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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, ruefully 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 adviser to Brian Stratton, mayor of Schenectady like his father before him. In 1987 Union College presented him with the Faculty Meritorious Service Award. In 2007 Mayor Stratton Junior presented Bill and Harriet with Patroon Awards, the highest honor 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 Ávila, "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.

To many, the death 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 a 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 words from the young at heart. As James always knew, poetry should be a young person's game, a devotion to the immortal voice and power of the word, an announcement of poetic self.

James Liddy was a tireless worker. He did more for poetry, publishing, Ireland, Catholicism and sexuality than most poets, presidents, teachers, cardinals or kings. He taught friends and students alike to embrace our time and place, our knowledge of history and religion, our memory and awareness. He taught us to live, to "work hard at reading the tea leaves," to become writers in outlook and spirit. James urged important writing that ignored safe

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 it Jacques in Milwaukee surrounded by young, inquisitive poets. Once, after a reading, he received a standing ovation

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and immediately stopped the audience to announce, "If you stop we can get to the bar sooner." It would be one of many times I saw his edgy attitude, his desires and beliefs about how poetry should be heard, how praise almost stunted the ego. For many, these thoughts seemed to also resonate.

But Liddy's life was always impressive to most. His extensive career reads like an oral history, a poet's journey filled with 1950's Dublin, *Arena*, the Dolmen Press, the San Francisco Renaissance, New Orleans and finally the German dream city of Milwaukee. If you knew Liddy, you knew his stature, attitude, and generation. Yet he stood as a unique member of the Irish literary elite with a challenging style of writing and persona, not at all safe or traditional. I remember how he despised poetic forms and encouraged me to write more like Frank O'Hara—one of

my many heroes. "If you're having trouble with stanzas, eliminate them," he said. "What have stanza breaks ever done for us?" He was direct and honest, highly respected.

The first time I met James Liddy was in Dublin in 1994 while taking a summer class at Trinity run by Eamonn Wall. Liddy, a guest lecturer, talked about writing and Ireland mostly. I listened intently and took voracious notes that now seem to speak more to the experience than the limitless insight he dictated to the class. At the end he stood up and announced, "Is there anyone here from Milwaukee? I love to talk to students from Milwaukee." Eamonn looked to me and we went to the front of the room to speak with James posing in his big blue sweater. He told me that the royal blue was in honor of the first Irish flag and graciously invited us to lunch at a nearby Pub. There I had my first real discussion with him. I felt awfully naïve at first, but Liddy made those feelings go away. He was encouraging, asked who I liked to read and if he could see some of my poems. He immediately brought out some confidence in me and recommended books, offered advice. He told stories in between sips of Harp that cultivated our growing connection. Soon, he became one of my closest friends, someone I looked forward to seeing and working with. It was a joy even on the days when he pushed quite hard to improve my mind or my writing. I felt like he knew me better than most people because of his impressive intellect and wit, his devotion to who I was, who I wanted to become. When I was in need of direction he gave me his undivided attention.

I worked quite closely with James at UW-Milwaukee and in the years after I graduated. We went to conferences together, traveled to Coolgreaney and Kilkee, frequented bars, classrooms, and offices. It was a formative experience, a look into the literary and academic world from the often contrary and highly interesting perspective of James Liddy. We wrote each other weekly and I remember one very encouraging letter when I was just starting to get published. It was filled with congratulations and an invita-

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 guidance 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 remembered 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 at the time.

Excursions with 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, *Esau, My Kingdom for a Drink*. "So you, James Joyce, loving us seriously behind our backs like a 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 loved him back. We realized the weight of being with 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 saw him as an angel sent from Dublin with a unique intensity, a kind of proclamation 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 naïve, uninformed attitudes, at people who judge like "fatherpolitics and motherchurch [from] across the narrow 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 him up, I imagined he must have been deep in 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 CONGHAILE

