

A Thorough and Generous Portrait

Review of

“Literchoor Is My Beat”: A Life of James Laughlin, Publisher of New Directions

By Ian S. MacNiven

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Reviewed by **Ross Labrie**

I met James Laughlin many years ago at a gathering held in his honor prior to his giving a lecture on Thomas Merton’s *Geography of Lograire* at Simon Fraser University. I can remember a genuine pleasure in talking to him about Merton whom he visited frequently at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The two of them would, before and after Merton moved into his hermitage, go off for a day together partly to discuss business but mostly to enjoy each other’s company. I can to this day hear Laughlin saying: “He was so much fun.” Laughlin greatly missed Merton and he was determined in his lecture to create room for Merton in the company of modernist poets, something that may surprise those of Merton’s readers who know him through his non-modernist writings such as *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Sign of Jonas* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*. The modernist writings in both prose and poetry came in the 1960s and included such works as *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, which Laughlin told me he regarded as Merton’s greatest poetic achievement. This was high praise from one who not only shepherded into print some of the most significant writers of the period but who had achieved a worthy reputation himself as a poet. What particularly caught Laughlin’s eye in *The Geography of Lograire* was Merton’s use of parody and reconstructed myth.

As the title of this biography suggests, literature was James Laughlin’s “beat.” More than anyone else he discovered and published many of the major modernist writers of the twentieth century in the U.S. as well as abroad. These included Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Henry Miller, many of the Beat writers, Hermann Hesse and Jorge Luis Borges. The vehicle for Laughlin’s promotion of his modernist writers was the New Directions Company, which Laughlin founded in 1936 while still an undergraduate at Harvard. In addition to publishing avant-garde writers, Laughlin created anticipatory interest in them through the annual New Directions anthology in which Merton often appeared. One of Laughlin’s habits was to try to bring his writers into contact with each other. Sometimes, this led to a correspondence between Merton and other writers including some who might seem far removed from Merton’s world. Henry Miller was one of these and there is a revealing exchange between them even though Merton admitted he had not read the torrid *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*. As with all of the modernists, though, Merton was attracted to experimentalism, although he told Laughlin early on that he was concerned that his involvement in the New Directions group might imply a moral

approval for what other writers were doing. Laughlin assured him that he needn't worry.

Laughlin got on to Merton through Mark Van Doren, Merton's favorite professor at Columbia, in 1943. Though not particularly fond of religious verse, Laughlin was impressed by Merton's vividness and freshness. The result was the publication of Merton's fine first collection, *Thirty Poems* (1944). Although Laughlin would have been interested in publishing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which as it turned out brought in a lot of money, Merton directed his agent, Naomi Burton, to offer it to Robert Giroux at Harcourt, Brace. On the other hand, when Giroux wanted to publish all of Merton's writings, Merton intervened so that his poetry and poetic prose went to Laughlin because he wanted to preserve his relationship with Laughlin, who was interested in things spiritual and with whom Merton had formed what would become a strong, lifelong friendship. That friendship led Laughlin to observe that Merton's beliefs merged seamlessly with his person. Laughlin came from a wealthy Protestant family through which he could have benefitted financially had he wanted to join the business. He didn't. Although he had no formal religious beliefs, Laughlin relied on his friendship with Merton to embody beliefs that he himself lacked but towards which he was drawn. The trust between the two was reciprocal. For example, Merton's confided to Laughlin about the nurse with whom he had a romantic relationship in the mid-1960s. Moreover, Merton named Laughlin as one of the three trustees of his estate and in particular of his unpublished writings. On his side of the relationship Merton provided a sympathetic ear to Laughlin in connection with his troubled marriages.

A particularly poignant part of Ian MacNiven's fine biography of Laughlin centers on Laughlin's tireless and meticulous preparation of *The Asian Journal* following Merton's sudden death in Bangkok in 1968. What had been estimated to be a four-month project for Laughlin turned out to take over three years. It would seem, MacNiven observes, that the preparation of *The Asian Journal* was a way for Laughlin to grieve the loss of his friend. As a trustee of the Merton Legacy Trust Laughlin had access to all of Merton's papers including those that were kept in a vault in Louisville until 25 years following Merton's death. In the year I spent in Louisville in 1975 looking through Merton's papers at Bellarmine College, I was denied access to these restricted papers by the Curator of the Merton Center, Robert Daggy, a prohibition that made them more and more alluring as the years went by. In any case it was interesting to learn from MacNiven's book that Laughlin, who had access to Merton's restricted papers, was surprised and disappointed that there seemed to be no mystical experiences recorded in Merton's unpublished writings. This perception overlooked not only Merton's epiphanic visit to Polonnaruwa but also the apparition of Merton's father on Merton's trip to Rome in 1933. In addition, one doesn't want to omit the Fire Watch section of *The Sign of Jonas* even if some might regard this experience as falling short of mysticism. If mysticism involves the contemplative communion with God, then the Fire Watch section with its otherworldly intimacy would seem to qualify. On the other hand Merton would be the last person to designate his experience as mystical.

On the whole one is impressed by MacNiven's thorough and generous rendering of his subject. He has combed Laughlin's papers in many different locations as well as interviewing Laughlin's family and friends. Moreover, through the modesty of his tone he has allowed the focus on Laughlin and on his relationship with his modernist writers to remain uppermost without overlaying these with heavy interpretive comments. This sort of approach was characteristic of Laughlin himself, who in spite of his own ambition as a poet, recognized the greater importance of the writers he introduced to the world. Among these was Thomas Merton, about whose relationship with James Laughlin we have much to learn here.