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JAMES LAUGHLIN, AMERICAN MODERNISM AND POST WORLD WAR II WELSH WRITING IN ENGLISH

David Lloyd

Abstract

James Laughlin, who founded New Directions Press in 1936, had an early and enduring commitment to publishing innovative European authors, including Jorge Luis Borges, Louis Ferdinand Céline, Hermann Hesse, García Lorca, Eugenio Montale, Vladimir Nabokov and Pablo Neruda. Laughlin's international ambitions as a publisher extended to engaging with contemporary British writers and journal editors demonstrating a modernist dimension, evidenced in his extensive correspondence. This essay explores ways in which Laughlin furthered the New Direction Press publishing objectives within the post World War II English-language literary culture of Wales, including his interactions with Dylan Thomas, editors Keidrych Rhys and Gwyn Jones, and significant poets and fiction writers emerging in Wales during the 1940s. While Laughlin was informing Welsh writers and editors about New Directions Press authors and titles – and thus about manifestations of international modernism – Welsh writers and editors in turn educated Laughlin about the burgeoning English-language literary culture of Wales.

Keywords: modernism, Welsh Writing in English, poetry

James Laughlin founded New Directions Press in 1936 as a means of developing and sustaining the modernist literary aesthetic internationally. Within that mission, he pursued three objectives: to bring into the New Directions list emerging modernist authors;¹ to gain international status for New Directions as a premier publisher of contemporary literature 'of purely literary rather than commercial value';² and to create as wide a readership as possible for canonical modernist texts.³ Laughlin had an

early and enduring commitment to publishing innovative European authors, including Jorge Luis Borges, Louis Ferdinand Céline, Hermann Hesse, García Lorca, Eugenio Montale, Vladimir Nabokov, Pablo Neruda, Boris Pasternak, Octavio Paz, and a host of others. Laughlin's international ambitions as a publisher extended to engaging with contemporary British writers and journal editors demonstrating a modernist dimension, evidenced in his extensive correspondence with literary magazine and small press editors and his curating of a personal archive of British journals and anthologies⁴ – including Keidrych Rhys's *Wales*⁵ and Gwyn Jones's *The Welsh Review*. This essay explores ways in which Laughlin furthered the New Direction Press publishing objectives within the post World War II English-language literary culture of Wales.

As a newcomer to publishing literary titles in the United States during the 1930s and 40s, New Directions Press (founded 1936) competed with established publishers such as Harper and Brothers (founded 1817), Alfred A. Knopf (founded 1915), Simon and Schuster (founded 1924), and Random House (founded 1927) – all with proven sales records, who could offer generous terms to coveted authors.⁶ Without the mature author list and deep pockets of venerated New York publishers, Laughlin needed to convince emerging authors in the US and abroad of the advantages of representation by New Directions.⁷ Laughlin also needed to ensure that recruited authors would remain with his press after gaining a readership and critical attention. Over time, many of Laughlin's most acclaimed authors were in fact lured away, including Henry Miller, William Carlos Williams, and Vladimir Nabokov. Laughlin guarded against defections with a spirited advocacy of how New Directions would prove more supportive and committed to authors than established publishers wary of what might be controversial or otherwise difficult to market.

James Laughlin first contacted Dylan Thomas in early 1938, two years after founding New Directions. In a 13 May 1964 letter to Bill Read, Laughlin writes that he 'cannot recall how I first heard about [Dylan Thomas]. It may have been through Edith Sitwell, or perhaps I read some of his poems in 'New Verse', or one of the other English literary magazines. I do recall that I was struck by his complete originality and total difference from all of the other young poets who were writing at the time.'⁸ Laughlin had been 'following [his] career since 1935' and admired Thomas's two collections published in the UK: *18 Poems* in 1934 and *25 Poems* in 1936.⁹ The 1937 issue of the *New Directions in*

Poetry and Prose annual anthology (managed and edited by Laughlin) contains an advertisement stating that New Books bookshop in London serves as ‘Agents for’ New Directions and Parton Press (among others), and highlights two of Parton Press’s books: Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and Dylan Thomas’s *18 Poems*.¹⁰

James Laughlin’s initial letter offered to send Dylan Thomas a copy of the most recent (1937) *New Directions Poetry and Prose* annual anthology and asked if he had an American publisher for his books.¹¹ When Thomas replied on 15 February 1938 that ‘I haven’t as yet an American publisher’, Laughlin moved quickly, writing to Thomas on 6 March 1938 that he ‘is in touch with your agents here – Ann Watkins Inc’, and would be sending ‘copies of those of our books which I think would interest you the most’ as an introduction to his press.¹² Thomas reports on his ‘American negotiating’ in an undated March 1938 letter to George Reavey: ‘James Laughlin IV, of New Directions ... wants to be my publisher in America, and do all my future books as well. I’m going to sign a contract with him some time.’ He added, ‘They’ve published Cocteau, Miller, Stein, Saroyan etc., & make nice books.’¹³ On 28 March 1938 Thomas wrote to Laughlin that the sample New Directions books ‘interested me very much indeed’ and accepted Laughlin’s proposal that New Directions become Thomas’s American publisher.¹⁴ Laughlin wasted no time in disseminating this news, appending to the end of the contributor’s note for Thomas in the 1938 *New Directions Poetry and Prose* annual that ‘New Directions will be his publisher in America.’ Thomas’s contributor’s note in the subsequent (1939) annual begins, ‘In December New Directions will publish the work of Dylan Thomas in book form.’ Betraying anxiety that he could lose Thomas to a competing US publisher, Laughlin wrote on 5 April 1938 that ‘New Directions is the best publisher for you in America because I fight for my books. None of the big houses will fight for a poet these days. If they think he’ll write a novel, they’ll play him along, but they won’t fight for him as a poet.’¹⁵ To Thomas, Laughlin suggested that the established New York publishers would not embrace his *avant-garde* writings: ‘Who have they published in the face of convention?’ he asked. ‘The answer is, nobody, or, if you will, Edna [St. Vincent] Millay.’¹⁶

