

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

---

1-1-2011

# The Complex Past the Door: a Life of James Liddy

Tyler Farrell

Marquette University, [tyler.farrell@marquette.edu](mailto:tyler.farrell@marquette.edu)

---

Published version. "The Complex Past the Door: a Life of James Liddy," in *Selected Poems*. Eds. James Liddy and John Redmond. Dublin: Arlen House, 2011: 135-143. [Permalink](#). © 2011 Arlen House. Used with permission.

THE COMPLEX PAST THE DOOR  
A LIFE OF JAMES LIDDY

Tyler Farrell

Louis Zukofsky wrote, "As a poet I have always felt that the work says all there needs to be said of one's life". This more than aptly fits when describing the life of James Liddy. If a reader of Liddy wants to discover James, all he needs to do is examine the poetry, the letters, the essays; and the short biographies at the back of poetry magazines, books and anthologies. Liddy's life is scattered in his extensive body of work. He was a generous person who invited many into his world. He lived long and, because he honoured youth, never became cynical. He worked hard at the conviction that poetry and the self were sacrosanct.

Who is James Liddy? Since James wrote many of his own biographical notes, as well as two late-life autobiographies, we can hear his voice and humour, feel his undying sense of art. Here is the small biographical note on the back cover of *A White Thought in a White Shade*, his first selected poems, published in 1987:

James Liddy was born on the night of the long knives and learnt to live in Dublin, Kilkee and Co. Wexford. He was educated by the monks at Glenstal, and by Patrick Kavanagh in McDaid's. He has taught in San Francisco, Portland, Galway, New York, New Orleans and is now Associate Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Books of his poems have been published by the following presses: Dolmen, Humanities, Gotham Book Mart, The White Rabbit, hit & run, Capra and the Malton. A novella was brought out by the Wolfhound Press in 1985.

He would like to have been Baudelaire. He wishes to live someday in Mexico or Morocco. Ireland, a country of charmers instead of saints and poets instead of scholars, is a preparation for literature and other places.

There are many curious aspects to this brief note. First is the mention of "the night of the long knives", the purge which took place primarily on 1 July 1934, in which Hitler carried out many political executions, mostly on members of the Sturmabteilung or "brownshirts", in order to consolidate his power and send a message of complete command over the Nazi party. James used this coincidence to place himself inside history, to connect with a significant moment in European, indeed, world history. James loved connections to the timeline of the world and constantly talked of dates, times and places. It defined him and helped to create his voice. It ran throughout his poetry.

Another theme often included in Liddy's contributor notes is the almost continual mention of place, an Irish obsession perhaps. Liddy was born on Lower Pembroke Street in Dublin, and spent much time in Kilkee, Co. Clare (where his mother owned a house), and of course in Coolgreaney, Co. Wexford, where he grew up with his father (a dispensary doctor), mother, and sister Nora, who would later

become a pediatrician and medical officer. There is often confusion with Liddy's place of birth. In some of his biographical notes, Liddy claims to have been born in Kilkee, while other writers have placed his birth in many places, including New York City, apparently confusing him with his mother. James could place his birth in different places, because for him birth was an imaginative event, not a geographical one. He was born often and in many places.

Liddy's first incarnation as a writer can be seen in the magazine *Arena* which he published (subsidized by his mother) and edited with Liam O'Connor, and later with Michael Hartnett as well. He would edit other magazines, but *Arena* was the first and probably the most influential, containing some of the last works of Patrick Kavanagh, and introducing new writers such as Leland Bardwell and Hartnett. And while the magazine was short lived (only four issues published from 1963–1965), it brought James to the world in grand style. His first book, *In a Blue Smoke* (Dolmen Press, 1964) came out shortly before *Arena* ended and was the start of Liddy's extensive literary career. As he writes in the introduction to *This Was Arena* (Malton Press reissue, 1982), "I have always wanted to exchange new magazines for old, for I know that magazines can alter the shape of a literary landscape". In Liddy's world, the literary landscape more than changed, it constantly evolved.

