

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

4-1-2007

The Poet Who Caps Our Being

Tyler Farrell

Marquette University, tyler.farrell@marquette.edu

Published version. *Irish Literary Supplement*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2007): 26. [Publisher link](#). © 2007 Trustees of Boston College. Used with permission.

lauded—he includes the American-born Ivy Bannister and English-born Anne Hartigan, for example, as well as including writers from both sides of the border—he also leaves out Frances Sheridan, whose birthplace was Ireland, and dozens of other writers included in Weekes' earlier, equally inclusive volume.

The ethos of *Irish Women Writers, An A-to-Z Guide* is consistent with feminist emphases on considering the work of a woman writer in relation to the biographical conditions which produced (or hindered) it. However, while it is important to examine the lives of women writers whose work we seek to study, it sometimes seems as though biographical inquiry has overshadowed other approaches. For example, a good deal of the critical output focusing on Irish women writers has consisted of interviews with the

authors themselves rather than scholarly readings of their works. While biographical and similar materials can be useful for scholars, they also tend to produce a particular intentional fallacy, in which the woman writer is seen as a straightforward reporter of the events and preoccupations of her own life rather than as an artist shaping her work, producing texts which are also shaped by social and political contexts. The simplistic conflation of the woman writer's life with her work diminishes her artistic achievements; it is exemplified, in this volume, when Claire McEwen writes of Sara Berkeley's character Hannah, who has suffered childhood sexual abuse, that "in an echo of Berkeley's own migration, [she] moves from Dublin to London and then finally to America in a search for a new and

untainted life" (19).

The feminist ethos of this book does not extend to highlighting collaborations among Irish women writers or the influences that early or contemporary women writers have had on those Irish women writers currently writing. Somerville and Ross are discussed in the same entry, though Somerville outlived Ross by several decades and continued to write during much of that time; every other writer is presented, in her own entry, as if she'd never had contact with the writers with whom she shares this A-to-Z guide. This is despite several mentions of connections between highlighted authors and the male literary establishment; given the feminist emphasis on female collaboration as a corrective to masculinist myths of authorship, this is something of a disappointment.

All this criticism does not mean that I found the book to be without merit. Even the most well-read of scholars can find information about writers and works with which they may not have been acquainted prior to picking up the book. However, it would be a pleasant surprise if, rather than producing another book describing the fascinating lives of Irish women writers, or cataloguing the treasure trove of work waiting to be analyzed, scholars in Irish Studies began the endlessly-deferred project of engaging seriously and in an extended fashion with the texts that have been produced by many of the neglected authors discussed in this work. In fact, I think I'll end this review now so I can go do that myself. •

—Southern Illinois University

The Poet Who Caps Our Being

JAMES LIDDY

On the Raft with Fr. Roseliep

Arlen House, 2006

MICHAEL S. BEGNAL, EDITOR

Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice: A Tribute to James Liddy

Arlen House, 2006

Reviewed by
TYLER FARRELL

IF THERE EVER WAS A POET who deserved more attention, James Liddy is that poet. In the ever changing and varied world of Irish letters, James Liddy's star is finally on the rise—albeit slowly, but with constant deliberation and accomplishment. With the publication of his new book of poetry, *On the Raft with Fr. Roseliep* and a festschrift filled with poems, prose and reminiscences from friends and colleagues, the poet's audience is expanding. His voice is moving, gaining ground. His thoughts attain a new sense of religion, sexuality, humor, Ireland, and (of course) his adopted United States. James Liddy can be compared to other writers, but what would be the point. His voice is far more daring, far more important. As Liddy's friend Patrick Kavanagh wrote, "A poet is an original who inspires millions of copies." The original James Liddy has inspired many of his students and friends to create and admire, but not many will be able to copy such unique behavior and contemplative writing.

Both of these new books are a glimpse into Liddy's life, a look at and discussion with friends, influences and ideas. The book of poetry uses Fr. Raymond Roseliep as a focal point and muse. Fr. Roseliep was a Catholic priest ordained in 1943 who received his Ph.D. from Notre Dame in 1954. He lived primarily in Dubuque, Iowa teaching at Loras College and writing more than a dozen books of poetry, mostly haiku. His presence is still felt in Dubuque with annual discussions of his work and a room dedicated to the housing of his books and research materials at the Loras College Library. Roseliep is another neglected poet and one that attempted to find truth in art and spirituality. He was committed to the priesthood, teaching, and poetry, and like Liddy, used poetry to attempt the sacrificial act in which the ordinary becomes extraordinary. There is a balance in both of these writer's works that

looks at humanization through touching language and beauty as an act of contrition. Here is a quote from one of Roseliep's books that seems to address certain aspects of Liddy's writing and voice:

Whatever success I enjoy as a poet must reflect the philosophy behind my work. Through poems I try to materialize spirit and spiritualize matter. I attempt to project the dissidence at the heart of all life: the clash between darkness and light, good and evil, purposelessness and purpose, avowal and denial, the sacred and the profane, flesh and spirit, death and the thirst for immortality, Yahweh and oblivion. Believing as George Eliot did that "love is the word of all work," I publish my poems so that I might impose fresh order on the disorder of the world. A poem is a plumb line by which all of us can better understand ourselves and the universe. A poem completes and caps our being.