Laughlin’s letters to Thomas chart a developing publisher/author relationship complicated by stark differences in backgrounds. Laughlin was Harvard-educated, well-traveled, and heir to the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation family fortune.¹⁷ Indeed, Laughlin founded

New Directions with a \$100,000 gift from his father in 1936, while he was an undergraduate at Harvard.¹⁸ Thomas had little formal education, rarely traveled abroad prior to his US reading tours, and lived hand to mouth most of his life. Thomas regularly appealed to Laughlin for advances, beginning with his letter of 28 March 1938, soon after their initial contact, writing ‘Now comes the most difficult, and to me the most desperately important, part of this letter. I must say, straight away, that I must have some money, and have it immediately.’¹⁹ In a letter to John Davenport of 31 August 1938, Thomas remarks about Laughlin: ‘Pigiron duke sounds good, and I’ll probably try taunting him with it if he still sticks by his disgusting idea of a business advance of £8.’²⁰ But their own correspondence was cordial, sometimes affectionate, and focused on publication of Thomas’s writings in journals and books, and the development of Thomas’s reputation and audience in the US.²¹ In a 1 June 1938, letter Thomas invited Laughlin to visit him in Laugharne, while Laughlin was on New Directions business in London, giving travel instructions and concluding, ‘We expect you on Saturday. Start in the morning, early as possible.’²² While Laughlin was not able to visit Thomas in Wales, they certainly met in London or New York in 1946, 1950, 1951, and 1953.²³ After Thomas’s death in New York on 9 November 1954, it was Laughlin who confirmed the body’s identity in the St. Vincent’s Hospital Morgue.²⁴

To formalize their publisher/author relationship, Laughlin wrote to Thomas on 10 July 1938, enclosing ‘various contracts’. In this letter he outlined a detailed strategy for how New Directions would develop an American readership for Thomas’s challenging work – a plan that hinged upon Thomas giving Laughlin full control over his writings to be published in the US:

The best thing is for you to fire everything you do right over to me and I’ll set to work placing it. In this way we’ll hope to get you know[n] so that we can soon start in with the books.

I have heard from Poetry [Chicago] that they are going to use the four short poems sometime soon.²⁵

Let me know which poems you send [*sic*] to the Partisan Review so that I won’t duplicate. I’ll keep a big chart like a railway dispatcher’s plan, showing where all your things are.

I’ll start in with the best out of the two books and try them in small batches on the various papers.

NEW DIRECTIONS 1938 is already being printed and I am using of yours two stories and three poems.²⁶ That will start things going.

The propaganda is underway. Squibs have appeared in the newspapers to the effect that the best young English [*sic*] poet is soon to be published in America, etc.

The next step is the radio. I have arranged to give a reading of you in August.

...

Anyway I'll give them a good earfull [*sic*] here.²⁷

Though Dylan Thomas was the first Welsh author James Laughlin approached, he also initiated correspondence with other writers coalescing around Keidrych Rhys's journal *Wales*.²⁸ In 1939 Laughlin took out a subscription to and arranged for a 'swap advertisement' with *Wales* – a practice that avoided the expense of buying ads while fostering connectedness among like-minded editors. The 'swapped' advertisement for *Wales* appearing in the 1939 *New Directions Poetry and Prose* lists contributors with a high profile in Wales, including Saunders Lewis, Kate Roberts, Caradoc Evans, John Cowper Powys and Rhys Davies. These Welsh writers were listed in proximity to writers well-known to *New Directions* readers: Franz Kafka, Hugh MacDiarmid, Norman Macleod and Harry Roskolenko (among others).²⁹ Though *Wales* ceased publication with the start of the Second World War, Rhys did publish *Wales Wartime Broadsheet No. 1* in 1940, urging its readers during time of war to 'support' literary magazines, singling out *Life and Letters To-Day*, *Horizon*, *Heddiw*, *Seven*, *Now* – and *New Directions*, with Laughlin's annual anthology as the only American publication listed. With a letter of 10 October 1943, after re-starting *Wales*, Rhys sent Laughlin a copy of a swapped *New Directions* advert placed 'in the current issue' and wrote to Laughlin on 1 December 1944 with 'proof of the advert I made out of your list', adding 'I shall look forward to receiving some NEW DIRECTIONS volumes.'³⁰ Rhys also sent Laughlin issues of *Wales*. Laughlin would have noted the influence of Anglo-American modernism on the journal's style and content, reflecting the aesthetics of Ezra Pound's *Blast* (1915-15).³¹ After responding to questions Laughlin asked about *Wales*, Rhys wrote in a

letter of 12 February 1944, 'I'll send you some little books I'm doing as WALES EDITIONS ... It's so kind of you to bother.'³²

There are multiple means by which Keidrych Rhys would have come to Laughlin's attention as a poet and editor. The 1938 issue of Laughlin's *New Directions in Poetry and Prose* thanks various journals for permission to reprint Dylan Thomas's stories and poems, including Keidrych Rhys's *Wales* for 'In the Direction of the Beginning'.³³ Laughlin published in and habitually read the *Partisan Review*³⁴ – he praised the journal in a note published in the Feb. 1938 issue as the 'best magazine now being published'.³⁵ So he would have registered the assertion in the June 1938 issue by *Partisan Review* editor and influential critic F. W. Dupee that Rhys's '*Wales* has printed some excellent verse and fiction, beginning with a good piece of fantastic prose by Dylan Thomas in the first number.'³⁶ Laughlin would have then seen Rhys's poem 'Black Trust' in the *Partisan Review*'s 'A Little Anthology of British Poets' (Fall 1938, edited by D. S. Savage),³⁷ with Dylan Thomas leading the six poets.³⁸ The Contributor notes for the issue describe Thomas as 'Welsh poet No. 1' and Keidrych Rhys as 'editor of the periodical *Wales* and a leader of the Welsh literary movement', a characterisation highlighted in the March 1939 issue of *Wales* under the title, 'Historic Moment in Welsh Literature': 'Keidrych Rhys has been called "a leader of the Welsh literary movement" by the American *Partisan Review* ...'³⁹

