

William Carlos Williams and New Directions:  
The Care and Feeding of a Literary Reputation

by

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You have just heard of the sometimes close, sometimes turbulent, sometimes respectful, sometimes antagonistic, but ultimately symbiotic relationship of William Carlos Williams and his publisher James Laughlin. Williams was the foundation of Laughlin's vision of a "new direction" in American writing. And Laughlin was, finally, the one person on whom Williams could depend for publishing, consolidating, and preserving his literary legacy into the future. After the April, 1960, reconciliation of the two men, Williams wrote to his lawyer, Jim Murray to say that the "cold war" between himself and Laughlin had ended and by mid-June of that year had terminated his business connections with David McDowell and McDowell, Obolensky Press. He wrote Murray that he was determined to go "back to New Directions for the last time, making a clean sweep of it." And he wrote to Laughlin that it felt good to be back with his old publisher for what he knew would be "the last time." (Mariani, p. 756).

But from the publisher's point of view, exactly what did this vow of eternal devotion mean? What kind of commitment did it entail from a small, always struggling publishing venture, which, at that point, was not self-sustaining. This commitment came in four parts, not necessarily thought out in advance and not all carried out directly by James Laughlin. The first was simply availability—to make all of Williams work available both

to readers and libraries so that he could simply be read by more than the relatively small coterie of fellow poets, professors and bohemians that had been, in Williams' earlier career, the main part of his audience. I'll talk briefly about how James Laughlin personally supervised this first part and then go on to discuss Phase 2 "widening the base," Phase 3 "the importance of establishing authoritative texts," and finally the 4<sup>th</sup> and final phase, the need for continual renewal of the various parts of an author's canon.

This "plan" as it developed benefited both parties. Williams' reputation continued to grow, in part because of the careful attention that New Directions was giving his work. Simultaneously, New Directions finally became profitable (it was incorporated in 1964). This "going into the black" after 25 years of precariousness was due, again in part, to the fact that Williams and other of James Laughlin's early authors (Ezra Pound for example) were becoming part of the canon of American literature at a time when the paperback revolution was hitting American colleges. At the beginning this mutual success was hardly assured. I remember Williams' older son, William Eric Williams, telling me (after receiving a particularly nice royalty check) that when he and his brother (with their parents, of course) visited J. Laughlin in Connecticut in 1938, J soberly told him and Paul that one day they'd be getting a lot of money from their father's poetry. William Eric recalled, "We fell all over ourselves laughing, rolling on the forest floor at the very idea we would ever get money from Dad's poetry."

But now I will go into the details of the somewhat sketchy “Master Plan,” which began with the making of all of Williams work available. In 1960, Laughlin’s first move to bring Williams back into the fold after the hiatus of the 1950s was to plan for a comprehensive series of all of Williams books in matching clothbound “library” format. However, as a sign of the changing times, each “library” edition was complemented by the (usually) simultaneous publication of a paper edition for the college market. The first of these were the volumes *The Farmers’ Daughters*, a complete edition of “collected stories” (which added the long title story, “The Farmer’s Daughters” to earlier collections) and *Many Loves and Other Plays*, both published in 1961. And despite his declining health, William continued work on the poetic sequence, “Pictures from Brueghel” which Laughlin planned to issue in one volume with *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955)—the two volumes of poetry that Laughlin had seen slip away to Random House during the estrangement of poet and publisher. *Pictures from Brueghel* was published in a paper edition in the fall of 1962 (the cloth edition for the “library” series, with the sub-title “Collected Poems 1950-1962,” did not appear until 1967). Two months after Williams’ death in March, 1963, the book was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize—an ironic vindication for the poet who had struggled his entire career to have his vision of the “American idiom” accepted by the public it celebrated.

During the sixties, Laughlin concentrated on bringing out all previous New Directions titles by Williams in the new format (show sample). *The Collected Later Poems* was revised and enlarged and published in cloth only (1963) to match the 1951 edition of the *Collected Earlier Poems 1906-1939*, which remained in print in its cloth edition. Also in

1963, *Paterson Book V* and the fragmentary *Book VI* were added to the other four books of *Paterson* to finally give readers the entire opus in one paper volume.

