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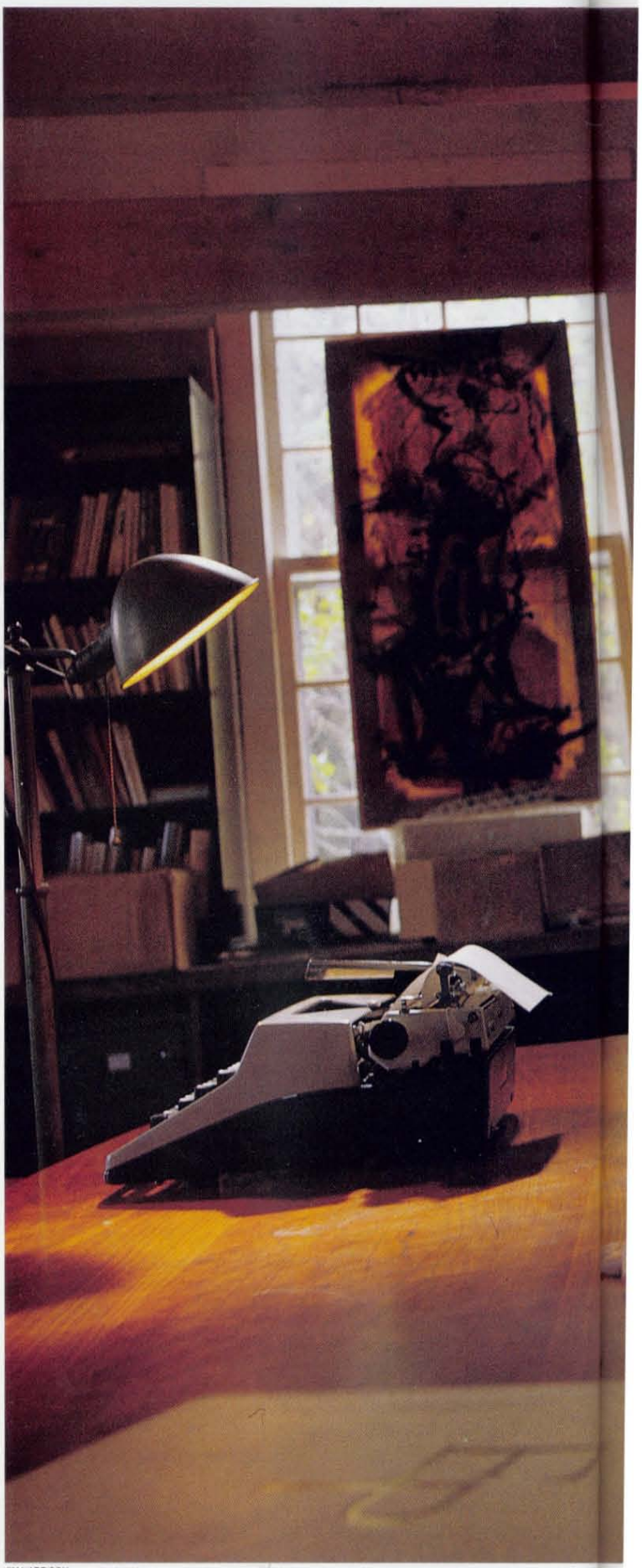
In 1936, in this converted cow shed in rural Connecticut, James Laughlin launched an avant-garde publishing house called New Directions. At 80, he reflects on poetry, Ezra Pound, and a life lived at the very center of modern literature.

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

James Laughlin ("Jaz" to his friend Ezra Pound) founded the avant-garde publishing house called New Directions. He also developed Alta, which some would call America's premier ski resort.