Beyond his awareness of Keidrych Rhys through the *Partisan Review*, Laughlin would certainly have seen the poems ('Nonconformity', 'Garn Goch' and 'Treasury') that Rhys published in the January 1939 issue of *Poetry* (Chicago) – still the premier modernist poetry journal twenty-seven years after its founding by Harriet Monroe in 1912. Laughlin himself published a poem ('Letter to Hitler') in the Summer, 1939 *Partisan Review* and another poem ('Easter in Pittsburgh') in the March, 1940 issue of *Poetry*. Since Faber and Faber at this time was the foremost publisher of English-language modern poetry in the UK, Laughlin would have known of Rhys as editor of the Faber anthologies *Poems from the Forces* (1941) and *Modern Welsh Poetry* (1942). And since Laughlin kept well-apprised of contemporary British poetry generally, he would have been aware of Rhys's collection *The Van Pool*, published in the Routledge New Poets series, 1942.⁴⁰

On 26 October 1944, James Laughlin wrote to Gwyn Jones asking if he would consider editing a volume of Welsh short stories for New

Directions – a project Laughlin must have initiated after reading stories by Welsh authors in UK journals and collections, including *Faber and Faber's* 1937 anthology *Welsh Short Stories* (no editor named).⁴¹ As with Keidrych Rhys, there are multiple means by which Jones would have come to Laughlin's attention during the 1930s as a centrally-important Welsh writer and editor, beginning with the 1937 Faber *Welsh Short Stories* anthology, which published Jones' story 'Shacki Thomas', and the anthology *Welsh Short Stories*, which Jones edited for Penguin in 1941. Given his close attention to UK 'little magazines' generally and to Keidrych Rhys's *Wales* in particular, Laughlin would have been aware of the 1939 launch and first run of Jones's *The Welsh Review* and its relaunch by Jones, after a four-year hiatus, in 1944.⁴² Keidrych Rhys ran an ad for *The Welsh Review* in *Wales*, No. 6/7 (1939) and mentions *The Welsh Review* in his 'Notes for a New Editor' (*Wales*, No. 8/9, 1939).⁴³ Laughlin might also have come across Jones's novel *Times Like These*, published in the United States by Macmillan in 1938. Certainly by 1944 Laughlin had identified Jones as the Welsh writer/editor most qualified for the New Directions editing job he proposed.

With his letter of invitation to Gwyn Jones, Laughlin sent sample New Directions books to introduce his press, as he had with Dylan Thomas and Keidrych Rhys. Jones replied on 12 December 1944, thanking Laughlin for 'the two beautifully printed little books' which he 'read ... with enjoyment.' He added that he would in turn send Laughlin the December 1944 *Welsh Review*, the first in the journal's second series, with an impressive list of contributors, including Idris Davies, Glyn Jones, and T. S. Eliot. 'About your suggestion for an anthology of Welsh short stories,' Jones wrote, 'I should certainly be prepared to take on the job, and there's no question of the quality of the material – and the quantity too.' Under the heading 'The Past' Jones suggested six works, including branches of the *Mabinogi* (though he added, in pencil, 'if possible NOT Lady Charlotte Guest'). Under 'The Present' he singled out stories by Rhys Davies, Caradoc Evans, Geraint Goodwin, Glyn Jones, Gwyn Jones, Idwal Jones, Alun Lewis, Kate Roberts, Dylan Thomas, D. J. Williams, and Richard Hughes Williams.⁴⁴

The plan for an American anthology of Welsh stories from the medieval to the modern period, however, did not go forward. In a letter of 1 December 1945, Jones informed Laughlin that he had just embarked on a new translation of the *Mabinogion*,⁴⁵ which would necessitate withdrawing from editing a New Directions anthology including tales

from the only published translation, Lady Charlotte Guest's flawed version.⁴⁶ As a solution, Jones suggested that the anthology be restricted to modern Welsh stories. He forwarded to Laughlin stories by Glyn Jones, Caradoc Evans, Dylan Thomas, Rhys Davies, Alun Lewis, Kate Roberts, E. Tegla Davies, Idwal Jones, Margiad Evans, and himself to illustrate the quality of this work, drawing particular attention to Margiad Evans:

I'd strongly urge including ... her 25000 word 'Country Dance', which is more than a good story – it is unquestionably a classic. Technically it may not be a short story, but it has been out of print for a good time now, and if Americans don't know of it (and I imagine they don't) it would give your volume a bloom all right.⁴⁷

In his letter of 1 December 1945 Jones further recommended Richard Hughes, Arthur Machen, Geraint Goodwin, D. J. Williams, Howard Clewes, and Henry Treece. And he included in the package a copy of his newly-published collection, *Buttercup Field and Other Stories* (Penmark Press, 1945). The New Directions project had advanced far enough for Jones to be specific about details, suggesting in the same letter that 'we run it to 15 or 16 stories including the long Margiad Evans one' and estimating '500 dollars to secure them all.' Jones offered to withdraw if an editor without conflicts could be found for the anthology, suggesting that 'Glyn Jones would be very very good.' Gwyn Jones continued: 'This isn't a fine gesture on my part – but I'd like to see a first-rate Welsh volume appear in the States, and am not concerned that it have my or another's name on the title page.' Jones then reiterates: 'Don't hesitate to drop me overboard. I shall be fully rewarded if I see such a volume in print.' The two hoped to meet in London while Laughlin was there in 1946 for further discussion of the Welsh stories project, but in a letter of 29 October 1946, Jones explained that he could not be in London on the available date because of a meeting in Cardiff. He concluded by letting Laughlin know that he had just posted him 'the last half-a-dozen *Welsh Reviews*.'⁴⁸