The books that were, in James Laughlin's view, "stolen" from New Directions by David McDowell and published by Random House in the fifties: *The Autobiography* (1951), *The Build-Up* (1952), and *The Selected Essays* (1954) were brought into the new format and published in both cloth and paper editions in 1967, 1968, and 1969, respectively. The first New Directions publication of *The Build-Up* (the third and final volume of the Stecher Trilogy, loosely based on wife Floss's family) followed the reissues the preceding year (1968) of the first two volumes of the trilogy, *White Mule* (the first title by Williams to appear under the ND imprint in 1937) and *In the Money*. Titles that had long been on the New Directions list such as *In the American Grain*, first published by New Directions in 1939), and the Randall Jarrell edition of Williams' *Selected Poems*, were reissued in the simultaneous format. *In the American Grain* had its Horace Gregory introduction restored (in 1964) and the *Selected Poems* was reissued first in 1963 but then reissued again in an enlarged edition in 1968 as Williams popularity and influence continued to grow. From personal experience I can report that my introduction to Williams was in 1967 in Daniel Hoffman's graduate course in modern American poetry at the University of Pennsylvania, where the addition of Williams to the list of T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost was considered to be nothing short of revolutionary by the somewhat stuffy old guard.

The basic Williams canon was now established and well published. Both poetry and prose were available in low cost paper editions for the young and college market, while libraries could buy durable and attractive (though still reasonably priced) volumes for their permanent collections. It was now time to turn to Phase 2 of what I have called “The Care and Feeding of a Literary Reputation.” How could Williams be introduced to an even wider audience? One project that began while Phase 1 was still in process was *The William Carlos Williams Reader*, an anthology put together by M. L. Rosenthal, published in cloth in 1966 and in paper in 1969. This was a one-book sampler that would enable a professor to introduce his or her students to both the poetry and prose. It would also help get Williams nose under the tent in those circles where he was still considered “not poetic enough.” Another project was *Imaginations* which combined 5 of WCW’s early and most experimental pieces including *Spring and All*, *Kora in Hell*, and *The Descent of Winter*, together with some shorter pieces, with an introduction by Webster Schott (published in cloth in 1970 and in paper in 1971). This helped highlight the innovative Williams searching for a new kind of prose style to express “the power of the imagination to hold human beings to life and propel them onward.”

The seventies was also a time of picking up loose ends. Sometimes publishers are accused of “scraping the barrel” for every tidbit of material left by a famous author and endlessly repackaging it. But publishing the remainder of an author’s work—material left in manuscript, books published decades earlier and forgotten, as well as collections of shorter works published previously only in periodicals—can often be vital to a complete understanding of an author’s entire work. This is the raw material that scholars need to

build on as they begin the assessments that over time determine an author's place in literary history. So in 1970, the early *A Voyage to Paganry* (1928) was published (with an introduction by Harry Levin) in simultaneous editions, and in 1974 the fascinating essays of *The Embodiment of Knowledge* edited by Ron Loewinsohn came out (with the paper edition appearing in 1977). Linda Wagner's 1976 edition of *Interviews with William Carlos Williams: Speaking Straight Ahead* added a new dimension to the available material. And the charming, but also highly instructive "talking bibliography" *I Wanted to Write Poem*, put together by Edith Heal from conversations with William Carlos and Floss Williams (originally published in 1967 by Beacon Press), was revised by Ms. Heal and reissued in 1978. Also in 1978, the first of several compilations of Williams' essays (not included in the *Selected Essays*) appeared: this was the first Williams project in which I was personally involved, *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists*.

I'll break into the publishing history of Williams' work to mention that when a publisher is dealing with the work of a deceased author, that publisher must inevitably work with the author's heir or heirs. This is either a blessing or a curse: some heirs (who shall remain nameless) are "keepers of the flame," who bend all their efforts to micro-managing publishing projects. These misguided souls thwart biographers who wish to reveal truths that the heirs think are unseemly or inconvenient, and sometimes impede scholarship by refusing access to unpublished materials or permission to quote. Williams was fortunate in that first his wife and then his sons chose to be cooperative in every way with the publishing program as J. Laughlin envisioned it and were unfailingly helpful to

