



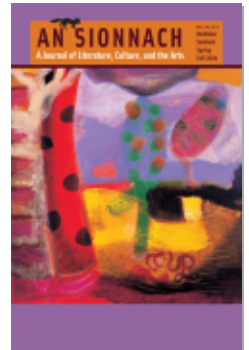
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Wexford and Arcady , and: *Askeaton Sequence* (review)

John Redmond

An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture, and the Arts, Volume 5,
Numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Fall 2009, pp. 302-306 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



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Book Reviews

James Liddy | *Wexford and Arcady* | Galway: Arlen House | 2009 | 80 pp. | paper | ISBN 978-1-903631-96-6 | €12.00

James Liddy | *Askeaton Sequence* | Galway: Arlen House | 2009 | 80 pp. | paper | ISBN 978-1-903631-72-0 | €12.00

I first met the Irish poet James Liddy in 2001, shortly after I had moved to America. Studying literature at UCD in the 1980s, I had stumbled across his name a couple of times, but he was a remote figure to my Irish generation. Back then, the Ulster poets loomed large and even veteran modernists like Thomas Kinsella and Pearse Hutchinson seemed to be more like the writers we should know something about. Meeting James changed all that. He had great charisma, by turns, sharp, avuncular, learned, puckish, witty, enthusiastic—always with time for everyone. I saw firsthand how much he meant to generations of students in Milwaukee, where he taught, and what a legendary figure he cut in Irish-American literary circles. His recent too-early death (at seventy-four) was marked by a generous obituary in the *Irish Times*, and that alone represented a level of recognition in his homeland which, in life, he struggled to achieve. These two new collections will, I hope, contribute to a fresh wave of interest in his work.

Among the many effects, positive and negative, of Liddy's move to America in the mid-1960s was an attachment, manifest in his writing and conversation, to the pre-televisual Ireland he had left behind—and this de-

spite being a gay poet, who had moved to a culture more tolerant of his orientation. Having been a literary scenester, Liddy was reluctant to let that scene die, even when it seemed long-dead to others. Editing experience in favor of anecdote, his poems gossip about that half-forgotten past and drop old-fashioned names as though they still carried their original cachet. Beginning nostalgically in the Ireland of the 1950s, *Wexford and Arcady* opens, for instance, with a series of references to well-known luminaries of that (“arcadian”) time. The third poem, “Un Rechaud,” gives the flavor:

I saw F. J. McCormack
 I heard Ruth Draper doing her maid's Co. Kerry
 Father liked 'the Shadow of the Glen' he wanted to be a tramp
 Yeats's plays my favourites tacked on at the end for a quarter of the house
 I preferred MacLiammoir in 'The Old Lady Says No' in the
 Gate to his 'The Importance of Being Oscar' in The Gaiety
 Siobhan McKenna St. Joan of all St. Joans . . .

The first line is a kind of Yeatsian boast, and one can easily imagine Liddy using it in conversation. It is, too, a boast which would have to be explained (“You saw who?”), but the poem appears not to care. References are hurled down with a kind of defiance, daring the reader to request an explanation. As in the verse of Frank O'Hara, Christian names are often used without an accompanying surname, and these private, or semi-private, references take on considerable specific gravity, giving weight and mystery to individual lines. Sometimes, of course, the named parties are recognizable. Like his friend Patrick Kavanagh, Liddy learned to weave poems from provocative statements, particularly sharp remarks about other writers. The following declaration is characteristic:

Let me put on war paint
 For Zbigniew Herbert against Helen Vendler's
 'sentimentality' charge.

Elsewhere we are told that George Moore was not “mean as they think,” that Michael Hartnett borrowed his lists from Lorca, and that Jack Kerouac was, in certain moods, as good a writer as James Joyce.

Both books open in a restaurant and many show the poet in convivial mood, engaged as Flann O'Brien once put it, in sapient colloquy. Liddy's idea of Heaven was something like a lively hostel, lit up with artists and the talk of art. He puts it this way in “Love from Café Bremen”:

In our Father's house exist many cafes even
poetry readings: we hope for the resurrection
of the dead at the tables of one of them.

Although references to “our Father” and “the resurrection” remind us that Liddy’s poems often have a clerical hue, it is worth separating, I think, his spiritual and religious sides. Entirely evident to all who knew him, his spirituality was simple: a combination of universal generosity with (occasional) bursts of righteous anger. His interest in religion—popes, priests, and bishops frequently appear in the poems—was different, being more, as I read it, of an aesthetic matter. Like the poet David Jones and the novelist Frederick Rolfe, he was fascinated by the *life* of religious people, their habits, hierarchies, codes, secrets, vestments, repressions, obliquities—above all, their color. And, for better or worse (it *was*, sometimes, for better), religion was part of the woof and warp of the Ireland which he had lost.

Like Yeats in senatorial mode, Liddy is often to be seen addressing the younger generations, giving them the benefit of his finely detailed hinterland. But as much as this hinterland was capacious, we should remember what it did *not* contain. A major part of Liddy’s value, as poet and conversationalist, was that he had absorbed *nothing* from television (or, indeed, *YouTube*.) Yes, his range of reference might no longer be *au courant* but that made it all the more exotic. The surprise of reading Liddy is akin to meeting someone with an entirely novel set of household gods—out go Paris Hilton, Jon Stewart, and Eminem, and in come Liam Miller, Elizabeth Bowen, and the Ginger Man.

