

James Laughlin IV (1914-1997)

*"The Greatest Publisher of the 20th Century"
Godfather of Literary Modernism
Downhill Skiing Pioneer
Poet*



A Young Ski Mogul and His Mountain, circa 1940

James Laughlin's crackerjack friend of sixty years and fellow Norfolk literary luminary, **Brendan Gill**, often referred to Laughlin as the greatest publisher of the 20th century - a joshing but sincere testimonial that never failed to embarrass 'J', as Laughlin was informally known.

Sheepishly, Laughlin would rejoinder: “everyone knows Robert Giroux (of Farrar, Straus & Giroux) holds that distinction”... and he meant it. Laughlin’s modesty aside, a legion of writers, critics, academics and book publishing *cognoscenti* have resoundingly endorsed Gill’s unequivocal assessment of Laughlin’s enormous impact on book publishing in the twentieth century.

And to think, **New Directions**, Laughlin’s celebrated, unabashedly cerebral publishing company found its footing and flourished down a secluded country road in rural Northwest Connecticut - little more than a well-struck persimmon driver from the 7th green of the Norfolk Country Club. NCC members **Leila Laughlin Javitch**, Laughlin’s daughter, her husband, **Daniel Javitch** and Laughlin’s daughter-in-law, **Carlene Laughlin** are *in situ*, at least part of the time, in the family enclave just past Golf Drive on Mountain Road.

Despite Laughlin’s momentous accomplishments in publishing, all the awards and accolades he received and richly deserved, the fullness of his life as a publisher, it was recognition as a poet in his own write (apologies to John Lennon), that by far meant the most to him, in particular near the end of his long, productive, estimable life.

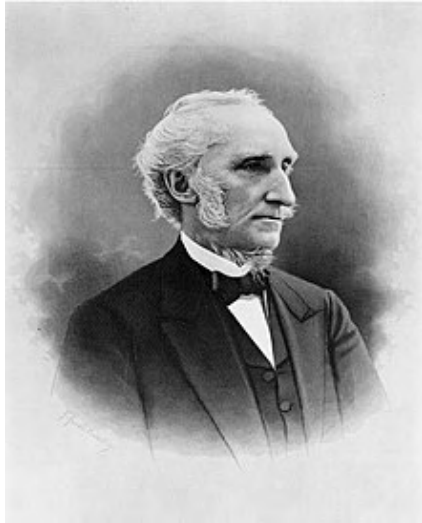
The Pittsburgh Laughlins

Over two centuries ago, in the village of **Dunover** near **Ballywalter** in County Down, Northern Ireland (some 35 miles southeast of Belfast), a family of Laughlins tilled the hardscrabble soil on a subsistence potato farm. Alexander and James Laughlin, together with their siblings, owned the farm equally when they all decided, around 1819, to sell off the forsaken land. With his share of the proceeds, Alexander bought a sizable amount of crockery and sailed with it to the United States with his wife Mary Ann Bailey. Landing in Baltimore, they bought a horse and wagon and set out for Pennsylvania, selling the crockery to farmers along the way. Two hundred and fifty miles and several days later, they reached Fort Pitt(sburgh) located where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers converge to form the Ohio River. Having sold all the crockery, the young marrieds had enough money to buy a little house and go into business at the pork and provisions store owned by Mary Ann’s father.

Ten years later, after the siblings mother died, younger brother James Laughlin, aged 23, left Ireland with his octogenarian father to work with Alexander at the grocery store in Pittsburgh - thus began the patriarchal James Laughlin lineage that three generations later begat **James Laughlin IV**, the subject of NCC Profile #8.

Pious, enterprising and shrewd, 19th century’s James Laughlin distinguished himself enough, after only ten years in Pittsburgh, to marry the granddaughter of Major George McCully, George Washington’s most trusted officer and commander of Fort Pitt during the Revolutionary War. By 1852 at age 46, just twenty three years after leaving Ireland, James Laughlin had garnered a large enough stake in the First National Bank of Pittsburgh to become its president - a position he held until his death in 1882.

The Great-Grandparents



James Laughlin (1806-1882)



Ann McCully Laughlin (1813-1891)

In 1853, James Laughlin made the acquaintance of **Benjamin Franklin Jones**, a canal boat builder who, envisioning the potential of railroads, went into the iron and steel business. James Laughlin, looking to focus his four sons (one of whom threatened to move to Paris to become a painter) on suitable careers, invested a large sum in Benjamin Jones's steel enterprise and by 1856 he was an equal partner in what became the **Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation**. After making a fortune during the Civil War, Jones & Laughlin Steel grew exponentially and by 1900 was the second largest steel producer in the United States.

A strict Presbyterian and true believer in higher education, James Laughlin was the first President of the *Western Theological Seminary* and founder and longtime president of the *Pennsylvania Female College* in Pittsburgh which is now **Chatham University** (William Pitt, namesake of Pittsburgh, was the 1st Earl of Chatham).

The Laughlins became members in good standing of Pittsburgh's industrial revolution-era *arrivistes* which at the time included fellow self-made Scotch/Irish millionaires, **Andrew Carnegie**, another steel magnate, and wealthy banker **Andrew Mellon**. Industrialist/art patron **Henry Clay Frick** was a Laughlin uncle.