scholars who made the trek to Rutherford. When I became the main contact with the Williams family in the early 1980s, younger son Paul was primarily an assenting voice, but William Eric, himself a doctor who continued his father's practice at 9 Ridge Road, was an active participant in all publishing decisions after his mother's death in 1976. He could always be counted on to look for a picture or book that was needed, to discuss and approve the latest project, or even to write an introduction or essay about a particular facet of his father's life. He was finally persuaded by Emily Mitchell Wallace, a noted Williams and Pound scholar (and the compiler of the essential *Bibliography of William Carlos Williams*), to combine these essays into a memoir, in preparation when William Eric died in 1995, for publication by Knopf. Joel Conarroe, head of the Guggenheim Foundation and a Williams scholar, had introduced Emily to Alice Quinn, poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, who introduced her to Harry Ford, poetry editor at Knopf, to whom she sent photocopies of the essays William Eric had published in *The William Carlos Williams Review*. Harry Ford agreed to publish the essays, and helped plan several new essays, but he died soon after William Eric. I'm happy to report that this memoir will finally be published next spring by New Directions. Dr. Wallace has edited and expanded the manuscript by adding William Eric's own material from other sources and has extensively researched family and archival photographs to make a family album, which also includes Paul Williams' essay "A Letter to my Father on his 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday." Emily has also added an interesting, previously unpublished, 1980 interview with William Eric by Richard P. Quatrone. This book called *William Carlos Williams—An American Dad* is both loving and no-nonsense and adds immeasurably to the portrait of Williams as family man and doctor. William Eric's Preface is titled "Closer to the Grain," and he does

indeed provide some very different views of his father than those of previous biographers, particularly on the topic of “WCW and women.”

In the next generation Daphne Williams Fox, daughter of William Eric, and Suzy Williams Sinclair, daughter of Paul Herman Williams, have come forward as spokespersons for the family and both have been great supporters of this Symposium. You will hear from Suzy and Daphne and other family members tomorrow.

I was on hand to institute Phase 3, the establishment of authoritative texts. In the early 1970s, Prof. A. Walton Litz of Princeton University, a specialist in modernist literature and mentor to a generation of both Williams and Pound scholars, first proposed to James Laughlin that the time had come for definitive scholarly editions of Williams poetry, apparently haranguing JL between golf shots whenever they played. By the 1980s, Litz had secured Laughlin’s approval (I was an active cheerleader by now) and recruited Christopher MacGowan, a graduate student from England, who was very interested in Williams, to assist him. Litz would set up the organizational concept—keeping the poems free of footnotes so the poems would be shown to advantage, using the type of the 1938 edition, for example—and would offer his name and prestige to the first volume of the project, but would then let MacGowan carry on with the second volume of *Collected Poems* and *Paterson*. Why was this work necessary? Williams himself had established the texts of the *Collected Earlier* and *Collected Later* volumes resulting in a somewhat confusing hodge-podge: poems were accidentally left out; the chronology was skewed in CEP according to a well-intentioned but finally rather confusing last minute ideas of

Williams; there were many typos due to the fact that Williams' didn't compare his original versions to the versions he had typed which were then sent to New Directions. All of these problems were corrected in the new editions, which also enabled the reader to see different versions of the poems where Williams had radically changed the first printed version. I wrote in the flap copy for *Volume I*: "This careful attention to chronology enables the reader to chart the large contours of Williams' early career and to appreciate the enormous advance in technique he made during his first decade as a poet."

If a writer is to truly enter the canon of American literature, it is this kind of scholarly attention that is needed to give a baseline text so that interpretive critical work can go forward. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I, 1909-1939* was published in 1986 and *Volume II, 1939-1962* in 1988 (paper volumes of both came in 1991). The kudos that swiftly followed proved the worth and necessity of the project: *Library Journal* named *Volume I* one of the best books of 1986, former poet laureate Robert Pinsky enthused about a "beautifully edited edition" that should "embody a standard for any living American poet." Thom Gunn wrote in the (London) *Times Literary Supplement*: "...rather than follow the custom of breaking up the integrity of the original volumes by mixing collected with uncollected volumes in strict chronology, the editors adopt a compromise method of ordering that is a complete success. This is, in fact, an ideal edition." (Feb. 19-25, 1988). After *Volume II* was published, *American Literature* confirmed that "This volume...fully matches the first in both intrinsic content...and top-flight editing." D. C. Greetham in his book, *Scholarly Editing* (MLA 1995) cited the two volumes of *The Collected Poems* as "an example of how a major

edition of twentieth-century poetry should be produced.” And in the ultimate homage of one poet to another, Octavio Paz insisted that his *Collected Poems* (published by New Directions in 1987, between the two Williams volumes) follow both the interior and cover design we had used for Williams.

