

Brendan Gill (1914-1997)

*Zealous Man of Letters, Prodigious Writer, Arts Critic,
Urban Preservationist, Intrepid New Yorker*



A Poor Man's Cary Grant - Age 36, 1950

"Not a shred of evidence exists in favor of the idea that life is serious, though it is often hard and even terrible. The first rule of life is to have a good time; and the second rule of life is to hurt as few people as possible in the course of so doing. There is no third rule."

- Brendan Gill
Here at the New Yorker, 1975

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A gifted student at the prestigious Kingswood School in West Hartford, CT in the early 1930s, Brendan Gill earnestly applied for admission to Yale University. Though his father, eminent Hartford physician, **Michael H.R. Gill** graduated from Yale Medical School in 1896, Gill was summarily rejected. His math entrance exam scores were alarmingly low, especially his

geometry score which was reputed to be the lowest in the nation - a dubious distinction Gill recounted often, with self-deprecating glee.

Taken by Gill's preternatural charm, innate volubility and perceived, incipient brilliance, the faculty at Kingswood pleaded with Yale to accept his application on the grounds that he was the nonpareil editor of Kingswood's highly-regarded literary magazine, *Wyvern*, and was in their words 'a literary genius'. Yale relented and New Haven's ivied doors swung open for the square-jawed, black Irish-American lad burning with ambition.

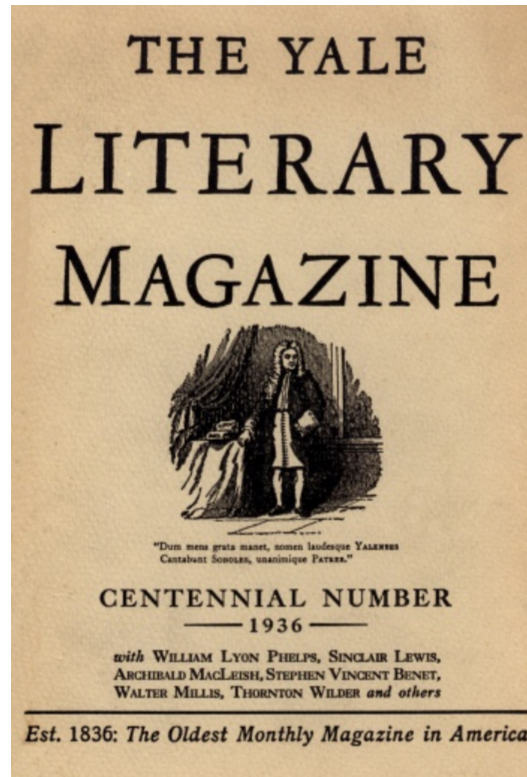
Born on October 4, 1914, Gill grew up on Prospect Avenue in West Hartford, an enclave of well-to-do families emblematic of the grand municipality Hartford was at the time - the wealthiest city in America. Gill's mother died when he was seven leaving his benevolent father with five rambunctious young children to raise by himself. Dr. Michael Gill was a kind, generous man who lavished his motherless children with money, gifts, private schools and extravagant trips to Europe. As a result Brendan, his fourth born, never had a high regard for money and all his life considered saving money to be the worst form of anti-social behavior.



**Dr. Michael H.R. Gill House (1901) - 735 Prospect Avenue, West Hartford, CT
Brendan Gill's Boyhood Home**

Kingswood's motto, *In Via Rector Celeriter* (In the Right Direction Swiftly), might well have delineated the storied life that lay ahead for this kinetic striver brimming with literary aspirations. His affable nature easily ingratiated him with his Yale classmates. By senior year he was the

popular editor of the centennial edition of Yale's famed literary magazine, *The Lit*, enabling him to rub shoulders with such literary luminaries as Robert Frost, Sinclair Lewis, T.S. Eliot, and Edna St. Vincent Millay.



Brendan Gill, '36 - Editor-in-Chief

Ensclosed at Yale, Gill eagerly sent poems and short stories to the *New Yorker* and other magazines, which were readily rejected. He self-published a prize-winning book of poetry, *Death in April*, and in his senior year, the exalted secret society, *Skull and Bones* (Brotherhood of Death), welcomed him into their mythic, mysterious ranks.