The authors Gwyn Jones singled out for James Laughlin were highly accomplished Welsh writers of the mid-twentieth century whose writings would appeal to Laughlin's aesthetic – made clear to Jones through the New Directions publications Laughlin had sent him. The correspondence and exchange of books, stories, and journal issues

demonstrate Jones's enthusiasm for championing modern Welsh writing for an American readership. It is tantalizing to speculate what the impact of a New Directions anthology of stories by modern Welsh writers would have been. Since the editors, journals, and presses necessary to sustain Welsh writing in English were only just emerging during the 1940s, support and recognition from readers, reviewers, and editors in the United States would have been welcome, as would royalties from US sales.⁴⁹ The absence of such support during the 1950s contributed to a dearth of publishing opportunities in Wales not remedied until the 1960s.⁵⁰ Ultimately this transatlantic collaboration did not go forward, and to date no American press has published an anthology of Welsh short fiction.⁵¹ Indeed, few American readers were or are aware of Welsh short story writers or novelists, with the exception of Richard Llewelyn's *How Green Was My Valley*, given traction by John Ford's 1941 Hollywood film adaptation.⁵² The Jones/Laughlin correspondence on their proposed collaboration, however, brought to Laughlin's attention some of the most innovative and accomplished writers within the burgeoning Welsh literary culture of the 1940s while alerting Gwyn Jones to the interests and publication list of a sympathetic and engaged editor and publisher across the Atlantic.⁵³

James Laughlin's most extensive interaction with Welsh writers developed from the 1949 New Directions Press publication of *New British Poets*, an anthology edited by Kenneth Rexroth and including Welsh poets Brenda Chamberlain, Nigel Heseltine, Glyn Jones, Alun Lewis, Keidrych Rhys, Lynette Roberts, Dylan Thomas, and Vernon Watkins. In addition to paying poets a fee for contributing to this anthology, Laughlin offered to send New Directions Press books to contributors, equivalent to the fee. So if an author was paid \$12 for poems in *The New British Poets*, that poet would also receive, as a bonus, \$12 worth of New Directions Catalog books.

With 302 pages of poetry in *New British Poets* and a per poet fee of \$2 per page,⁵⁴ Laughlin would have paid \$604 in fees in 1949, equivalent to \$7000 in today's money⁵⁵ – a considerable outlay for a financially-struggling publisher, especially with the added cost of shipping. What Laughlin gained was an overseas readership of seventy 'new British poets' – some emerging and others fully established – requesting

between one and eight New Directions books, a rare opportunity for Welsh writers to acquire titles not available in Britain. In effect, Laughlin was supplying modernist books for a demand he was simultaneously boosting as he worked to develop a readership for New Directions authors in Britain.

Contributors to *New British Poets* were pleased – sometimes incredulous – at Laughlin’s ‘bonus’ offer, wondering if they understood the terms correctly. Poet Anne Ridler – who knew well the finances of anthology editing, having served as an editor for Faber⁵⁶ – wrote to Laughlin on 11 May 1949:

I can still scarcely believe your generosity, but if I read your circular aright, you are offering me books to the value of 17 dollars (the amount of your check to me in payment for my poems in *New British Poets*). I accordingly enclose a list of books that I should like, but I shall quite understand if they are scarce and you do not wish to send them.

Ridler requested Christopher Isherwood’s *Berlin Stories*, Henry James’s *Stories of Writers & Artists*, Arthur Rimbaud’s *A Season in Hell* (translated by Delmore Schwartz); Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Book of Hours*, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*; Alain-Fournier’s *The Wanderer*; and Herbert Read’s *The Green Child*.⁵⁷

Author requests shed fascinating light on their developing interests, aesthetics, and writing styles in 1949. The most acclaimed poet in the anthology, Hugh MacDiarmid, wrote on 26 January 1949 to thank Laughlin for his offer of free books, noting that he had been wanting to buy certain titles for many years. MacDiarmid requested Philip Rahv’s *Object and Image*, Harry Levin’s *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*, and the *Selected Writings of Paul Valery*. He then promised to send Laughlin ‘cuttings of reviews of Rexroth’s book I’ll do for various organs over here’ and mentions that ‘a couple of small books of mine will be out shortly ... and I will send you copies’⁵⁸ – an intriguing instance of the ‘transatlantic flux’ of modernist books and shared interests that Laughlin hoped to stimulate.

Denise Levertov provides an example of how book requests can forecast a writer’s career. An English poet whose mother, Beatrice Spooner-Jones, was Welsh, Levertov at age 26 in 1949, would not have imagined that in forty years she would be acclaimed as a poet in the

modernist line descending from Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, ranked with American *avant-garde* poets such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Allen Ginsberg. From Laughlin, Levertov requested the *Selected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, *Selected Valery*, Kenneth Rexroth's *Signature of All Things: Poems, Songs, Elegies, Translations and Epigrams*, and Delmore Schwartz's *The World is a Wedding* – a remarkably predictive reading list.⁵⁹

An analysis of which books the Welsh authors chose illuminates the impact of American and international modernism on post Second World War Welsh writing in English. In a letter dated 20 January 1949⁶⁰ Glyn Jones wrote to Laughlin, 'I notice in your circular letter that you mention a "bonus of books published by New Directions" for contributors to the anthology. Do I read this correctly? And does the offer still hold? If so, may my choice be: *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes,⁶¹ 'The Wanderer' by Alain Fournier, and Friedrich Hölderlin's *Some Poems*, translated by Frederich Prokosch' – requests that match the technical innovations in poetry and fiction that Jones had already undertaken in *Poems* (1939) and his short story collection, *The Blue Bed* (1937), and that prefigure *The Island of Apples* (1965).⁶²

In a letter of 13 February 1949, Brenda Chamberlain wrote to James Laughlin, 'It was very exciting going through your wonderful list, to choose six dollars worth. I finally decided on the following books: James Joyce's *Stephen Hero*, Rimbaud's *A Season In Hell* and Albert Camus's *the Myth of Sisyphus*.'⁶³ On 20 March 1949, Chamberlain wrote to thank the New Directions assistant who sent the books, adding (when told the Camus book was not available): 'Instead of Camus' *Sisyphus* can I have either of the following: – Djuna Barnes: *Nightwood*, or Franz Kafka's: *Amerika*, or D. H. Lawrence *The Man Who Died*.'⁶⁴ Chamberlain thus requested texts demonstrating modernist strategies she would later master in *Tide-race* (1962) and *The Water-Castle* (1964). One can see how the author of *The Green Heart* poems (1958) would be drawn to Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*, with its extended treatment of an intense, emotionally-fraught relationship.⁶⁵ Rimbaud's dense prose-poetry, Kafka's distorted reality in *Amerika*, and the detailed evocation of sea, landscape, and creatures in Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* would all feed Chamberlain's major prose works, *Tide-Race*, *The Water-Castle*, and *A Rope of Vines* (1965). Chamberlain wrote to Laughlin on 27 April 1949 about the Lawrence novel:

Already, I have read it and found it wonderful. One of the most perfect, moving, and beautiful pieces of D. H. that I have read. Usually, for me, his prose holds so much purely personal venom and an almost feminine spite, that I find it distasteful & tainted, a somehow impure art despite its tremendous power. But this book holds nothing but the most perfect expression of genius on the brink of the grave. Those wonderful passages about the cock: the flaming colour, the zest, the understanding of the mind of the bird. And then the peninsula, with its sea, nets, fishermen, the priestess moving in and out of the woods. It all sinks deep, becomes part of one's heart and mind.