There are many aspects to writing that Liddy shares with Fr. Roseliep and his fondness for his subject grows with each passing poem. Liddy, as a poet, is priest-like and contemplates the use of love (more accurately lust) to identify his devotions. His poetry is fresh and unique, always creating a new reality for the reader while also examining contradictions as well as what defines him as a writer. The reader can always come back to Liddy's use of his country of birth, the lively innuendo—an intoxicating waltz through the Ireland of Liddy's youth. There is human nature, nostalgia, and anecdote in these poems all backed by a sort of biting wit that serves to personify these observations and philosophies. Take, for example, the first poem, "Let's Invade Ourselves Not Iraq." Liddy's version of a protest poem is quite atypical and one that uses contemplative autobiography to get to the heart of the poem. "I have a crusade inside me against killing in war / astonishing for a drinking man; / Sweetheart, I have a crusade in me that steams like a / decaying liver / towards you" (11). There is the lust, a type of humor in the midst of war and life-writing. The disorder that Roseliep writes about is here in Liddy's poetry as well. The poet is simply taking these ideas to another level, reshaping common conceptions of poetic subject matter, reflection, humanity and beauty.

Liddy is also very fond of making

allusions to other authors and artists, to friends and colleagues. Some of the best poems in this collection mention fellow Wisconsin poet, Lorine Niedecker, friend and mentor Patrick Kavanagh, poets Jack Spicer and T. S. Eliot, Milwaukee artist Bob Watt and a poem honoring the encyclical of Pope Benedict XV. Liddy is gleeful, funny with his subjects, poking gentle fun at various aspects of life while also being true to his poetic style. In a way he is honored to be around such fellow travelers of the written and spiritual word and hails each of them with unwavering thoughts and humorous observations. Liddy's almost religious dedication to these subjects is quite reflective, emotional, solemn and devotional. His humor is often balanced with commitment to his friends and freedom of his loves and his word choice is imagistic and profound, personal and full of feeling. Liddy's passionate poems are like Roseliep's. They often search for something between the sacred and profane.

The festschrift, titled *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice*, is also quite devotional to the subject of the poet. We are finally able to hold in our hands a tribute to Liddy himself. The book is filled with some great Irish and American writers, individuals who not only respect James Liddy, but also admire him. The amount of renowned writers shows Liddy's influence among his friends and contemporaries. The book symbolizes his years of work and devotion to poetry and friends, but is also an indication of the hard work he has endured for the sake of his art. The festschrift shows the desire to hail this poet, to give something back to a man who influenced poetry, shaped a new and unique outlook, and struck a blow for the spiritual and sexual, the Irish and American, the freedoms and the footsteps.

Some of the loyal poets and artists included in this tribute are: Thomas Kinsella, Knute Skinner, Eamonn Wall, Myles Na Gopaleen (Flann O'Brien), Philip Casey, Daniel Tobin, Charles Bukowski, Dermot Bolger, Liam O'Connor, John Montague, Jim Chapson and Michael Hartnett, among others. There are also a few works by the author himself. Some poems are previously unpublished including a wonderful poem about his mother entitled "Her Disposition." The poem tells of Mrs. Liddy's attendance at a party in Dublin that W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory were also at. While the drinks were passed and stories were being told the Christ-

child James "was like a snug inside her" (47) feeling this early the influence of such famous company.

Most of the poetry and prose in the book is quite honest, relaying stories of Liddy's adventures, making a point to tell the reader of Liddy's loves. It is obvious that everyone included in the festschrift are in awe of the poet and recognize the influence he has had on their lives and their writing. Eamonn Wall's essay talks about the Irish writer in exile in America and the impact it has had on writing and culture. Myles Na Gopaleen's contribution is a review of an early Dolmen Press book by Liddy entitled *Esau, My Kingdom for a Drink: Homage to James Joyce on his LXXX Birthday*. The review is quite funny and told in classic O'Brien journalistic style. Bukowski's "Letter to James Liddy" is typical of the late writer and talks of poetry, permission for Liddy to use some of his poems for publication. He writes, "we're not going to cause any literary revolution, but we hope to say a few things that haven't, for some reason, been said and to print the good clear strong poem – the poem that drinks beer and smokes cigars and laughs – sometimes" (46). Many of the works in *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice* accomplish these desires. Liam O'Connor's short essay is also quite interesting telling tales of *Arena* (the short lived magazine he created with Liddy), trips to Spain, the house in Coolgreany, and flattering words that pay honest and generous tribute to a friend and confidant.

Many of the works jump off the page and relay much of Liddy's devotion to writing, life, friends, love and art. It is gossip for the gossip poet and love for the love poet. One of the best contributions to *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice* is Michael Hartnett's poem "The Poet as Saint." It is a loving tribute from a fellow poet, a traveler who crossed paths with Liddy early in his career and also helped to shape the groundbreaking magazine *Arena*. Hartnett writes, "He is father to many poets / and he is lover of their songs... We have argued over style / in the grey sheltered limestone bays / of Clare and not agreed: but we / shall be poets in the coming days" (19). The poem forever sums up Liddy's influence and inspiration, his devotion to language and his love for his friends. Both books hold elements of Liddy's nature of poetry and it seems that the poet's influence will continue to grow in the coming days. •

—University of Dubuque

Copyright of Irish Literary Supplement is the property of Irish Studies (Boston College) and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.