CANTOS AND THE STEM CHRISTIE

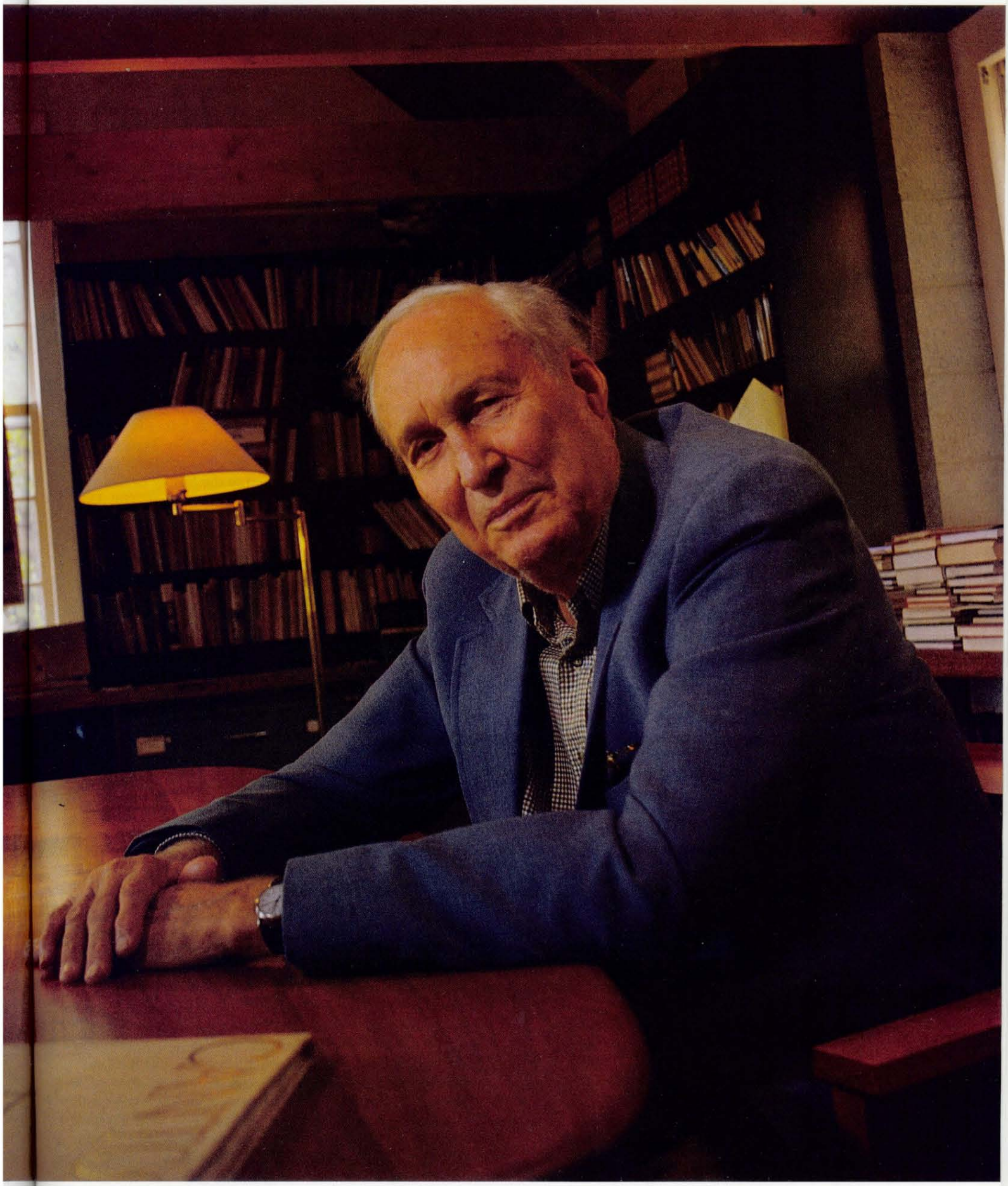
by CRAIG LAMBERT



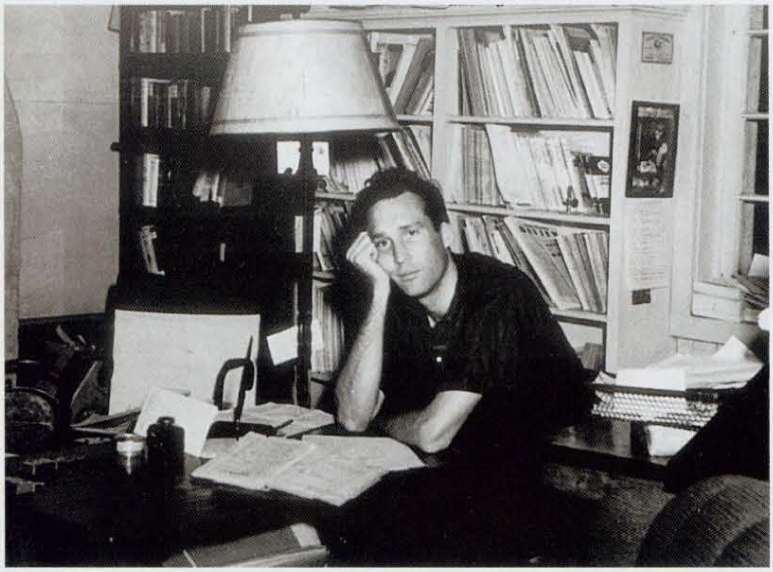
JIM HARRISON

In 1982 James Laughlin '36, founder of the New Directions publishing company, returned to Harvard to read some of his own poetry. One poem, *Ars Gratia Artis*, described James Rorimer, the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. After reading it, Laughlin called out a question to the late Harry Levin, then Babbitt professor of comparative literature. "*Ars Gratia Artis*—Harry, is that a tag from Horace?" asked Laughlin. "No," Levin barked back from the audience. "It's from MGM."

Though Laughlin has straddled both art and commerce, he may feel closer to Horace than MGM, even if the Latin inscription around the MGM lion, translated as "art for art's sake," might also be New Directions' credo. Laughlin does indeed bring time-honored literary values to publishing. "I always felt that a good book should stay in print so that readers could get it—out of fairness to both the author and the reader," Laughlin asserts—sounding, in the current world of media-conglomerate publishing, almost like an eighteenth-century



Laughlin and Ezra Pound. A lunch stop in the Dolomites in 1935, on a drive from Venice to Salzburg.



Above: Owner of a one-man shop. The young Laughlin in his New Directions office, at his aunt's home in Connecticut.

Right: Laughlin in the 1950s at Alta, his ski resort in Utah where tons of dry powder fall.

patron of the arts. "New Directions is the model of what a fine literary small press is and ought to be," says poet and critic David Lehman, series editor of *The Best American Poetry.*

New Directions has also upended the publishing dictum that poetry and serious literature don't earn money: black ink appears on the house's ledgers as well as the pages of its books. "The secret of making do in this kind of publishing is to get professors to assign the books in their courses," Laughlin explains. When college professors began assigning Pound, Baudelaire, and William Carlos Williams, New Directions became profitable, after 23 years of deficits. The