In the same letter, Chamberlain gave a heartfelt response to her contributor's copy of *The New British Poets*: 'The *Poets* is a lovely production. I ... find myself deeply moved & a little surprised by the things Rexroth says about my writing. I had *almost* given up.'⁶⁶

Nigel Heseltine's first letter to James Laughlin regarding *The New British Poets* (1 November 1948), expressed irritation that he had not received proofs or payment, though the anthology's publication had been announced in a circular. He concluded: 'If my work is worth printing these details should be worth paying attention to.'⁶⁷ But his tone changed in a letter to Laughlin on 18 December 1948: 'Very many thanks for your letter and for the check for \$12 for my poems. I should like to take advantage of your generous offer of books from your list, all of which as far as I can see are unobtainable here. May I suggest: – William Faulkner *Light in August*, Vladimir Nabokov *Nine Stories*, Jean Paul Sartre *Nausea*, and Italo Svevo *Confessions of Zeno*.'⁶⁸ Laughlin replied in a letter of 14 January 1949, confirming that he had sent Heseltine all the books except Sartre's *Nausea*, scheduled for simultaneous publication by John Lehmann in England. Laughlin wrote, 'it occurred to me that you might be able to get that over there, and that you would rather have something else that was available only in America from our list.'⁶⁹

Fruitful long-term relationships did develop from these transatlantic exchanges among James Laughlin and Welsh writers publishing in the 1940s and 50s in addition to the towering example of Dylan Thomas. Laughlin was aware of Vernon Watkins's first Faber publications, *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and other poems* (1941) and *The Lamp and the Veil: poems* (1945), and knew of him from Dylan Thomas's proposal in 1945

that Watkins write the 'personal note' requested for Thomas's *Selected Writings* (10 February 1945).⁷⁰ Furthermore, Laughlin's friend, poet and *New Directions* editor Kenneth Rexroth, highly recommended Watkins to Laughlin as he considered Welsh authors for his 1949 *The New British Poets* anthology, characterizing him as 'A fine, very moving ... poet.'⁷¹ Laughlin published Watkins in *New Directions Poetry and Prose* 10 (1948); and determined to become his American publisher, releasing in 1948 his US *Selected Poems*, followed by *The Death Bell: poems and ballads* (1954), and subsequent collections through to the posthumous *Fidelities* (1969).⁷² Indeed Watkins's reputation in the United States developed almost entirely out of his representation by *New Directions*, yielding in time an invitation to serve as Visiting Professor of Poetry at the University of Washington, Seattle.⁷³ As he did with many of his long-term authors, Laughlin developed a personal relationship with Watkins, writing (for example) on 20 July 1967 (three months before Watkins's death on 11 October): 'That is good news that you will be back in Seattle next term. ... perhaps later in the year you will be coming back this way, and it would be so nice if you could plan your time so that you could visit with us in the country in Connecticut at some point.'⁷⁴

Laughlin also published Brenda Chamberlain in *New Directions in Poetry and Prose* No. 9 and Lynette Roberts in No. 11, and expressed interest in book proposals from Brenda Chamberlain, Lynette Roberts, and Glyn Jones. In a letter of 24 October 1949 Chamberlain asked if Laughlin would 'consider publishing a volume of my poetry in America?', asserting that 'The situation in this country for someone trying to get their first volume of poems published, is just about impossible.' She attached to her letter an extract from a T. S. Eliot letter (dated 10 October 1949), expressing admiration for her poetry and for '*Silkie and Tide Race*' (later published as *Tide-Race*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1962). In the extract Eliot declines to publish a volume of Chamberlain's poetry, explaining that 'the situation for poetry has deteriorated', requiring Faber to 'limit the amount of new poetry which we undertake.' He concludes: 'if you are writing to another publisher, you are at liberty to say that I think a volume of your poems undoubtedly deserves publication.'⁷⁵ Over time, Chamberlain sent several book manuscripts to *New Directions*. With Laughlin on a partial leave of absence, *New Directions* managing editor Robert MacGregor wrote to Chamberlain on 8 March 1954 concerning the manuscripts:

the book-length piece, 'Between Two Worlds[,] ... a shorter prose piece ..., 'The Return,' and a manuscript of the long poem 'The Green Heart'. These had all been turned down by our reader, who sometimes, however, is quite unpredictable. Jim [Laughlin] will perhaps tell you about him sometime.⁷⁶

Lynette Roberts wrote to Laughlin on 8 November 1948 to offer 'A long heroic poem of 175 stanzas; and another batch of poems for a second book', noting that the 'heroic poem is dedicated to Edith Sitwell, with her permission' – this is certainly *Gods with Stainless Ears: A Heroic Poem*, published by Faber and Faber in 1951.⁷⁷ Laughlin responded to Roberts on 25 January 1949 that he could not publish her book because 'Our schedule is just too full and too far behind' – though he asks to include one of her poems in 'the next number of NEW DIRECTIONS annual'.⁷⁸ Glyn Jones approached Laughlin on 26 January 1949 to offer 'a novel which I have just completed':

It is about 80-90,000 words long and is, I think, something new in Anglo-Welsh literature, something in the tradition running from 'Tristram Shandy', through the 'Opium Eater' & 'Sartor Resartus' down to 'Jacob's Room' and 'In Parenthesis'. Would you please let me know if this interests you & is the sort of thing you would like to include in your list?⁷⁹

Laughlin replied to Jones on 4 February 1949 that while his novel 'sounds very interesting', New Directions could only publish it if 'we can go along with an English publisher who would run sheets for us'.⁸⁰ This co-publishing offer, however, did not go forward. Though Laughlin ultimately elected not to include Chamberlain, Roberts and Jones in his New Directions book list, in subsequent years he published modern Welsh canonical texts for an American readership in the New Directions New Classics series: Caradoc Evans's *Nothing to Pay* (1995) and Caradoc Pritchard's *One Moonlit Night* (translated by Philip Mitchell, 1997).