By now Christopher MacGowan had established himself as one of the country’s pre-eminent Williams scholars and went on to finish his masterful editing, collating, and analytic work on *Paterson*. Anyone with any doubts as to the extent and depth of the research involved in getting back to Williams’ original intentions, correcting prose passages quoted from letters sent to Williams and corrupted in retyping, making the spacing conform to Williams’ wishes as expressed in the early editions of each separate book etc. etc. has only to look at Chris’s report to the NEH (which had given him a grant) which I found in the files. Whew! The corrected and re-spaced *Paterson* was published in 1992. If James Laughlin’s commitment to Williams or to the old fashioned publishing virtues of beautiful editions was ever in doubt, I’m holding up several proof pages from the reset *Paterson*: the setting was done lovingly in hot metal type by Bill Loftin at Heritage Printers in Charlotte, North Carolina. (Alas, *Paterson* was the last New Directions book done in this way—hot metal is now exclusively the purview of fine printers of limited editions.) I do have to say that being the in-house editor of these three volumes and shepherding each through the writing of the contracts with William Eric and Paul Williams, to laboriously checking multiple sets of proofs, to writing the copy for the flaps, to working with the gifted designer Hermann Strohbach and in particular to working with Chris whose meticulous attention to detail as well as unfailing patience and

good humor in solving together the myriad problems of such complex editions was the highlight of my editing career.

But at the same time this intense and extremely important scholarly work was being done, New Directions, like all other publishers was facing a changing market. Now came the time for Phase 4: continual renewal. Old books needed to reach new audiences. How does one decide what to do? Sometimes serendipity is more useful than market research. In the fall of 1983, Robert Coles and his wife had dinner with James and Ann Laughlin. The dinner discussion turned on the fact that Dr. Coles liked to teach Williams' stories about "doctoring" to his medical ethics students but didn't like to make the students buy the entire collected stories, *The Farmers' Daughters*. Ann Laughlin suggested a short selection of just those stories related to medicine and *The Doctor Stories* was born. A preliminary selection of stories (and a few poems) was made in the office and sent to Dr. Coles who refined the contents and contributed his brilliant introduction to the volume. I found notes from a phone conversation I had with Dr. Coles in early 1984 in which he was explaining to me what he hoped to do in the introduction and among the phrases I can make out (in my own handwriting you understand) are things like Coles' observations that Williams dealt with medical situations in ways that are "candid and complex as opposed to simplistic and formulaic," and that Coles' felt that reading Williams "helps medical students look at their own motives and experiences because WCW does it himself." The book was published later in 1984 and is our best-selling volume of Williams' stories with over 60,000 copies now in print in both editions.

To round out the picture of Williams publishing in the 1980s, I'll quote from a letter I wrote to Dr. Coles in January of 1985 to tell him that we were in a second printing of *The Doctor Stories* and assure him that we'd done a special mailing to the deans of medical schools: "Just to keep you up to date on the Williams front, we are replacing our edition of the *Selected Poems* with the British selection made by Charles Tomlinson—our scholarly advisers have urged us to use the fuller version. I'm working on a book of uncollected essays that Williams wrote about "younger writers" (Ginsberg, Lowell etc.) [published as *Something to Say: WCW on Younger Poets*], and Walt Litz at Princeton is superintending the preparation of a "definitive" edition of the poems. And we're reissuing the *Selected Letters* in just a few months. A veritable industry."

I want to cite just one last republication because it reflects back not on publishing but on the special qualities of this particular author. In 1996 we decided that when reprinting *The Farmers' Daughters* we would do better to have "truth in advertising" and reissue the book as *The Collected Stories of William Carlos Williams*—and why not add a new introduction, not by a literary person but by someone more in the public eye at that time. Dr. Sherwin Nuland had just written a very popular and humane book called *How We Die*. He was also a friend of a New Directions board member, who made the initial connection. Nuland did not really know Williams work but was intrigued, and the doctor-poet of Rutherford worked his magic. Dr. Nuland wrote to me: "All is well, and I'll unquestionably have the Intro in your hands by the end of February, as planned. He's a fascinating mix of things, is our mutual friend WCW, and I hope to do him justice. You've done me a great service by asking me to do this piece—I might never have tried

to peer into his psyche had this opportunity not presented itself.” As you can see, it is always the author and his work that matter, but a committed publisher can help to maintain and enhance the work that’s already there by making sure the work is available, available in good editions, and available with new insights for each succeeding generation of readers.