diction not unlike that of his poetry. Liddy's

contribution to that publication includes a line that identifies his writing and specifically the often poetic art of memoir. The poet writes that he was "Holding my hands in prayer over a typewriter."<sup>4</sup> The meaning becomes visions from middle youth and Liddy emerges with a poignant style and a new type of profound reflection. The expressive and fluid manner of the memoir is uniquely literary, the perspective is youthful, the voice is lucid and joyous.

James Liddy views the memoir as a literary and historical undertaking with tell all confessions and a life of the self. The scatterings of society, philosophy and psychology are a desire to relay time and recollection through the personal, and a chance to speak of survival instead of analysis. The most enthralling and addicting parts of the memoir are tales of New Orleans, San Francisco and Milwaukee, possibly because the author is closer to them in life. In these sections, Liddy is impressed and curious. His writing is fast paced and highly descriptive, his words are respectful. Again Elizabeth Bowen writes, "Autobiography as we know it now is artists' work; though pegged to one man's story it has as its subject Life, as by one man that has found to be."<sup>5</sup> Liddy sees time and art as the tale even as we are left standing on a street corner in Milwaukee wanting more history, more travels, more self, more vision. Liddy is alive in *The Doctor's House*. His efforts of the self are what has been seen and heard.

## NOTES

1. Bowen, Elizabeth. "Autobiography As an Art." *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 17 (March 1951): 9.
2. Gunn, Janet Varner. *Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) 3.
3. Bowen 9.
4. Montague, John ed. and Thomas Kinsella, poetry ed. *The Dolmen Miscellany of Irish Writing*. (Dublin: Dolmen, 1962) 31.
5. Bowen 10.