Jones & Laughlin Steel Company - Aliquippa Works

On September 10, 1908, **Marjory Rea** and **Henry Hughart Laughlin**, scions of two prominent Pittsburgh steel families, were married at the Rea's summer home in Point Pleasant, NJ. A year later they built a manor house at 104 Woodland Road in Pittsburgh's tony Squirrel Hill/ Shadyside neighborhood. The first of their two children, Hughart Rea Laughlin, was born in 1909; and on October 30, 1914, son James was born after surviving a difficult delivery.

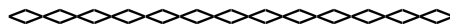
H. Hughart Laughlin was a legatee of a wealthy generation of newly monied American families who didn't really have to work for a living and thought doing so was somewhat beneath them. He was an electrical engineer and was put in charge of Jones & Laughlin's coal mines but two weeks after his father died in 1919 he retired at the age of 41 to live a sportsman's life replete with expensive sports cars, fancy yachts, golf, polo, bespoke custom-made suits, grand houses and European travel.

Marjory Rea Laughlin was the personification of early 20th century upper crust sophistication. Tall, athletic and comely in the patrician manner, she grew up playing golf and tennis at the exclusive Pittsburgh Golf Club (1896), graduated from the Pennsylvania College for Women (the all female precursor of Chatham University where the Laughlin House is now a women's dormitory), played bridge and was an impeccable dinner party hostess.



Marjory Rea Laughlin House, 1909 - Chatham University
James Laughlin's Boyhood Home

Every Thanksgiving, H. Hughart Laughlin took his sons on a ceremonial tour of the fire-breathing, seething, belching steel mills owned by the family. First born son, Hughart, had no qualms about going into the steel business and enjoyed a successful, satisfying career in the upper echelons of management. Unnerved and frightened by the deafening hellscapes of fire, smoke and intense heat emanating from the mammoth blast furnaces, young James resolved early on to never work in the family business.



The Education of an Up and Coming Book Publisher

In September 1927, 13-year old James and his older brother Henry were dispatched to *Institut Le Rosey* considered then (and now) to be the most expensive school in the world (currently \$150,000 a year) on Lake Geneva in Switzerland for an immersive year-long primer in European culture. A strict disciplinarian school where classes were taught in French, *Le Rosey* was larded with the sons of royalty and privilege from all over the world. It boasted a second campus in the famed ski resort of **Gstaad** in the Swiss Alps where students spent the winter

camping in rustic lodges and skiing their hearts out. Laughlin was never an athlete but Gstaad ignited in him a passion for skiing that consumed him for over fifty years.

Upon his return from Switzerland, Laughlin enrolled at **Eaglebrook School** in Deerfield, MA, a kind of prep school for prep school, with its own private ski facility, about 80 miles from Norfolk. His beloved **Aunt Leila Laughlin Carlisle** had recently built an imposing brick 'cottage' on Mountain Road that she named **Robin Hill** after a house in John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1922). Leila was a formidable, strong-willed woman who was looking to distance herself from the sometimes fraught Laughlin family dynamic in Pittsburgh. She was introduced to Norfolk by her cousin, **Starling Winston Childs**, a New York banker also from Pittsburgh who, starting in 1909 together with future Senator **Frederic Walcott**, acquired thousands of acres of Norfolk woodlands they called **Great Mountain Forest**.

Aunt Leila was married to George Lister Carlisle ('Uncle Dicky'), a Yale graduate and mining engineer. Before their wedding Leila declared that she had no intention of having children; but she became a surrogate mother to the sensitive young James Laughlin who spent many happy weekends and summers at Robin Hill and fell in love with Norfolk.

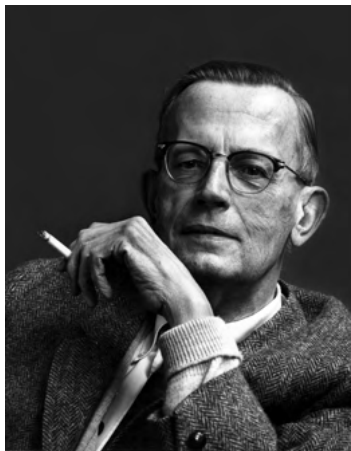


Aunt Leila Laughlin Carlisle (1873-1961)



Robin Hill - Charles Everett, Architect - 1927

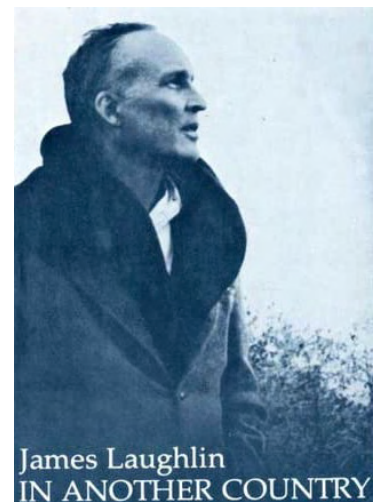
After Eaglebrook, Laughlin enrolled at the **The Choate School** in Wallingford, CT considered *the* prep school for the sons of the *nouveau riche*. Joseph, Jr. and John F. Kennedy were students at Choate during the same period. It was at Choate that Laughlin's lifelong pilgrimage devoted to the literary arts, especially poetry, got its start. Laughlin was profoundly influenced by his Harvard-educated English professor, **Dudley Fitts**, a poet, and literary critic who translated ancient Greek and Latin texts and instilled in Laughlin a passion for the Classics. The neoteric, avant-guard (for the time) Roman poet, **Catullus**, who rebelliously wrote about every day life in Rome became Laughlin's enduring poetic muse.



