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The Poet's Hymn

JAMES LIDDY

*The Doctor's House: An Autobiography*

Salmon Press, 2004, €15

Reviewed by

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AT THE MILWAUKEE BOOK, LAUNCH for James Liddy's new memoir. *The Doctor's House,* the author stood before friends and colleagues at a local and frequented Irish pub to proclaim, "Autobiography is a way of going home. And tonight I am not homeless." With such a sentiment the writer announces his entrance into a new world of Irish literary elite by firmly gracing his readers with an account of his Irish upbringing, his Dublin education, his American journeys, and his poetic sensibility. Straight from the mouth of the poet we see Liddy's sense of fun, development, and intellect spill onto the page through small vignettes and quick anecdotes told with an artistic diction drowned with people and places, pubs andwriters, reflections and recordings.

*The Doctor's House* is a poetic autobiography, (somewhat unconventional) but not unlike Austin Clarke's or George Moore's autobiographical writings of upbringing, formation, and humanizing description. Liddy’s historical placement falls in with the new generation of Irish writers, poets of gathering and gossip, poets influenced by previous generations, but poets who also wanted their own time and voice. Both Clarke and Moore tend to poke fun at themselves (as well as their audience) and create subtle patterns and textures. Liddy does the same, but 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, but where Clarke and Moore leave off with true tales of Ireland and the literary andreligious worlds, Liddy's picks up with 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.

Liddy jumps back and forth between the influence of his journeys, the placement of his opinions and ideals and the people who helped to shape him. He is like a child again running through an encyclopedia of memories. We glimpse his passionate icfve for his mother (a New York born socialite prone to stories and drink) and respect for his father (a Dispensary doctor filled with constant work and opinion). We see Irish festivals, travels to Spain, readings, adventures and American connections to Ireland, He 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 leader into an enthralling world described with a distinctly charming wit and a poetic and proud tone.

The description that begins the book is of Liddy's childhood home in Coolgreany Co. Wexford. It is a youthful tale told with innocence. 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, his father and mother at a world's fair, echoes of religion, childhood, upbringing. These are followed with stories and thoughts of friends, relatives, neighbors. It reads as a bygone era of gatherings placed in a historical context. Liddy is never too far from letting his reader know the time frame, the implications of subjects such as Roosevelt's statements to Ireland during World War II or even the celebration at O'Rafferty's pub on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul. Liddy is

exalted by history and religion, an inquisitive mind even as a child that leads him to his next stop: Literary Dublin.

The stories of mid-century Dublin are Liddy's evocation of the everyday, the writers, sights and sounds of a time that defined a second literary Ireland. His personal style is honest and funny, a reminiscence dotted with dialogue and poetry, names and tales. Dublin represents the middle and formative years that seem for the formation of the poet's voice. Liddy tackles hts less formal education by Kavanagh at McDaid's with a smattering of significant events and persoiKil

recollections. Here we see Bohemian Dublin told to us differently than John Ryan or Anthony Cronin. Liddy's sense of Dublin is respectful, but not as serious or egotistical. He tells tales of the opening of the Martello Tower, meeting Austin Clarke and conversing with John Jordan, Anthony Kerrigan or Liam Miller, but doesn't dwell on them ad nauseam. The poetic diction is not verbose. It moves quickly and remains evocative and confident while relaying recurrent visions of middle youth as we see Liddy emerge as a unique figure in a new generation of Irish writers. Some of the best tales involve Patrick Kavanagh, vacationing with Michael Hartnett in Spain or the making of *The Dolmen Miscellany.* The historical aspects of the memoir are impeccable and ruthlessly revealing while also being carefully presented in a fluid and effortless manner. Liddy's characterization of anage says the most for Dublin at this time and does so in a tender and expressive manner worthy of all previous writing on the subject.

These descriptive memories leave little doubt that Liddy is praising the Dublin of his youth, an inspiring city in all its glory, It is almost mystical when we read of Kavanagh's jaunts through the alleys or the ghost of Oscar Wilde haunting Liddy's psyche and hanging over his shoulders. His poetic style is lucid and joyous, capturing the sights and sounds of a time told uniquely by a writer whose perspective is new and startling, young and enchanting. Liddy writes, "Ireland is one pub, and friendship is one lounge. No one is ever there without a drink in hand. A melody of lights and brights. Buzz in a labyrinth....We all thought the Baggot Street summer would be endlessly renewed. There would be nods fo libations and gods" (57). Liddy is friendly in his gossip, true to the form of tales heard in a pub. His stories of Michael Hartnett are flattering and personal, portraying the poet with respect and candor. Soon we come to the end of Liddy's Dublin wonder city to see a glimpse of the Ramstown Arts festival before moving into the final section. Liddy's historic crossing of the Atlantic shows an America filled with even more wonder and excitement than the author even knew.

Part four of *A Doctor's House* is enthralling and addicting. Liddy's tales of respect for fellow teachers like Janet Dunleavy, Nic Kubly, and Mel Friedman are balanced by his poems, memories and times in an America with a new pulse, a time never to be duplicated. The section recounts friendships, encounters and observations from an Irish born poet (now a teacher in America) and signals a new breath in places like San Francisco, New Orleans and later Wisconsin, it seems in this passage that Liddy hits his stride. He is impressed by America, interested and curious, and his proud tone reflects his inquisitiveness. His influences begin to show and in San Francisco his love for writes like the Beat Generation begin to peak out from behind his language. He lives like those writers once did, drinking, writing in a small apartment, going out to meet friends and writers, simply loving life. He meets many people recalling a friendship with Jack Spicer and cronies at the White Rabbit Press, talks with Louis Zukovsky and George Stanley, has encounters with Robert Duncan and Richard Brautigan. Then he hears of the death of Patrick Kavanagh back in Ireland and everything slows. Although Liddy is sad at the passing of his .mentor, he gives his respect and remembers where he has been placed at this time in his life. "My captain is dead though I am among the captains and the kings" (119).

Liddy wanders further into the United States making moves through New Orleans and the fairy tale French Quarter with small stories of being mugged (truly a symbolic yam) and the beauty, flowers and simplicity of living in the Crescent City in a seemingly magical time. Liddy bounds with easethrough these passages until he reaches many conclusions about life, art and

friendship teaching the reader a few lessons along the way.

When his movements begin to peak we finally reachhis ultimate destination of Wisconsin where the language becomes more flattering and inquisitive about his love for poetry, his adoraticm of young poets and his simple wanderings and "exile" in a state not much bigger than ttie entire

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country of Ireland. He turns more reflective and inward in this last section still making quips about the very notion of the wandering and exiled poet. "Thc spirit wandereth whence it is employed or patroned. The artist type is outside the first social force of Mammy and friends; distance beckons new interruptions, and maybe memory spins into backlash" (133). There are many things that remind the poet of home, including Wisconsin poet Lorine Niedecker, whose

notion of the sacred Liddy compares to Yeats. He writes of taverns and etiquette, nightlife,

friends and findings all within Milwaukee, a town filled with a surprising amount of poets and artists. The writer is happy. The mood is respectful.

Then the memoir closes its once opened doors. The journey culminates on a favorite street comer in Milwaukee and we are left wanting more. More of Liddy's stories and memories. More of the poet traveling physically and mentally. More descriptive times written for all to hear. Hopefully this will not be the only installment of Liddy-isms. There is always room for another poetic memoir, especially one w ith this much history and joy.