Gill graduated from Yale in 1936, a classmate of **Robert Case**, the Norfolk Country Club's first golf club champion in 1930. Somehow Gill had finagled his way into taking only one class his senior year, a survey of English lyric poetry. He was the only student in the class that met once a week at the professor's apartment near Yale Bowl. Mid-term, the professor died suddenly. Yale's faculty determined that Gill's single grade of 95 for that class would stand for the entire year which serendipitously vaulted Gill into *Phi Beta Kappa* and graduated him *Magna Cum Laude*. Blithely acknowledging that he deserved neither of these honors, Gill accepted both with relish, calling his spurious achievements 'a scandalous, delightful end to a lazy scholarly career'.

On June 20, 1936, shortly after Gill's Yale graduation, he married the 'joyous, beautiful' Anne Barnard from Smith College, whose family had been summering in Norfolk for decades. Anne's

father was a former deacon at Brick Presbyterian Church in New York but, although Gill was only nominally Catholic, the wedding ceremony took place at Norfolk's Immaculate Conception Church on Greenwoods Road. A reception followed in the gardens of *Laurel Cottage*, the 1792 house owned Anne's uncle **Arthur Knox** that had been in the Barnard family for years. An original member of the Norfolk Country Club, Arthur Knox was instrumental in getting the golf course constructed and was in the first foursome to tee off when it opened on July 4, 1928. The house eventually became the Gills' weekend house and is currently the residence of NCC member, **Betsy Childs Gill**.



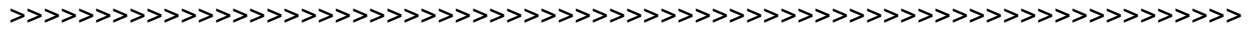
Anne and Brendan Gill Wedding Party, Laurel Cottage - June 20, 1936

As a wedding present, the Barnards gave the young couple the family's 'bungalow' on Laurel Way which had been designed a few years earlier by **Alfredo Taylor** on a scorecard during a round of golf with Anne's father at the Norfolk Country Club. Gill wrote his first *New Yorker* articles at the bungalow and for the rest of his life made several quixotic attempts to redesign the bungalow in the manner of Frank Lloyd Wright - whose biography, *Many Masks*, Gill wrote in 1987.

Gill's literary dream was to write The Great American Novel. With this lofty goal in mind, he spent most of the newlyweds' European honeymoon hunkered down in their ocean-going luxury liner and in various fancy hotel rooms in Paris, Rome and Vienna diligently typing away, 'in a puritan ecstasy' at his first novel - leaving his sweet, patient, forbearing bride to take in all the sights, mostly by herself.

Back from their honeymoon, the newlyweds moved to Old Tollgate Farm, an 18th century farmhouse in Berlin, CT, a wedding present from Gill's father. It seemed to be the ideal refuge for an aspiring writer and Gill got down to work finishing his novel (which never found a

publisher) and writing poems and short stories that he sold to magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Good Housekeeping* and *The New Yorker*. For the most part, they were living off an inheritance from Gill's father when **St. Clair McKelway**, *The New Yorker's* fiction editor invited Gill to New York for a job interview. Impressed by Gill's exuberance, McKelway, hired him on the spot without bothering to consult the magazine's bombastic, legendary co-founder and editor-in-chief, **Harold Ross**. By then the Gills were ready for a change, feeling too young to be cloistered in rural Connecticut and fettered to a lush life they hadn't altogether garnered on their own.



The New Yorker's New Yorker

It was a leap of faith to give up rustic Berlin, CT and move to the gritty metropolis of Manhattan during the Depression. The Gills found a 7-room, 3-bath apartment with a wood burning fireplace at 21 East 90th St. across from Central Park - for \$125 a month. Anne had the first of their seven children and Gill began his dream job: what would become an exhilarating 60-year writing career at the peerless *New Yorker Magazine*.

Energized by his new job and garrulous to a fault, Gill was taken aback by the dreary ambience he first encountered on West 43rd St. in the halls of *The New Yorker*. Shabby, filthy, smoke-filled offices lined a corridor mordantly dubbed *Sleepy Hollow*. Aloof, crotchety writers and illustrators barely spoke to one another, often because they were surpassingly hungover. And the boss, Harold Ross, the magazine's co-founder and driving force, proved to be a small-minded, bigoted bumpkin from Colorado whose formal education ended at the age of thirteen. How was it possible that the most admired, sophisticated magazine of its era could come out of such a soul-crushing hash of chaos and dysfunction?