Dudley Fitts (1903-1968)



Catullus (84-54 BC)



James Laughlin

Dudley Fitts (1903-1968) + Catullus (84-54 BC) = James Laughlin

The Pittsburgh Laughlins were proud Princeton men who bled orange and black, so much so that H. Hughart Laughlin cried when his son James told him he'd decided to go to Harvard in 1932. A restive, serious student, Laughlin was likely pointed toward Cambridge by Dudley Fitts who considered Harvard the most erudite university teaching the Classics. Wealthy and preternaturally charming, Laughlin fit right in socially at Cambridge. He majored in Latin and Italian but felt that the curriculum wasn't rigorous enough and that Harvard was too conservative. Skipping boring English literature classes, he busied himself translating the ancient Roman poet *Virgil*, and on weekends escaped to Vermont with his chums to pursue his growing appetite for skiing.

In June after his freshman year at Harvard, Laughlin sailed to Europe carrying a letter of introduction from Dudley Fitts to the controversial, expatriate, Fascist American poet **Ezra Pound**. After touring England, France and Germany, Laughlin arrived in Rapallo, Italy on August 27, 1933 to find Pound taking his morning swim in the Ligurian Sea. It was the beginning of a complex, drama-filled, decades long literary kinship.

Aside: (In 1902, at the University of Pennsylvania, Pound met his literary alter ego, poet/physician **William Carlos Williams**. Both had 'an inveterate gift for impropriety'. At Pound's suggestion, soon after he got back to the States, Laughlin visited Carlos Williams in New Jersey and persuaded him to sign on with *New Directions*. Carlos Williams' epic poem *Patterson* (written in five volumes from 1946 to 1958) is a touchstone of modernist poetry. *New Directions* would eventually publish 24 books by Ezra Pound and 19 by William Carlos Williams.)

Two Pillars of Modernism



Ezra Weston Loomis Pound (1885-1972)



William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

Sophomore year at Harvard was no more satisfying intellectually for Laughlin. Restless for adventure, he decided to take a year off and go back to Europe, sailing on the S.S. Leviathan in 1933. In London he inveigled an audience with **T.S. Eliot**, whose poem ***The Wasteland*** (1922, dedicated to Ezra Pound) had made him internationally famous. In Austria, at the age of only 20, Laughlin found himself caught up in the heady pre-war social whirlwind of Salzburg where one day sitting by a public pool, he sensed that an older gentleman was staring at him. Rather than feeling uneasy the dashing, nearly six foot-six-inch Laughlin boldly marched over to the gentleman and struck up a conversation. The man turned out to be **Bernard Faÿ**, a French historian and polemicist who just happened to be **Gertrude Stein**'s good friend and translator.



James Laughlin Poolside - 1930s

A few days later Laughlin found himself being driven by Faÿ to **Bilignin** in Southeastern France where Stein, who was at the height of her fame, was living with Alice B. Toklas. Evidently Stein, who was also born in Pittsburgh, was quite taken with the young Laughlin. She immediately put him to work typing her manuscripts and writing press releases for her upcoming triumphal return to America after thirty years abroad. Stein liked to drive her car 'Godiva' very fast through the French countryside. With Alice B. Toklas riding shotgun Laughlin, who thought Stein was the most charismatic person he ever met, would be installed in the back seat with the dogs, at the ready to change the numerous flat tires visited on 'Godiva'.



Gertrude Stein and Her Poodle 'Basket' with James Laughlin, 1933

After Stein left for America, Laughlin found an apartment in Paris for \$3 a night and lived the bohemian life until November when he made his way back to Rapallo to enroll as the only student in Ezra Pound's tongue-in-cheek, but deadly serious '**Eziversity**'. For hours, Laughlin would sit quietly listening to Pound pontificate brilliantly on literature, politics and economics (particularly on the unscrupulous power of banks and corporations) always imploring him to 'make it new'. Laughlin abhorred Pound's contemptible anti-semitism but was enthralled by his facile, rambling mind and the enormous intellect which created his seminal modernist poetry masterwork, '**The Cantos**'.

It has become a cliché in publishing (and a story Laughlin often recounted) that Pound, after reading Laughlin's ingenuous efforts at poetry, advised him to give up poetry and do something

'useful with his life' - like becoming a book publisher. Apocryphal story or not, when Laughlin returned from his sabbatical in Europe he set about doing what Pound (mostly because he and his fellow modernist writers were in need of a reliable publisher) implored him to do.