house's all-time biggest seller was Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (over one million copies), which Henry Miller had recommended to Laughlin. (New Directions has twenty of Miller's books in print, "but none of the *Tropics*—my family would have disowned me," Laughlin says.) Another million-seller was Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poetry collection *A Coney Island of the Mind.*

Over the decades, Laughlin has published books by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Denise Levertov, Tennessee Williams, Dylan Thomas, Kenneth Rexroth, Thomas Merton, Delmore Schwartz, Vladimir Nabokov, and Octavio Paz—one of four Nobel Prize-winners on his list. "The history of the Modernist movement in American writing is in great measure inextricably tied to the history of the New Directions Publishing Corporation," wrote Guy Davenport in an introduction to a recent book of Laughlin's verse. "In the 1930s and 1940s New Directions was the only outlet for a certain kind of daring, adventurous, experimental—and often expatriate—literature," Lehman adds. "The history of twentieth-century poetry is unthinkable without the publishing intervention of James Laughlin."

New Directions has also published many translations of avant-garde novels by writers such as Céline and Mishima. Its list includes authors writing in Spanish, German, and Italian, and the firm has brought so many French titles into English that the French foreign office awarded Laughlin the ribbon of their Legion of Honor.

New Directions has produced 55 annual anthologies, beginning in 1936 with a 208-page volume titled *New Directions in Prose & Poetry* that cost Laughlin $396 to print and produce, including the binding. Its cover touts "Indirect Criticism," "American Surrealism," and "Dream Writing." Laughlin forgot to tell the Otter Valley Press of Brandon, Vermont—which also printed the Harvard *Advocate*—to number the pages. The price was $2; contributors included Pound, Cocteau, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, e.e. cummings, and Henry Miller. The press run was seven hundred copies.