Throughout Liddy's life, he would continue to compulsively write and publish. His output, like his voice, increased and improved. "He never became soft", as he once wrote about fellow Irish poet Louis MacNeice. He added to his list of publishers by releasing poetry and memoir with Salmon and some of his most realized poetry with Arlen House. He also

continued to produce and edit magazines of work by his friends and students in the form of *The Gorey Detail* and *The Blue Canary*. The former was published from 1977–1983 in a handful of issues in conjunction with Paul Funge’s Gorey Arts Festival in Co. Wexford. The latter was published in many forms (postcards, T-shirts, pamphlets) from the 1990s until Liddy’s death on 5 November 2008. *The Blue Canary* (named after a Milwaukee restaurant, now sadly gone) was a pet project of Liddy’s with issues dedicated to Dickie Riordan and Lorine Niedecker and launches at various Milwaukee landmarks such as Valent’s, a bar which opened at 6am for the Milwaukee industrial graveyard shift workers. *The Blue Canary* was a magazine for writers James respected, worked with and taught. Both of these magazines exhibit James at his best, most freely the poet, most himself. *The Gorey Detail* also contains quite humorous biographical information. “James Liddy: Barred from Neary’s in 1974”; “James Liddy: Married April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1983, by the statues of Goethe and Schiller, Washington Park, Milwaukee”. The poet creates himself, invents, and exaggerates.

James, the consummate poet, always held adoration for the nuanced self. It was important in much of his writing, whatever the genre. Here is another self-penned biographical note:

James Liddy spent his early life in Dublin, amongst the poets. His latter years are sequestered in Milwaukee, not quite so literary a city! His selected poems are still available from Creighton University Press.

This was written for *Poets in a Frieze & A Valentine* published by the Poetry New York pamphlet series in 1999. Liddy’s *Collected Poems* (Creighton University Press, 1994) was still quite new and James was proud, much like he was when a friend would write and

congratulate him on its publication, or when he would give a graduate student money to purchase the book at a reading saying, with a smile, "That way I'll make a little commission". In referring to his *Collected* as a "selected", James was not making a mistake, but naming it more accurately. A complete collection, even in 1994, would be at least twice as long. Liddy's *Collected* represents, quite well, his major collections up to that point. However, there are small gaps in his choices, as if to say that there would be no possible way to "collect" all of James Liddy. James sent poems all over the world, felt that poems should be given away. He wrote and published often: small pamphlet poems in honour of Christmas, contributions to American and Irish magazines, interviews such as one with John Montague about John Berryman's reading in Dublin: "I was there. You were a ghost, and Yeats was a ghost, and John Berryman became a ghost shortly afterwards". He appears also in anthologies dedicated to poems about James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh, Milwaukee and religion. He always wrote, often after returning from a night out with friends. Again, he pushed his writing to be better – the complex evolution of the poet and the self.

A more thorough and later personal account was written by James for Jessie Lendennie's anthology, *Salmon: A Journey in Poetry, 1981–2007* roughly a year before his death:

James Liddy was born in the Pembroke nursing home in Dublin, a distinction he curiously shares with the author of a critical work on him, Brian Arkins. His parents hailed from Limerick and New York. He has lived in Wexford, Dublin, and the USA. While a UCD student he took his camera to the unveiling of a centenary plaque on Oscar Wilde's house opposite the church where his parents were married and he was baptised ...

Again, we see the history lesson, but more introspective this time. We read of the lineage of history and place, the link to the past. Or as James wrote in "I, The Poet", in the first issue of *Arena*, "the poet is an adult who is permitted by grace to relive in exploration his mysterious childhood. He does not repeat childhood; he restores it adventurously so he may find a human preparation for others – and for himself". As history moves, so does the poet.