On Laughlin's 21st birthday, Laughlin's father gave him \$100,000 dollars (\$2 million today) with the stipulation that, since he hadn't earned the money, he should use it to help less fortunate people. To Laughlin, making the best modern (albeit obscure and difficult) literary works available to the public was a worthwhile, altruistic pursuit. Determined and ambitious, he made plans to publish his own anthology of contemporary writing and, with no prior experience, proceeded to start his own publishing company in his dormitory room in Eliot House at Harvard. Twenty-one years old, technically still a sophomore, he called his quixotic publishing endeavor, ***New Directions***.

The day after having Christmas dinner at Robin Hill in 1935, Laughlin drove to New Hampshire to hone his skills ahead of trying out for Harvard's ski team. He promptly skied into a tree and ended up in a full body cast for two months. As a result, he suffered with a bad back for the rest of his life. Propitiously however, the skiing accident left him with plenty of free time to concentrate on getting *New Directions* off the ground.

Though Laughlin began putting his first *New Directions* anthology together in his Harvard dorm room, Aunt Leila offered him a former cow shed she called the 'White Cottage' on her Mountain Road property to use as an address for the ***New Directions Publishing House***. In time, the cow shed became the early repository, focal point and headquarters for the fledgling boutique publishing company.

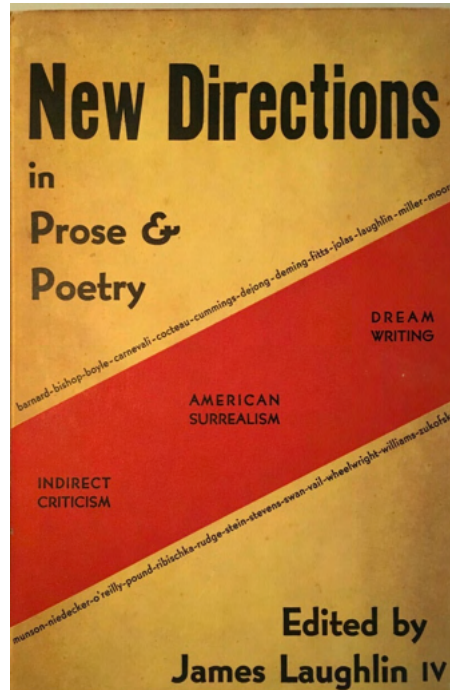


Tree-Shrouded Cow Shed *cum* White Cottage - Mountain Road

Laughlin was not only gifted with immense charm and intelligence, he was blessed with the ferocious work ethic and intensity of purpose required to approach, romance and nurture gifted writers, well-known and obscure, that he deemed appropriate for his first anthology.

A year later, on November 16, 1936, Laughlin published his first anthology: ***New Directions in Prose & Poetry***. Laughlin designed the book himself, choosing fine paper, bindings and distinctive print befitting the quality of writing in its 208 pages. It proved to be a literary lightning

rod, brimming with the works of experimental modernist writers such as **e.e. cummings**, **Jean Cocteau**, **Gertrude Stein**, **Henry Miller**, **Marianne Moore**, **Kay Boyle**, **Ezra Pound**, **William Carlos Williams**, **Wallace Stevens**, etc. and even Laughlin himself writing under the pseudonym, **Tasilo Ribischka**. It was an audacious, auspicious debut.

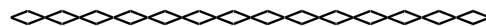


James Laughlin Launches *New Directions* - November 16, 1936

[Laughlin] brought Modernist writing to us as assiduously and triumphantly as The Museum of Modern Art brought twentieth-century painting and sculpture."

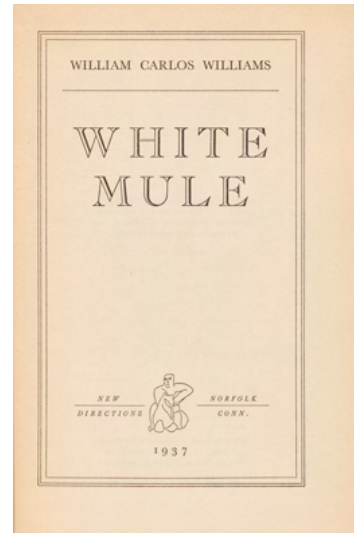
- Guy Davenport

Laughlin had found his calling. Never in it for the money, he was a fervent believer in publishing only the highest level of intellectually stimulating books of pure literary value, purposely eschewing anything conventionally commercial. He refused to cater to the 'poor taste of the masses'; only to the 'cultivated, educated reader'. Fighting what he considered the creeping decay of literature, he wanted publishing to not be a business but an art, in and of itself.





**New Directions Colophon
Heinz Henghes - 1936**



First ND Novel - 1937

In 1937, **White Mule**, by William Carlos Williams became the first novel published by New Directions. It was surprisingly well-reviewed creating a demand that caught Laughlin off guard. When the book came out he was abroad skiing again, this time for three months in New Zealand and Australia. Panicked, Carlos Williams rushed to Norfolk to frantically bound more volumes, but it was too late to meet the demand. It was a missed opportunity that the chagrined doctor took a long time overcoming.