The publishing house actually began in Ezra Pound's study in Rapallo, Italy, one morning in 1935. Laughlin, on leave from Harvard, was enrolled in Pound's "Ezuversity," as the poet styled his daily routine of holding court. Pound was going over some of Laughlin's poems, crossing out most of the words. He looked up and said, "Jaz, you're never going to be any good as a poet. Why don't you take up something useful?" When asked what that might be, Pound replied, "Why doncher assassernate Henry Seidel Canby?" (Canby was the *Saturday Review* editor who consistently gave Pound's books unfavorable reviews.) "I'm not smart enough," Laughlin answered. "I

wouldn't get away with it." Pound cogitated some more, then said, "You'd better become a publisher. You've probably got enough brains for that."

Pound promised that if Laughlin could learn to print books "right side up," he would designate him as his publisher. Pound not only gave *Kulchur* to New Directions but wrote to his literary friends, urging them to publish with Laughlin. "Ezra was so kind, so generous. He completely changed my life," Laughlin says. William Carlos Williams gave New Directions his novel *White Mule*; Kay Boyle submitted her collection of poems *A Glad Day*, and Djuna Barnes allowed Laughlin to reprint *Nightwood*. When Alfred Kazin praised *White Mule* in *The New York Times*, it went into a second printing and New Directions was off and running.

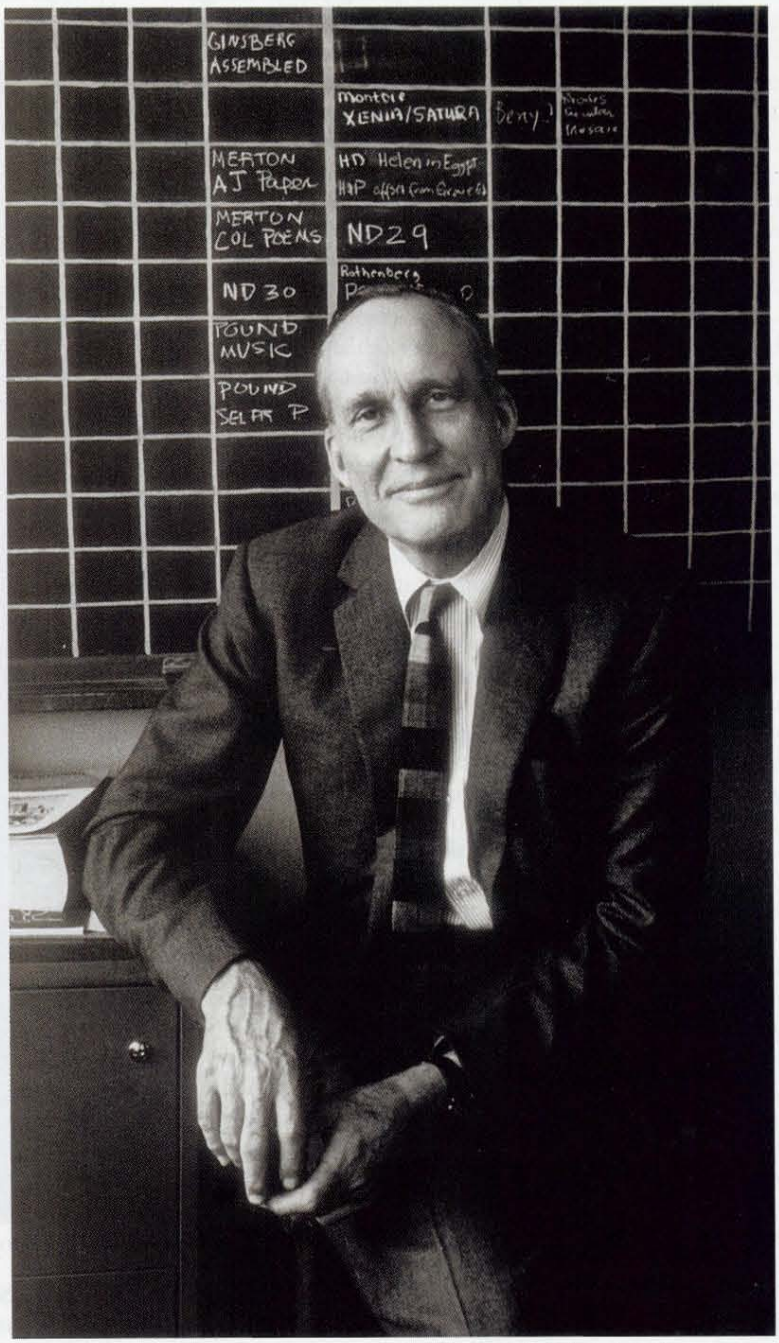
In the early years New Directions was a one-man operation, based at Harvard. At first Laughlin had two customers: Frances Steloff, of the Gotham Book Mart in New York, and Gordon Cairnie, of the Grolier Book Shop, which still survives in Harvard Square. Laughlin did some mailings, bought a 1936 Buick, and hit the road alone with his satchel of books. "During reading period, I could get as far as Omaha," he recalls. "The store buyers were mostly female. I would sail in there wearing my Austrian *lodenmantel*—a kind of wool cloak—and I was rather good-looking in those days! There was an attraction that was almost sexual. I sold the books myself for three years, and I was glad that I did it because I knew how the bookstores operated."