Harold Ross (1892-1951)
Cofounder/Editor-In-Chief, *The New Yorker*

In spite of himself, Harold Ross had acquired an instinctive, primal knack for recognizing literary and artistic talent. With pluck and determination he managed to assemble a stable of brilliant writers and artists whose sensibilities fit perfectly with the magazine's mission of being 'as topical as possible on a level that is often small in scale and playful in intention - worldly, ironic, informed by knowledge but not visibly burdened by it'. **E.B. White** and **James Thurber** did the most to shape *The New Yorker's* urbane, sophisticated perspective but they were helped enormously by such household literary and artistic names as Walcott Gibbs, Dorothy Parker, John O'Hara, Charles Addams, Peter Arno, Eudora Welty, John Updike, John Cheever, Joseph Mitchell and on and on.

'Gregarious to the point of seeming lunacy', Gill was nonplussed and crestfallen to be surrounded by such a morose company of petulant co-workers. Adding to his dismay was being informed by his editors that his writing was too bedizened to reflect the magazine's clarity of tone.

Frustrated and disillusioned, in the summer of 1939 Gill accepted a family trip to Ireland from his father, planning to quit the magazine upon his return. Instead, he and Anne moved out of New York and into the 'bungalow' on Laurel Way where Gill devoted himself primarily to fiction and submitted material to *The New Yorker* from Norfolk. By 1942, missing the City's energy, Gill was back on staff at *The New Yorker* offices and living with Anne and their children in a red brick townhouse at 157 East 78th St.



Eustace Tilley
***The New Yorker's* First Cover - February 21, 1925**
Rea Irvin, Illustrator

Few would have called Brendan Gill a dandy (though, as a theater critic, he wore a tuxedo to every Broadway opening night) but, according to the *New York Times*, 'he became as inseparable a part of the magazine as *Eustace Tilley*, the Regency fop', who reappears on the magazine's anniversary cover every February. When he started writing for the magazine, Gill's style was formal and mannered, reflective of his genteel Hartford upbringing. Under the expert tutelage of inveterate *New Yorker* writer and editor, **Rogers E.M. Whittaker** aka, *E.M. Frimbo*, and legendary editor, **William Keepers Maxwell**, Gill learned to 'polish and maintain the magazine's glossy tone of informed sophistication', engendering vigorous sentences that invariably packed an existential punch, often tintured with sarcasm and irony, e.g. "The ingenuities we practice in order to appear admirable to ourselves would suffice to invent the telephone twice over on a rainy summer morning." or "I will try to cram these paragraphs full of facts and give them the weight and shape no greater than that of a cloud of butterflies."

His writing sharpened and he became invaluable, appearing in virtually every *New Yorker* issue for decades. A go-to reporter and rewrite man for Talk of the Town, Gill also contributed a plenitude of book, theater and film reviews, scores of personality Profiles and multiple poems and short stories. After stints as the magazine's film and theater critic, Gill revived **Lewis Mumford's** classic *New Yorker* column, *Skyline*, in 1987, thereby feeding and satiating his life-long passion for architecture.

A whirlwind of manic energy, Gill was too busy to have much interest in fussy food and needed only three or four hours of sleep a night. He bounded out of bed every morning with delight claiming he was never-tired, never unhappy and always eager to attend the next exciting party

or event. While working full time for the magazine, Gill published fifteen books, including biographies of Cole Porter, Charles Lindbergh, Tallulah Bankhead and Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1951, he received a **National Book Award** citation for his novel, *The Trouble of One House*; and he published several collections of Profiles of the scores of interesting characters he encountered by virtue of his crackerjack catbird seat in his aerie at *The New Yorker*.



“A Pillar of New York’s Civic, Social and Literary Life”
- The New York Times

Brendan Gill Caricature by Frank Modell

Among Gill’s many cultural and civic leadership roles were: chairman of the *Municipal Art Society*, chairman of the *Landmarks Preservation Commission*, vice president of the *American Academy of Arts and Letters*, chairman of the *New York Landmarks Conservancy*, co-founder and chairman of the *Victorian Society in America*, chairman of the *Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts* and a founder of *P.S. 1 Center for Contemporary Arts*.

Gill was also a much sought-after speaker. Often called upon for closing remarks at civic and cultural events Gill, in his clipped, tendentious rasp would rake his audience with a fusillade of words shot through with wit, humor and wisdom, leaving his listeners dumbstruck, smoldering in the aftermath of another blistering, passionate *coup de main*.