Laughlin's attention to New Directions was attenuated somewhat by his emotional, almost spiritual absorption in America's burgeoning craze for downhill (Alpine) skiing. He often said he felt graceful only on skis. A proficient, daredevil skier, he skied competitively all over the world and in 1936 defeated an Olympian skier and the Canadian national champion in the slalom on Mt. Baker in Washington. He was also writing articles for *The American Ski Annual* and other skiing publications; and paid for the Dartmouth ski team to travel to the national college ski championships.

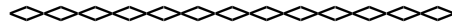


Along with Laughlin's innate intellectual curiosity came a compelling wanderlust. Despite his chronic back pain and lanky six foot six frame, he travelled with alacrity and relish. Taken and inspired by the culture and colors of India, he returned frequently and wrote many poems about his intense feelings for South Asia.

In March of 1938 he was traveling again, this time on the Queen Mary, where he socialized with novelist **Martha Gellhorn**, Ernest Hemingway's wife, who was meeting her husband in Madrid to report on the Spanish Civil War. Laughlin went on to Switzerland where he blissfully skied his way from primitive hut to hut throughout the springtime Alps.

On the way home he stopped in Paris. A natural and talented networker, he met with **James Joyce, Jean Cocteau, Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, Collette, Dylan Thomas, W.H. Auden**, etc. as, at age 24, he was busy building a solid core of writers for his fledgling publishing company.

His love for Norfolk prompted him to make the rural village, halfway between New York and Boston the headquarters and heart and soul of his company. He moved across Mountain Road into Meadow House and pretty much ran his publishing company out of his home for sixty years. His mother came from Pittsburgh and his old Choate professor, Dudley Fitts came to Norfolk to help out; and Laughlin coaxed the brilliant, tortured poet **Delmore Schwartz** to Norfolk to be his editing and production *consigliere*.



It took seven years but on June 5, 1939, Laughlin, after launching a new classics series of books for *New Directions*, finally graduated *cum laude*, from Harvard. That summer, Laughlin embarked on a cross country trip selling his books out of the trunk his car. He didn't necessarily like doing it but felt it was an inherent part of his job as publisher; and he was good at it, charming booksellers into taking a chance on his highbrow, esoteric prose and poetry. He also befriended **Frances Steloff**, the doyenne of New York avant-garde booksellers at the **Gotham Book Mart**. From her highly respected book store on West 47th St., a nexus for modernist literature and its enthusiasts, Steloff mentored Laughlin in the fine art of bookselling.

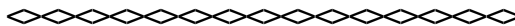


Whimsical John Held, Jr. Sign - 41 West 47th St., NYC



Frances 'Fanny' Steloff (1887-1989)
Gotham Book Mart Matriarch

For quite some time Laughlin kept *New Directions* afloat with money out of his own pocket and subsidized the bottom line by reprinting such forgotten books as ***The Great Gatsby*** (and, in so doing, resuscitating F. Scott Fitzgerald's diminishing literary reputation). After the war as college campuses began filling up Laughlin made the savvy business decision to focus on selling his highly literary catalog of books to college professors and their students. But it wasn't until **Herman Hesse's, *Siddhartha*** which he published in 1951, became catnip for the hippie generation and he published **Lawrence Ferlinghetti's, *Coney Island of the Mind*** which tickled the senses of the **Beat Generation**, both selling thousands of copies, that *New Directions* became truly solvent; as it is today, this year celebrating, from its headquarters at 80 Eighth Avenue in New York, the 85th anniversary of its founding by James Laughlin during the Great Depression.



Alta on High

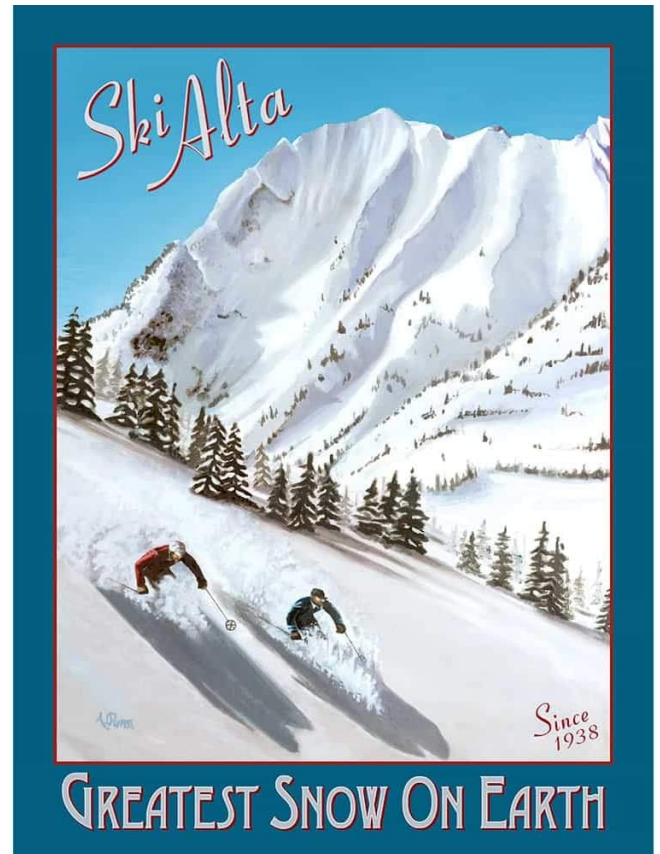
In 1940, Laughlin visited **Alta**, a derelict silver mining town 30 miles north of Salt Lake City, Utah that the U.S. Forest Service, with the help of Norwegian ski jump champion, **Alf Engen** (the pioneer of powder) was developing one of the first downhill ski areas in the United States.