James Laughlin was energetic, detail-oriented, and predisposed to long-term, personal relationships with authors. His engagement with Welsh writers and editors highlighted the New Directions modernist aesthetic and supplied them with classic modernist and *avant-garde* texts not available in Britain. While Laughlin was informing mid-

twentieth century Welsh writers and editors about New Directions Press authors and titles – and thus about current manifestations of international modernism – Welsh writers and editors in turn educated Laughlin about Welsh poetry and fiction and the burgeoning 1930s and 40s English-language literary culture of Wales. In 1952, six years before publication of her first book, *The Green Heart*, Brenda Chamberlain voiced an appreciation for the publishing efforts undertaken by Laughlin that many Welsh writers of her generation must also have felt, writing to him that, ‘The outlook for creative writing is more than desperate, isn’t it? Thank God for N.D.’⁸¹

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Notes

The author would like to thank Le Moyne College for grants that supported the research and writing of this essay.

- ¹ This goal was advanced by the *New Directions in Poetry and Prose* annual anthology; the Poet of the Month series (active during the 1940s); the compilation of anthologies such as *New British Poets* (1949), edited by Kenneth Rexroth, and book publication, begun in 1941.
- ² The first New Directions Press brochure describes the new publishing venture as 'concentrating on books of purely literary rather than commercial value.' Ian MacNiven, *Literchoor Is My Beat: A Life of James Laughlin* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2014), p. 107. Subsequent references will be to MacNiven.
- ³ This goal inspired the creation of three book series: 'New Classics,' 'Makers of Modern Literature: the Select Writings,' and 'Modern Readers.' For the New Classics series, 1935-1955, Laughlin republished such seminal texts as Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, and Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. See <http://seriesofseries.owu.edu/new-classics-series/>, last accessed 17 October 2022.
- ⁴ Laughlin gave Kenneth Rexroth access to this archive as a resource for his editing of the New Directions Press anthology, *New British Poets*. In a letter of 31 October 1945 Laughlin promised to send Rexroth 'a crate of English stuff. I have a lot of it around.' (Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, Collection Number 175.13, folder 6.) In a letter to Wrey Gardiner (29 December 1949) Laughlin writes: 'I have been doing a little work lately on my collection of literary magazines and I find to my horror that of your excellent *Poetry Quarterly*, which is so important to English publishing, I have nothing except volumes five and six. Can you tell me whether it will be possible for you to obtain for me the missing volumes? I consider the magazine so important that I would like to have it complete. The most satisfactory way for me to get these would be to trade you books for them, but if this would not work out, possibly you could sell them to me at a trade discount.' Houghton Library, Harvard University, New Directions Publishing Corp. Records, MS Am 2077 (630). Subsequent references will be to HL.
- ⁵ In a 10 October 1943 letter to Laughlin, Keidrych Rhys thanks him 'for subscribing to *Wales*'. HL MS Am 2077 (1442)
- ⁶ In a letter to friend and New Directions author and editor Kenneth Rexroth, who complained about not receiving sufficient royalties, Laughlin writes on 20 May 1954: 'Poets before you have had to wait for fame, and some don't get it ever. You complain that you only got \$14 in royalties, but [William] Everson, who some years doesn't even get a dollar, doesn't make scenes, nor does Vernon Watkins, who for 2 years had more returns than sales and got nothing.' Lee Bartlett (ed), *Rexroth and Laughlin: Selected Letters* (Norton & Company, 1991), p. 193. Though Laughlin during the 1930s and 40s worked hard to position New Directions as the premier global publisher of modernist and experimental works, the press struggled to make a profit. In 1949, gross sales totaled \$232,831 but 'ND had lost \$20,193 over the course of the same year' (MacNiven, p. 261).
- ⁷ Greg Barnhisel, *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), p. 65.
- ⁸ Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Dylan Thomas Collection, Series IV, Third-Party Works and Correspondence, circa 1930s-1991, Read, Bill Correspondence T-Z, B50.
- ⁹ MacNiven, p. 131.
- ¹⁰ This ad also ran in Keidrych Rhys's *Wales*, issue 3, Autumn 1937.