Liddy is not so much an erotic poet as a poet who is in favor of eroticism. Although his writing makes many (Ginsbergian) references to nudity—naked prelates recur, an old-fashioned form of subversion—the associated carnal charge is dim. Nudity, for this poet, is more spiritual mode than physical disposition. This example is from the poem, “Love!”:

We came to the rock, we strip and make a little dive to where it's deep
hands ahead falling slightly through the air, I'm in the same patch of current
you're a little distance off praying or playing and breathing. Consciousness
of flesh is the memory of infinity and rivers.

A delphic left turn from the narrative, the last sentence frames the naked bodies in a wash of aesthetic high-mindedness. It's a characteristic “Liddy swerve,” a sudden agreeable aphorism which forces its way in, and lets the surrounding statements make of it what they will. Phrases of this sort give the impression that—within the poet’s head—many conversations are

being held simultaneously and that we are only getting to hear a few of them. Also, as this passage shows, Liddy is no Lawrentian. Sex, here, is very substantially “in the head.” Although our animal natures are acknowledged—the speaker, after all, refers to his partner’s “beautiful ass”—they are also firmly transcended.

Stylistically, Liddy practices a kind of monological shorthand, no doubt fortified by his reading of Beat literature, but also not that far removed from some of the modernist procedures of Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin. He has a talent for parallelism, a device which has the benefit of tightening his many provisional forms. Structural repetition is used to good effect in “Et Nunc Manet in Te,” one of the best poems here (though a bit too long to quote), as well as at the end of “Snippets of Altar Ballads”:

Til the city collects saints
 til we enter our priesthoods
 til simplicity becomes clemency
 til the altar flowers rumble
 til the candle smoke hymns
 til our hands hold the sun’s reflection

More often, the poems seem casually written, as though they were footnotes, afterthoughts, shavings from some larger writing project. One might even think of them as paratextual. “More than a sealed border or a boundary,” Gerard Genette once wrote, “the paratext is rather a threshold.” And this sense of being in the margins to something grander, a literary footnote, a preface, a signpost, is, for Liddy, not just a matter of biographical accident, of moving to Milwaukee, it is woven into his entire existential stance. Consistent with the great Emersonian tradition to which it is not so distantly related, and which Irish writers, from Kavanagh to Muldoon, have always found beguiling, poetry here is always “on the way.” The arts, as Emerson put it, are initial, not final; it is where they aim, not where they arrive, that matters. Like thresholds through which the freshness blows, like architraves into the blue, Liddy’s poems point beyond themselves to the sweet diversity of life. Cathedrals, bars, bodies, meetings, boys, food, books, cities, experiences—always the pressure of a life being lived forces itself against the outlines of his verse. And, if a poem feeds into that energetic continuum, if, so to speak, its heart is in the right place, what matter if it looks modest or minor? A poem is as good as where it leads.

One odd feature of this dual publication by Arlen House is that both books bear the exact same blurb. The last sentence on the back cover is pre-

cisely the same: “With this collection it can be said the poet has become in charge of his literary undertaking: he has been able finally to write out his own language.” One doesn’t want to be too critical of a small press, but this does suggest that the two books were hastily assembled. It’s also not clear why a dual publication was necessary at all—why not one book? It is evident, anyway, that Liddy’s canon will need further attention from editors and scholars. True, the now defunct Creighton University Press brought out a handsome edition of his *Collected Poems* in 1994, but now we need an edition that will incorporate the large volume of later material, not least these two books. We also need a sympathetic *Selected* for readers on both sides of the Atlantic in order to bring into sharper focus his true achievement.

JOHN REDMOND

Eamonn Wall | *A Tour of Your Country* | Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Poetry, 2008 | 57 pp. | €12.00

Eamonn Wall’s first collection of poetry appeared in 1994 and, since then, it has become increasingly difficult to imagine the landscape of contemporary Irish-American poetry without him. Born in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, he has lived in the United States since 1982, and his writing easily glides across the Atlantic; he paces the ocean and pulls the land of his childhood and the land of his adulthood into constant dialogue. His previous collections—*Dyckman-200th Street* (1994), *Iron Mountain Road* (1997), *The Crosses* (2000), *Refuge at DeSoto Bend* (2004)—all ask thorny questions of place, and Wall seems at home whether he is writing about Ireland or the prairies of North America. His non-fiction, too, explores such themes, most notably in *From the Sin-é Café to the Black Hills* (2000).

We quickly understand that the Lakota Indians in South Dakota and the cornfields of Nebraska are just as vital for Wall’s imagination as anything he grew up knowing in Ireland. These may be differing geological landscapes but he blends them together, pointing first to Ireland, then to the Midwest, and his words—like a tightening center of gravity—bind these two worlds together. His books remind us of the immigrant’s wide-eyed stare as well as that longing for home which can never be truly satisfied.

It is therefore fitting that his fifth collection of poetry is called *A Tour of Your Country*. From the outset we are doubly displaced from the land in question because the word “tour” implies a lack of intimate knowledge while the use of “your” suggests uncertain ownership. We cannot pinpoint