Situated on a strikingly beautiful 11,000 foot mountain in Little Cottonwood Canyon in the Wasatch Mountains, Alta gets a yearly average of 547 feet of of dry, light powdery snow.

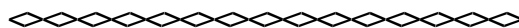
Smitten, Laughlin invested \$25,000 in the Forest Service's project and partnered with Dartmouth skiing legend **Dick Durrance** to build a no frills ski lodge, ideal for skiing purists eager to challenge the mountain's 2538 foot vertical drop featuring long, straight fall-line pitches. In the early days Alta attracted celebrities such as **Claudette Colbert, Errol Flynn** and **Gary Cooper**. Today, with 2,614 skiable acres and 119 runs, it has a cult following of thousands of skiers from all over the world. Alta's 81-year old lodge is now owned by a separate entity, but the Laughlin family maintains a majority financial interest in the **Alta Ski Lifts Company**.



Alta Promotional Photograph - 1940s



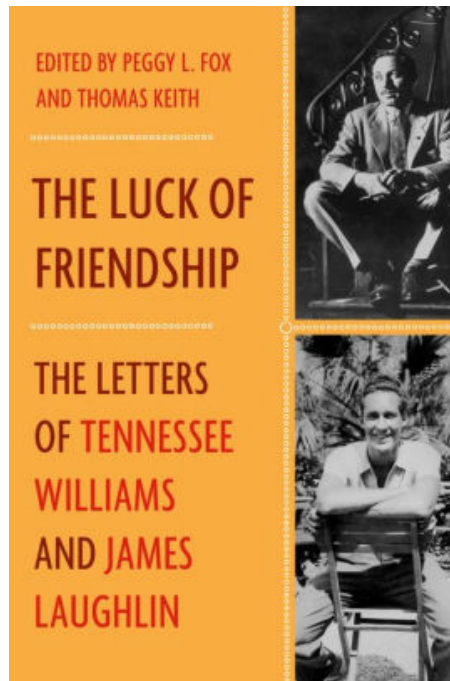
Pure Powder



The Luck of Friendship

It's true enough that lasting friendships are often random, serendipitous and yes, sometimes lucky. Not only did James Laughlin have the luck of friendship he had the charisma, drive and stamina for nurturing and maintaining hundreds of personal and professional relationships. In person he carried his tall frame with a certain aristocratic mien, a presence that many current NCC members who knew him well, especially women, say was simply irresistible.

Laughlin religiously wrote hundreds of thousands of letters to his multitude of friends and authors by hand, typing or into his Dictaphone. To date *eight volumes* of letters between Laughlin and his most notable correspondents have been published; to wit: **Thomas Merton, Henry Miller, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Guy Davenport, Kenneth Rexroth, Delmore Schwartz** and most significantly, the writer Laughlin always referred to as the best friend he ever had, **Tennessee Williams**.



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In the summer of 1942, Laughlin was invited to a party at the East 19th St. apartment of ballet and society impresario, **Lincoln Kirstein**, located on the 'Block Beautiful' around the corner from Gramercy Park. New York art world illuminati filled the elegant 19th century town house making the young publisher from Connecticut by way of Pittsburgh feel unusually ill at ease. Meandering into an anteroom of the apartment, Laughlin came upon slight young man sitting by himself who felt equally uncomfortable in the rarified air of New York's high society, such as it was during the War.



Lincoln Kirstein (1907-1996)

The shy stranger sitting in the corner was **Thomas Lanier Williams III**, a struggling writer on the verge of becoming one of the most celebrated playwrights of the 20th century, known colloquially as **Tennessee Williams**. The two literary cubs struck up a conversation and bonded immediately over their shared love of the writing of tragic, modernist poet **Hart Crane**. It was the beginning of a robust, fulfilling, decades long friendship. In 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* opened to universal acclaim, followed by *A Streetcar Named Desire*, catapulting Williams into the firmament of American theater. Laughlin became Tennessee's loyal confidante, helping him navigate the perils of fame and Tennessee's tumultuous love life. It was a warm, unique, lasting brotherhood which is chronicled in the forty years of letters they wrote to each other in, *The Luck of Friendship*.



Thomas Lanier 'Tennessee' Williams (1911-1983) - circa 1942



In His Hours of Darkness (In His Time of Need)

- paraphrasing Gram Parsons

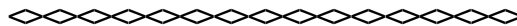
Laughlin enjoyed his cigars, his contemplative, solitary swims from his camp at Tobey Pond (where from the adjoining dock, Brendan Gill's children once tossed bread at the visiting Ezra Pound) and often played golf at the Norfolk CC with Gill or with fellow publisher **Gavin Borden**, who with his wife NCC member, **Elizabeth 'Libby' Borden**, founded and operated **Garland Publishing**, which specialized in photographic reprints of antiquarian books and manuscripts.