The Bronxville Gills

As much as the Gills came to love New York City, they needed space to accommodate their growing family. In 1946, they moved to Oak Ridge Cottage (the '**Owl House**') in Bronxville, NY, a 25-room Victorian Tudor mansion built for noted society portrait painter, **William Thomas Smedley** in 1895. Smedley's vast, two-story artist's studio was turned by the Gills into a gymnasium where their seven children could run free.



Oak Ridge Cottage (The Owl House) - Bronxville, NY
William Winthrop Kent, Architect - 1895

Via a convenient 16-mile train ride to Grand Central, Gill was in Manhattan, his natural habitat, writing in his *New Yorker* office and in full career all over town - researching articles, conducting interviews, leading free neighborhood walking tours and attending countless preservation and cultural meetings. An adherent of Jane Austen's shibboleth, "*Everything happens at parties.*", he delighted in attending every imaginable social event.

Urban Hero

“A ritual disembowelment in the name of Urban Renewal”

The above quote was Brendan Gill's expression of outrage at the wanton destruction in the 1960s and 70s of Hartford, the proud city of his youth. Under the dubious rubric of social engineering, cities across the country were being tragically eviscerated. When McKim, Mead and White's monumental beaux arts masterpiece, **Pennsylvania Station** (inspired by ancient Rome's *Baths of Caracalla* and built with marble from the same quarry in Italy) was ignominiously torn down in 1963, a preservation movement was galvanized. Gill found himself on the front lines fighting for the very soul of the city he loved.



Pennsylvania Station, McKim, Mead and White - 1910

In the mid-1970s, in a further affront, developers proposed the demolition of **Grand Central Terminal** (1913) to erect an insipid skyscraper designed by Brutalist architect Marcel Breuer. Right-thinking, influential New Yorkers like Gill were horrified and organized a potent protest. Gill held a televised news conference at Grand Central's *Oyster Bar* where he introduced his fellow Municipal Art Society board member **Jacqueline Onassis Kennedy**, whose megawatt celebrity

was crucial in saving Grand Central. After a pitched, three year battle, the United States Supreme Court ruled in 1978 that the landmarked Grand Central could never be torn down.



**Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Brendan Gill
Enlightened Saviors of Grand Central Terminal**



Norfolk, CT - The Rural He

[Editor's Note: Brendan Gill, a man whose career was dedicated to the connotations and nuances of words, always pronounced it **Norfork**]

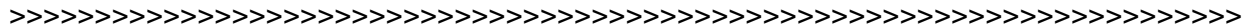
Cosmopolite Gill found Norfolk to be the rural antidote to New York's dynamism but, more significantly, it was where he forged his cherished friendship with *New Directions* publisher, **James Laughlin**. Born weeks apart in 1914 and dying weeks apart in 1997, these two Irish-Americans besotted by the seductiveness of words, burnished a mutual love of literature into an intellectually satisfying, six- decade kinship of mutual admiration and respect.

For years, the Gills spent many pleasant hours visiting the Laughlin family camp on the north side of Tobey Pond. Laughlin called Gill one day to inform him that the run-down camp next door to his was for sale and that he better act fast. Knowing that the price of the camp was the same as the advance for a *New Yorker* Profile Gill talked editor **William Shawn** into letting him write a Profile on Belgian mystery writer **George Simenon**, who wrote over 500 novels.

After buying the camp and fixing it up, Gill invited Simenon, who was living at Shadow Rock Farm in Lakeville, CT, for a thank you gathering at his new Tobey retreat. Simenon exclaimed munificently that Gill's waterside sanctuary reminded him of Renoir's evocative painting *Luncheon of the Boating Party* - a generously gratuitous remark that tickled Gill to no end.



Luncheon of the Boating Party
Pierre-Auguste Renoir, 1881



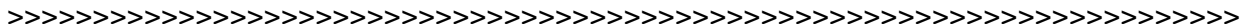


“Get Out of That Wet Bathing Suit and Into a Dry Martini”

As much as he loved his Eden on Tobey Pond, Gill was not a swimmer and rarely ventured into Tobey’s inviting, tonic waters. Antithetically, James Laughlin loved a tantalizing, brisk Tobey swim. From his dock, Gill would tease and taunt the swimming Laughlin until cocktail hour when he would insistently utter his version of the Hollywood bromide rendered above. Gill didn’t drink martinis but prided himself on making a mean one for Laughlin. Before long the two litterateurs were sitting on the deck among family and friends, playfully extolling each’s hoary literary conceits while the summer sun lazily set over Tobey and Great Mountain Forest.