- ¹¹ I have not located Laughlin's initial letter to Thomas, but Thomas refers to it in his reply of 15 February 1938.
- ¹² *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, Paul Ferris, ed. J. M. Dent, 2000, p. 321. Subsequent references will be to *CL*. Laughlin's practice of providing complimentary copies of New Directions press publications began with the press's inaugural publication, the 1936 *New Directions in Poetry and Prose*: 'Most copies of the anthology were distributed, through either sales or free copies sent to contributors, friends, and those J thought sufficiently influential. "Didn't quite pay its way", he said blandly.' MacNiven, *Literchoor Is My Beat*, p. 99. In 1945 Laughlin sent Welsh author and artist Brenda Chamberlain his own first poetry collection, *Some Natural Things*. HL MS Am 2077.2 (42). Laughlin sustained a correspondence with Chamberlain until 1957, continuing to send New Directions publications and catalogues to her on Bardsey/Ynys Enlli. In a letter of 28 October 1956, Chamberlain wrote to thank Laughlin for the ND 'book list, & particularly ... for the little booklet on Ezra Pound ... These booklets you send out from time to time, 'for the friends of New Directions' are quite wonderful & I treasure all you have sent me.' MS Am 2077 (2729)
- ¹³ *CL*, p. 321.
- ¹⁴ *CL*, p. 331.
- ¹⁵ HL MS Am 2077 (1649).
- ¹⁶ Harper and Brothers (later, Harper & Row, then HarperCollins) was Edna St. Vincent Millay's US publisher.
- ¹⁷ MacNiven, pp. 11-12.
- ¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/books/james-laughlins-story-told-in-two-new-books.html> Last accessed 23 May 2023.
- ¹⁹ *CL*, p. 332.
- ²⁰ *CL*, p. 370.
- ²¹ Writing to Henry Treece on 1 June 1938, Thomas remarks that 'I've had a lot of letters from [Laughlin] lately about plans for publicity for my stories and poems in America He seems genial & very earnest and has been giving me small sums of money regularly, though now they've ceased. He talks about 'his' poets and takes an avuncular interest in obscurity.' *CL*, p. 349.
- ²² *CL*, p. 341.
- ²³ Thomas wrote Laughlin on 24 November 1946: 'I'm sorry we didn't manage to have, together, quieter drinks, or less, or more, and that, before you went off to Paris, we hadn't advanced very much of my America-ward plans.' (*CL*, p. 677). Lycett writes that James Laughlin 'told Rexroth that had seen Dylan a few times [during his 1950 US reading tour] but had not been able 'to get much sense out of him as he always seemed to be half cooked.' (301) Laughlin starts a letter of 18 September 1951 to Thomas with, 'It was good to see you, even so briefly, when I was in London, and I'm only sorry that I didn't get a chance to make contact with you in Wales.' HL MS Am 2077 (1649) Laughlin attended a party in Thomas's honor at Victor Weybright's New York home in May 1953. (Brennin, p. 203)
- ²⁴ <https://www.ndbooks.com/author/dylan-thomas/>, last accessed 6 October 2022.
- ²⁵ In the August 1938 *Poetry* Thomas published 'Four Poems', numbered but untitled. The poems (identified by first lines) are: 'When all my five and country senses see ...', 'Oh make me a mask and a wall...', 'Not from this anger ...', and 'The spire cranes'.
- ²⁶ The 1938 *New Directions* annual anthology published Thomas's stories 'The Orchards' and 'In the Direction of the Beginning', and his poems 'In Memory of Ann Jones', 'How shall my animal' and 'I make this in a warring absence'.
- ²⁷ HL MS Am 2077 (1649). For a comprehensive view of how Laughlin managed a poet's career to create and sustain a readership and critical attention, see Greg Barnhisel, *James*

Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound (University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).

- ²⁸ ‘From the first [James Laughlin] saw New Directions as being in league with, and a natural extension of, the little magazines. I hoped that writers would flow from the little magazines to him ...’. MacNiven, p. 100.
- ²⁹ ‘Swap advert in “Wales” is written in pencil above an advertisement for ‘New Directions: The Schedule for the Poets of the Year for 1943’. The ad lists Dylan Thomas, Bertolt Brecht, Yvor Winters, Rimbaud and George Barker, among others. HL MS Am 2077 (1442)
- ³⁰ HL MS Am 2077 (1442).
- ³¹ Edited with Wyndham Lewis.
- ³² HL MS Am 2077 (1442).
- ³³ Apparently, however, Laughlin did not make a direct request to Keidrych Rhys: in ‘Ethics of Acknowledgement’ in *Wales* No. 8/9 (1939), Rhys chastises ‘Mr. Laughlin IV’ for not asking permission to republish Thomas’s ‘*In the Direction of the Beginning*, etc. WALES No. 4 ... in *New Directions* (U.S.A.)’. *Wales: Numbers One to Eleven*, Frank Cass and Company Limited (1969), p. 241.
- ³⁴ Laughlin was very close to *Partisan Review* contributor and poet Delmore Schwartz, who for a time worked as a New Directions Press editorial assistant.
- ³⁵ James Laughlin, ‘Ripostes’, *Partisan Review* 4.3, p. 64.
- ³⁶ *Partisan Review*, ‘Magazine Chronicle: British Periodicals’, Vol. V, No. 1 (1938), p. 48. The full comment by Dupee offers criticism as well: ‘*Wales* is a regional affair, with vaguely proletarian sympathies but little positive social character. Such militancy as it has, is directed against the “pansy competition”, the “log-rolling, cocktail parties, book clubs, knighthoods, O.M.’s, and superannuated effeminacy” of London circles.’ (48)
- ³⁷ *Partisan Review*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (1938). The journal had changed from a monthly to a quarterly, hence the use of ‘Fall’. Besides Rhys’s poem, the issue includes poems by George Barker, David Gascoyne, Julian Symons; Part I of a story by Franz Kafka; and a ‘Manifesto’ by Diego Riviera, co-authored with Andre Breton.
- ³⁸ Thomas’s ‘Poem’ (‘It is the sinners’ dust-tongued bell ...’) starts the anthology.
- ³⁹ *Wales*, No. 6/7 (1939) in *Wales: Numbers One to Eleven*, Frank Cass and Company Limited (1969), p. 209. The note is not signed, though it would have been written by Nigel Heseltine or Dylan Thomas (the issue’s editors), or by Keidrych Rhys himself.
- ⁴⁰ As Steven Kellman puts it, Laughlin ‘foraged restlessly throughout the world’ in his search for New Directions authors. ‘How James Laughlin Remade the Canon’, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Volume 61, Issue 11 (2014). <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-james-laughlin-remade-the-canon/>; last accessed 31 May 2023.
- ⁴¹ HL MS Am 2077 (872).
- ⁴² First series, 1939; second series 1944-48.
- ⁴³ *Numbers One to Eleven*. Frank Cass and Company Limited (1969), p. 249.
- ⁴⁴ HL MS Am 2077 (872).
- ⁴⁵ Translated with Thomas Jones and first published by Golden Cockerel Press in 1948, *The Mabinogion* was the definitive translation for many decades. It was republished by Dent in 1949 then revised by Gwyn Jones and reissued by Everyman’s Library in 1989.
- ⁴⁶ About Lady Guest’s translation, Gwyn Jones wrote in his 1 December 1945 letter to Laughlin that ‘the Guest translation (the one universally read) is not very accurate, has occasional omissions on victorian [*sic*] grounds of taste, and for the most part genteelizes the old stories.’ HL MS Am 2077 (872)
- ⁴⁷ In the first issue of *The Welsh Review* in 1939 Gwyn Jones published Margiad Evans’s ‘The Black House.’
- ⁴⁸ HL MS Am 2077 (872).