Jude

BREANDÁN Ó HEAGHRA

Gaeilgeoir Deireanach Charna

CAITRÍONA NÍ CHONAOLA

Incubus

Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2007, €12.00

Reviewed by
THOMAS IHDE

SOME INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES have dark secrets that continue the pain and suffering years later and into the next generation. *Jude*, *Gaeilgeoir Deireanach Charna*, and *Incubus*, three Irish-language plays recently published, touch on this theme. The works each earned honors in the Gradam Cuimhneacháin Bháitéir Uí Mhaicín, the largest award of bursaries in Ireland for either Irish or English works at the time. The distinctions were awarded in 2005 marking the 75th anniversary of Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe, the national Irish language theatre in Galway City, in memory of Walter Macken, the Galway author, actor, and director whose connections with the Taibhdhearc and the Abbey were commemorated.

Micheál 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 Ó Conghaile's *Go dTaga do Ríocht*, earned him "special distinction" in the Gradam Cuimhneacháin Bháitéir Uí Mhaicín. *Jude* was first presented in the Taibhdhearc on March 9, 2007. Directed by Seán Ó Tarpáigh (who was most recently seen in his role as Jackie in the bilingual film *Kings*, Ireland's foreign language film submission 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 Héallai, and Tomás Mac Con Iomaire (Former Head of RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta).

Jude, the focus of this work, is a strong and sensible 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 this story unravel and engulf the reader. His use of the Irish language as 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.

Micheál Ó Conghaile is a notable author and publisher who bridges the traditional Ireland with the modern Ireland. Born and raised on Inis Treabhair, an island in Cill Chiaráin Bay. Growing up on a small Irish-speaking island without television in a 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-Chonnachta (www.cic.ie), attest to the creativity and energy of this artist.

The second work of this volume is Breandán Ó hEaghra's *Gaeilgeoir Deireanach Charna*, (last Irish speaker of Carna). This and the third drama of this book were both honored with an award of recognition through the Gradam Cuimhneacháin Bháitéir Uí Mhaicín. *Gaeilgeoir Deireanach Charna* was first presented in the Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe on May 12, 2005. Directed by Darach Ó Dubháin 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 Faoite (*Kings/Ros na Rún*), Peadar Ó Treasaigh (*Kings/Cré na Cille*), Morgan Cooke, and Micheál Mac Donncha.

Gaeilgeoir Deireanach Charna 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 hEaghra's work. The script which has sections in Irish and sections in English sees Tommy, the last Irish speaker of Carna, waiting for the Minister of the Gaeltacht to deliver an award to his house acknowledging his special status. The events that transpire are thought-filled, shocking, and at times ironic. As readers, among other questions the work raises, we are challenged in our understanding of what constitutes language proficiency.

Breandán Ó hEaghra is an Irish writer and musician who holds the title of Deputy Director of the Galway City Museum and is involved more generally in Irish language promotion in the city. As member of the Irish language pop band Rís, Breandán has collaborated on composing, singing, and playing the guitar with its first album and another album soon to follow. *Gaeilgeoir Deireanach Charna* is his first drama and we look forward to continued activity in this field.

The last drama in this volume, *Incubus*, is written by Caitríona Ní Chonaola. It was first presented at Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe on March 31, 2005. As with *Gaeilgeoir Deireanach Charna*, this drama was also

produced by Darach Mac Con Iomaire. The sole character in this drama is Róisín, played by Tara Breathnach (who would be known to many readers for her role as Tina O'Dowd in *Ros na Rún* on TG4). In the printed format, the drama composes the last twenty pages of the book being reviewed.

Told from the perspective of the patient, we listen as Róisín, a young depressed woman, speaks to herself from her room in a psychiatric hospital. She is tormented with nightmares and struggling with mental problems. As with the other two dramas in this collection, one is left with suggestions that there are dark secrets at play here. The title of "Incubus" and frequent use of holy water prepare the viewer/reader as we enter into Róisín's inner thoughts as she tries to distinguish between reality and fantasy.

Caitríona Ní Chonaola hails from Camas 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 Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, 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 Centre to their next travel itinerary. Visit www.antaibhdhearc.com before leaving to see what is scheduled and to purchase tickets. •

—Lehman College, CUNY

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