For the last twenty years of his life, Laughlin's health declined precipitously and he suffered from insomnia from the heavy medication he was taking. But his lifetime yen to achieve greatness as a poet was trenchant as ever. Habitually, he woke up at two in the morning at Meadow House and shuffled downstairs to his desk overlooking the sheep meadow. Ruminating over his manual typewriter, lighting and relighting his ever-present pipe, he spent hours delving into his

past and meticulously stringing together words of love and loss. The result was a remarkable output of over twenty volumes of poetry, short stories and memoirs.



Meadow House - Mountain Road



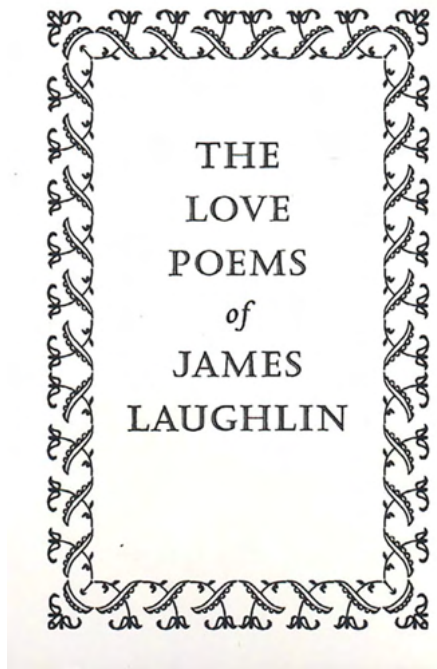
Laughlin was painfully modest about his talent as a poet and described his poems as “an arbitrary visual pattern against the sound pattern of colloquial cadence to get tension and surprise.” Married three times, Laughlin was known to have an abiding infatuation with the fairer sex; and many of his poems were about the never ending search for perfect, unattainable, evanescent love.

“[Laughlin] writes such bittersweet, ironic, rueful, exotic, tough minded, witty love poems that run the gamut from ecstasy to loss.”

- Marjorie Perloff

*“Under deep cover as **Godfather of Modernism**, James Laughlin had secretly raised and made himself into the Poetry Chieftain of Sane Eros, the **Catallus** of fin-de-siecle America.”*

- Andre Codrescu



Published in November, 1998

A sample of Laughlin's poetic sensibility:

In Hac Spe Vivo*

My head can lend no succour
to my heart because her face

is beyond all wonder she is
like diamond to glass when

her eyelids part their fringes
of bright gold and when

to the lute she sings she
makes the nightbird mute

gods why do you make us love
your goodly gifts and snatch

them right away I marvel how
the fish do live in the sea

but patience gazes on the
graves of kings (and mine). [1985]

* "*In this hope I live*" - *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* - by William Shakespeare, 1609

In his later years, Laughlin needed help managing his household affairs. He heard of a skilled woman who did clerical work for two of his fellow well-to-do Norfolk Country Club friends, **Alec Vagliano** and **Lambros J. Lambros**. Laughlin hired the young mother and for several years **Kathy Bascetta**, who now cheerfully, winsomely and energetically presides over the window at the Norfolk Post Office, did Laughlin's bookkeeping, took dictation, typed his manuscripts and did other clerical work, while raising her four daughters.



Kathy O'Brian Bascetta - Bookkeeper Extraordinaire - 1980s

Laughlin's pursuit of excellence and recognition as a poet was validated when, in 1993, along with his old friend Brendan Gill, he was honored with induction into the prestigious **American Academy of Arts and Letters**. It was perhaps his proudest moments in a lifetime of accomplishment in the world of literature.

The Sudden Subway

On February 25, 1983 at the age of 71, **Tennessee Williams** died unexpectedly from an accidental overdose of Seconal in his suite at the Hotel Elysée at 60 E. 54th St. in New York. He was scheduled to speak the following night at a dinner honoring Laughlin at the **National Arts Club** on Gramercy Park just around the corner from Lincoln Kirstein's apartment on 19th St. where the two inveterate friends had (kis)met forty years before. Devastated by the shocking loss of his longtime closest friend, Laughlin assuaged his feelings by reading (at his own award ceremony) a poem he wrote in honor of the great American playwright... as follows:

Tennessee

*called death the sudden subway and now he has taken that train
but there are so many good things to remember
first the young man in sloppy pants and a torn sweater
whom I met at Lincoln Kirstein's cocktail party
he was very shy and had hidden himself in a side room
I too was shy but we got talking
he told me that he wrote plays and that he loved Hart Crane
he carried the poems of Hart Crane in his knapsack wherever he
hitchhiked
then his first night of glory in Chicago
when he and Laurette Taylor made a new American theater
I remember happy days with him in London and Italy and Key West
and how often friends and writers who were down on their luck
told me how generously he had helped them
(but you would never hear it from him)
so many fine things to remember
that I can live again in my mind
until it is my turn to join him on the sudden subway*

James Laughlin boarded his own sudden subway when he died on November 12, 1997 from complications of a stroke - interestingly, just six weeks before the death of his Norfolk literary soul mate, **Brendan Gill**. Born just 26 days apart in 1914, Norfolk's foremost literary lions were 83 years old and are now resting for eternity barely a chip shot (20 steps) from one another in Norfolk's Center Cemetery on Old Colony Road.