Many small biographical notes also contain most of the necessary information: James' law degree from King's Inn in 1961, his admiration of Joyce and his job as second curator of the Martello Tower, his place in the late Irish Modernist movement, and his love for his adoptive dream city of Milwaukee: "A city of an impossible Germany, a possible Poland, and the vanishing Irish – plus the grail search for the most perfect bar in the world". Conversely, the parts of Liddy's life that are often missing from biographical notes are his influences, his ability to inspire and nurture young poets, his homosexuality, and most importantly, his antinomian Catholicism. We see some of these traits discussed in works like the Michael Begnal edited Festschrift, *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice: A Tribute to James Liddy* (Arlen House, 2006) and in the concluding essays in four of the Arlen House poetry books. He mentions to Arkins in the critical study (Arlen House, 2001), "I will have to say straightaway that being queer, like being Irish and being Catholic, has charted my imagination". But his influences also appear in the form of writers and saints in poems and elsewhere: Baudelaire, Jack Spicer, George Moore, Kerouac, Joyce, Ginsberg, Woody Guthrie, Kavanagh, various popes (Pope John XXIII and Pope Benedict XV) and saints.

Many of Liddy's traits can be found while listening to his closest friends, people who experienced the encouragement, generosity, and respect of James. One of the most acute descriptions was written by a fellow poet and UW-Milwaukee colleague Jim Hazard, for the publication of *Radio X-Mas* (Blue Canary 2004):

We're all God's children. But some are moreso. James Liddy is moreso.

James comes to us from several more interesting places than this one: Dublin, New Orleans, San Francisco, among them. He is an advocate of gaiety, pub life, the solitude of reading, gossip, and the Milwaukee County bus system – Route 15 in particular.

But these are not reasons he is God's child and moreso. James is a poet of radiant and saucy music. Etonnez-moi the old Russian tap dancer said, but to that stern dictum James adds poems that entertain us, make us dance, and help us to remember our prayers.

Perhaps the most telling mixture of James' intellect, love, and faith comes directly from his letters to students and friends, advising them to embrace what made them, to tap into a personal voice driving a writer to write, a singer to sing. Some advice on poetry, "Take only the complex past the door. You have to feast with panthers who have been to psychiatrists. There are achieved phrases. You are really working at excavating the core, a good deal of kraft, the art of poetry in Wisconsin; the poetry takes on smoothness. There is no final manuscript, only versions of what a poet might become". James wanted the poet to live, like him, through expressions of the soul and news of places to write about, new people with whom to discuss. "My friend, I write from the old Spain to your ghost in New Mexico. We had some extraordinary days in Grenada, with Ian Gibson, following the breath of Lorca, from orange tree to



house to photos and letters. The poet is not dead! Yours, James". Also, in letters from Ireland, he spoke in epiphany, "Election Day here, European elections, no one understands Europe. The poll is low in America, but I love elections. Ancient Irish passion, long before democracy was invented. You will meet my Ireland when you come over. Not that it knows me much anymore". There was always an emotion to his letters, a personal voice and refreshing honesty. His letters are poems in themselves, inspiring and guiding.

James Liddy held devotion for poetry, friends, and life. His final days were spent in a hospital on the eastside of Milwaukee, visited by friends, people who loved him, wanted to thank him. His death reminds me of one more letter. The day after Michael Hartnett died in 1999 I had a lunch date with James at a favourite restaurant in Milwaukee. I was a fresh and inquisitive graduate student, a little drunk on beer, on poetry, on freedom, on new poems I had been working on. James was sad, "an angel in the deepest trench", he would say later. After lunch I thanked him on the doorstep of his Park Place apartment and went looking for Hartnett poems at Renaissance Books. In the dust of the lonely second floor poetry section, hidden between books unmoved in decades, I found *Anatomy of a Cliché* (Dolmen Press) Cost: \$5. The next day I received a letter from James with a selection of Hartnett poems cut from an anthology. The note read:

Dear Tyler, here are some poems from Hartnett's extensive works. Sorry if I was in bad form. I was really in inner mourning. Chunks of my Irish life are disappearing. Tomorrow, show me your poems – the gifts of dawn when they start to shine. With love, James.

Needless to say, I was hooked, grateful and enthralled with my new life. James strove to introduce students

to his mind, his outlook, his wisdom. I was inspired and sat down to write a poem, something I hoped might impress the always complex and always loving poet, James Liddy.

Tyler Farrell's debut collection of poetry is *Tethered to the Earth* (Salmon Poetry, 2008).