- ⁴⁹ In *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, Glyn Jones comments that for an aspiring Welsh writer living in Cardiff during the 1950s, 'No literary or artistic life existed' (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1968, p. 30). He gives special credit to Seamus O'Sullivan, editor of the *Dublin Magazine*, for encouraging and publishing emerging Welsh poets, such as himself, Alun Lewis and R. S. Thomas (p. 31, note 1). He emphasizes the importance of international outlets for Welsh writers, who sent work 'to London, New York, Paris and Chicago' (p. 35).
- ⁵⁰ Meic Stephens, founding editor of *Poetry Wales* and literature director of the Welsh Arts Council from 1967 to 1990, remarks that 'We were very few in number who had any interest in what we called Anglo-Welsh literature in 1962, and there was no English-language "publishing scene" in Wales' (pp. 32-33).
- ⁵¹ However, there is an anthology of poetry from Wales, *The Urgency of Identity: English-language Poetry from Wales*, ed. David Lloyd (TriQuarterly/Northwestern University Press, 1994).
- ⁵² The film *How Green Was My Valley* was nominated for ten academy awards and won five, including best picture.
- ⁵³ Jones went on to edit two anthologies of Welsh fiction in Britain, *Welsh Short Stories* (Oxford UP, 1956) and *Twenty-five Welsh Short Stories* (edited with Islwyn Ffowc Elis and reissued in 1992 as *Classic Welsh Short Stories*, Oxford UP, 1971) – the first to include a substantial number of stories translated from Welsh. In his Introduction, Jones discusses the history of anthologies of Welsh fiction (pp. ix-xvi).
- ⁵⁴ According to a March 1946 letter Rexroth sent to prospective authors for *The New British Poets*, he expected to pay poets 'about \$2 a page, possibly a little more, under ten shillings anyway'. HL MS Am 2077 (2729)
- ⁵⁵ Calculated using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) data provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the United States government: <http://www.saving.org/inflation/inflation.php?amount=700&year=1950>.
- ⁵⁶ Ridler edited Faber's *A Little Book of Modern Verse* in 1941.
- ⁵⁷ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁵⁸ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁵⁹ A note to 'J' signed 'B', dated 10 May 1950, identifies the volumes requested by Denise Levertov. HL MS Am 2077 (2729)
- ⁶⁰ Though dated 20 January 1949, Jones's letter must have been written after he received a letter from James Laughlin dated 4 February 1949, as Jones refers to Laughlin's February letter.
- ⁶¹ The 'New Classics Series' brought back into print seminal modernist titles, such as Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (released by Faber in 1936, with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot). In *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, Glyn Jones singles out Barnes as a formative writer when he was a young teacher in Wales: 'I spent my school holidays at that time in London ... meeting young writers with whom I could discuss books by writers of the type of Djuna Barnes, Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett' (p. 35).
- ⁶² HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁶³ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁶⁴ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁶⁵ Rimbaud's violent and destructive relationship with Verlaine was of a different order than Chamberlain's intense but pacific relationship with Karl von Laer, the figure at the center of her 'Green Heart' poem sequence, or the fictional (or fictionalized) 'Leonidas' in *A Rope of Vines*. See David Lloyd, 'Against "Journalese": Form and Style in Brenda Chamberlain's *A Rope of Vines*', *Mapping the Territory: Critical Approaches to Welsh Fiction in English*, Katie Gramich, ed. (Parthian Press, UK, 2011): 245-269.
- ⁶⁶ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).

- ⁶⁷ HL MS Am 2077 (2729). For more on this neglected writer, see Rhian Davies, ‘Scarred Background: Nigel Heseltine (1916–1995), A Biographical Introduction and a Bibliography’, in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, Volume 11 (2006–7), pp. 69–101. Daniel Hughes has edited a selection of Heseltine’s stories: *A Day’s Pleasure and Other Tales*, Parthian Books, 2023.
- ⁶⁸ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁶⁹ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁷⁰ In the event, Watkins did not write for Thomas’s volume, which was published with an introduction by John L. Sweeney.
- ⁷¹ Some British Addresses, HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁷² Faber and Faber published the books in the UK.
- ⁷³ Watkins taught at Washington University in Seattle from March to June, 1964, then began a full academic year there, in 1967. He died in Seattle on 11 October 1967. Roland Mathias, *Vernon Watkins*, Writers of Wales, University of Wales Press (1974), pp. 116–117.
- ⁷⁴ MS Am 2077 (1741). Along with Dylan Thomas, Gwyn Jones, and Vernon Watkins, Brenda Chamberlain was another Welsh writer James Laughlin planned to visit during one of trips to the UK, though they did not connect in person. On 16 August 1951 Chamberlain wrote to Laughlin, ‘Delighted to receive your card. Very excited at the thought of seeing you on the island.’ HL MS Am 2077 (2729) She wrote again on 28 February 1952: ‘The population is now down to 11, including three dopey lighthouse keepers. There is no one of any interest left here. You must come here this summer if you are to see the island: I shall be leaving quite definitely before next winter.’ HL MS Am 2077 (2729) Though there is no correspondence between them in the New Directions Houghton Library archive after 1957, Laughlin maintained his interest in Chamberlain, keeping reviews of her books. Over a clipped review of Chamberlain’s 1962 novel *Tide-Race* in the New Directions archive, Laughlin’s assistant Robert MacGregor wrote: ‘J is this not an old friend?’ (signed ‘Bob’).
- ⁷⁵ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁷⁶ HL MS Am 2077 (333). For more detail on Chamberlain’s attempts to publish *The Green Heart* see my essay ‘Brenda Chamberlain and American Modernism’, *The International Journal of Welsh Writing in English* (Vol. 3, November, 2015): 21–47. As I note in that essay the reviewer MacGregor mentions is American poet Delmore Schwartz.
- ⁷⁷ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁷⁸ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁷⁹ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁸⁰ HL MS Am 2077 (2729).
- ⁸¹ 28 February 1952, HL MS Am 2077 (2729).