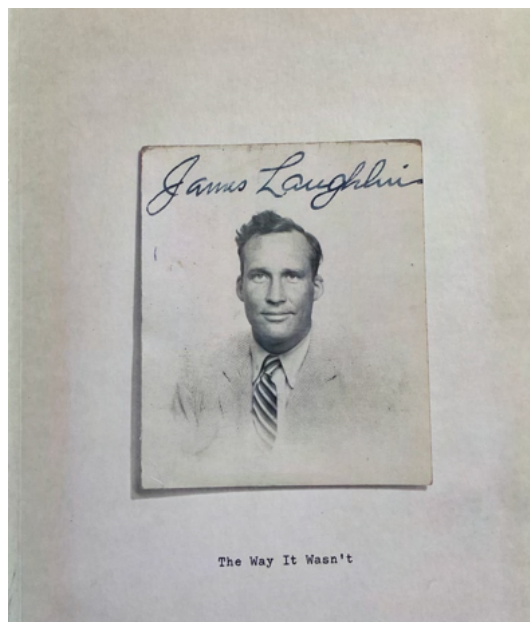
(and in) The End...

Mícheál Cummings Kelly
Club Historian
Summer Solstice, 2021

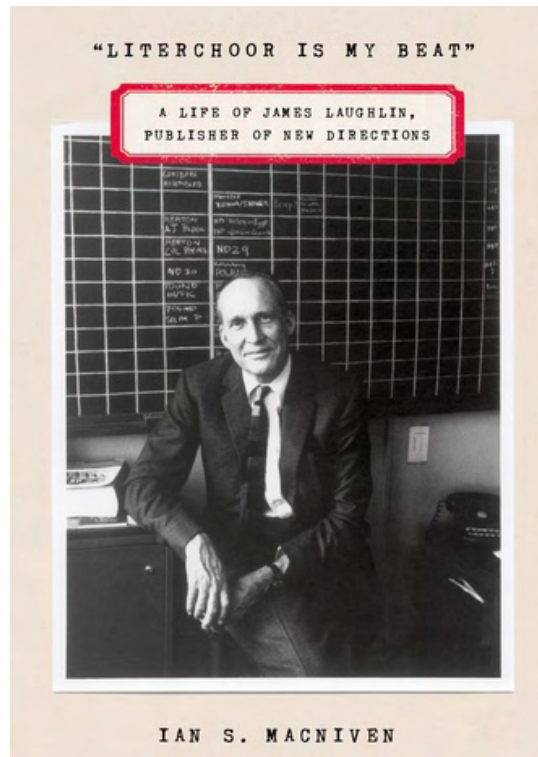


Acknowledgements

Scores of books have been written by and about James Laughlin. The three books below were the most helpful in assembling this Profile.



The Way It Wasn't, edited by Laughlin's son-in-law, **Daniel Javitch** and **Barbara Epler**, Editor-in-Chief of *New Directions*, is an irreverent, irony-driven attempt to capture the quintessence of James Laughlin's colorful life. Laid out alphabetically, the book is a mash-up of photographs, quotations and cheeky anecdotes that creates a cartoonish mosaic of the preoccupations and milestones that were the core of James Laughlin's incredible life.



Literchoor Is My Beat by **Ian S. MacNiven**, for now the definitive biography of James Laughlin, is a painstakingly-researched, revealing and engagingly written portrayal of Laughlin's life and times. Invitingly, it pulls together the complex plexus of family and friends that created and determined the the public and private persona of James Laughlin. The book's title is an example of Laughlin's playful, often puerile articulations which he frequently effectuated, especially when word riffing with Ezra Pound.



Beside the Shadblow Tree by **Hayden Carruth**, is a frank, incisive, sometimes unsettling memoir of Carruth's 30-year relationship with Laughlin as an editor, writer and poet. Painfully shy, Carruth was salvaged by Laughlin after being released from a mental institution in 1960 where he'd been hospitalized and given shock treatments for his debilitating depression, anxiety and alcoholism. Recognizing Carruth's literary talents, Laughlin put him to work for New Directions and invited him to live and work at Meadow House, where Carruth became almost part of the Laughlin family. In the summer of 1961, Carruth wrote ***The Norfolk Poems of Hayden Carruth***. In the first poem, *A Short-Run View*, Carruth writes "I am told by Mrs. Barnes, whose family has lived in Norfolk for generations; [that] like other proper Norfolkiens, she pronounces it **Norfork**."



...And a special Big Thanks to the Norfolk Country Club's nonpareil Club Manager, **Michael Sinclair**, for his patience and expertise in organizing and posting this and (several other) 'Members to Remember' Profiles.