Laughlin and Gill Plumb the Depths of Their Friendship at Tobey Pond



The Dawn, The Dew, The Golf... The Repartee**

Brendan Gill was no athlete. A staunch intellectual, he detested all games and organized sports; which is curious because his father was an avid golfer, known to play 45 holes in one day when his busy medical practice allowed. A vestigial memory of his father's love of golf may have been part of why Gill played golf, but it was more his profound friendship with James (J.) Laughlin that found him on the NCC's first tee most every weekend for years.

Insisting on teeing off at dawn so as not to 'ruin his day', Gill carried only three clubs in his bag: driver, 3-iron and putter. With no pre-shot routine he would aggressively flail away at the ball, make a mad dash to god-knows where the ball landed and haphazardly slash away again - for all 9 holes.

In stark contrast, Laughlin was a deliberate, serious golfer always trying to fathom the mysterious exigencies of the hardest game. He took lessons from former NCC golf pro, **Joe Bunk** and hit practice balls in his sheep pasture on Mountain Road. While Laughlin took his time contemplating his next shot, Gill would do his best to distract him by quoting from the canon of great poets. Upon Laughlin hitting an errant shot, Gill would mockingly invoke his favorite poet:

*"When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing
We are blest by everything
Everything we look upon is blest."*

- William Butler Yeats
A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 1933

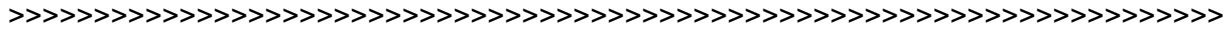
If a ball were lost, Gill couldn't be bothered looking for it while Laughlin methodically combed the brush well beyond the time allotted by the rules. At the round's conclusion, Gill would mischievously challenge Laughlin to a race up the steep hill to the clubhouse. While Gill broke into a ludicrous sprint, the bemused Laughlin looked on, meticulously tallying the results of the nickel-and-dime bets they'd made on virtually every golf shot.



Gill's Hill



...and golf bag
(Norfolk Historical Museum)





Churning Out the Words Until the Final Curtain

"You think it horrible that lust and rage should dance attention on my old age."

- William Butler Yeats
The Spur, 1938

By his early eighties, Gill maintained the vigor of a much younger man. As ever rising at dawn, he was continually on the go, working on a biography of Stanford White, attending meetings of the several literary and preservation institutions to which he belonged and still showing up at every party or social event. Two years before he died, Gill was proud to be inducted, along with his great friend James Laughlin, into the **American Academy of Arts and Letters**, the gratifying culmination of a long, illustrious literary career.

"To die quickly in one's eighth decade at the very top of one's powers is an enviable end, and not an occasion for mourning."

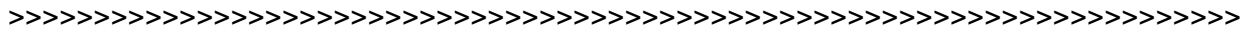
- Brendan Gill

Gill always said he wanted to die 'leaping over a hedge'. Two days after Christmas in 1997, still trenchant, in full writing harness, Brendan Gill died quietly in New York of natural causes at the age of 83. Two years later his beloved wife Anne who, at one time was dean of Sarah Lawrence College's Paris summer school, improbably died on her way to sing Christmas carols in downtown Norfolk.



Anne Barnard Gill Hugs Daughter Brenda, Norfolk, CT - 1938

(photograph courtesy of Louise Hill Davis)



brought to you by:

Mícheál Cummings Kelly
Club Historian
June 1, 2020

Acknowledgements

* *Here at the New Yorker*, Brendan Gill's insightful, revealing, amusing 1975 book was indispensable in putting this Profile together. Those who never had the pleasure of reading this irreverent *tour de force* are strongly encouraged to do so. Gill's life-affirming persona percolates on every page.

** Several anecdotes in this Profile were gleaned from a memorial reminiscence by Brendan Gill's son, **Michael Gates Gill**, provided courtesy of longtime NCC member and former NCC golf club champion, **Laurence Hannafin**.

A sincere thank you to **Holly Gill**, Brendan Gill's daughter, who graciously shared memories and photographs of her parents.

> Stay tuned for a companion piece on James Laughlin... someday soon