In his youth Laughlin also knew how a steel mill operated and didn't much like it. He grew up in Pittsburgh, where his Irish forebears had built up the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation, until 1978 the fourth-largest steel company in the country. "I couldn't stand two aspects of Jones & Laughlin," he says. "First, the steel mill itself. Every Thanksgiving father would take us into the mill, and I was scared to death. There were these terrible blasts of heat and noise, and buckets overhead dripping fiery droplets of molten metal. The second thing: I didn't care whether we sold more steel or not."

Yet selling steel made many things possible. New Directions was one; an earlier dividend was prepping at Choate, where Laughlin studied under the great classicist and translator Dudley Fitts. "The classics offered an escape from Presbyterianism, and I loved it," Laughlin recalls. "I discovered the glamorous Greek gods drinking mead and screwing nymphs on Mount Olympus."

Fitts was also a modern poet who knew Pound and was involved with *Hound & Horn*, the avant-garde literary journal founded by Lincoln Kirstein '30. (Typically, Pound nicknamed the magazine *Bitch & Bugle.)* After Laughlin had matriculated at Harvard, Fitts wrote to Pound, introducing his protégé. Laughlin took some time off from college (he would eventually need seven years to graduate) and went to Europe; one summer he worked for Gertrude Stein at her French country place in the Savoie. After a month, Stein and Laughlin fell out; the latter retreated to a small room in Paris and wrote Pound asking if he might come and see him in Rapallo. Pound's affirmative response, via telegram, astonished Laughlin: "VISIBILITY HIGH."

The two men immediately hit it off. Laughlin stayed several months at the "Ezuversity" in 1934-35. In his 1987 book *Pound as Wuz*, Laughlin collected some impressions of his mentor.



MARGO MOORE

Laughlin in New Directions' New York office in 1975. Behind him, the blackboard tracks projects by authors such as H.D., Thomas Merton, and Ezra Pound.

"The liveliness and the sparkling eyes—his eyes were so alive," Laughlin recalls. "He was dotty, it's true, but he also had horse sense. Pound's ego was large but not at all objectionable; you just accepted that Ezra could do all these things. I didn't know where he got so much energy. In those days I didn't know anything about the manic state that goes with de-

pression." That psychiatric syndrome touches Laughlin himself; he controls its cycles with lithium. His father and grandfather also experienced the extreme mood swings.

There was a good hill on Woodland Road in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh, where Laughlin grew up, and the young James Laughlin IV slid down it on a pair of skis that a lady golf champion from Scotland had left in the Laughlin house. But he really discovered skiing in 1927 when he went to Le Rosey, the famous Swiss school near Geneva, where he learned French. "In winter the whole school moved up to Gstaad. We stayed in chalets," he recalls. "I wanted those mountains; they were an enticing sight for a boy who wanted to ski." Laughlin became a fine skier and later wrote on skiing for *Town & Country* and *Vogue*.

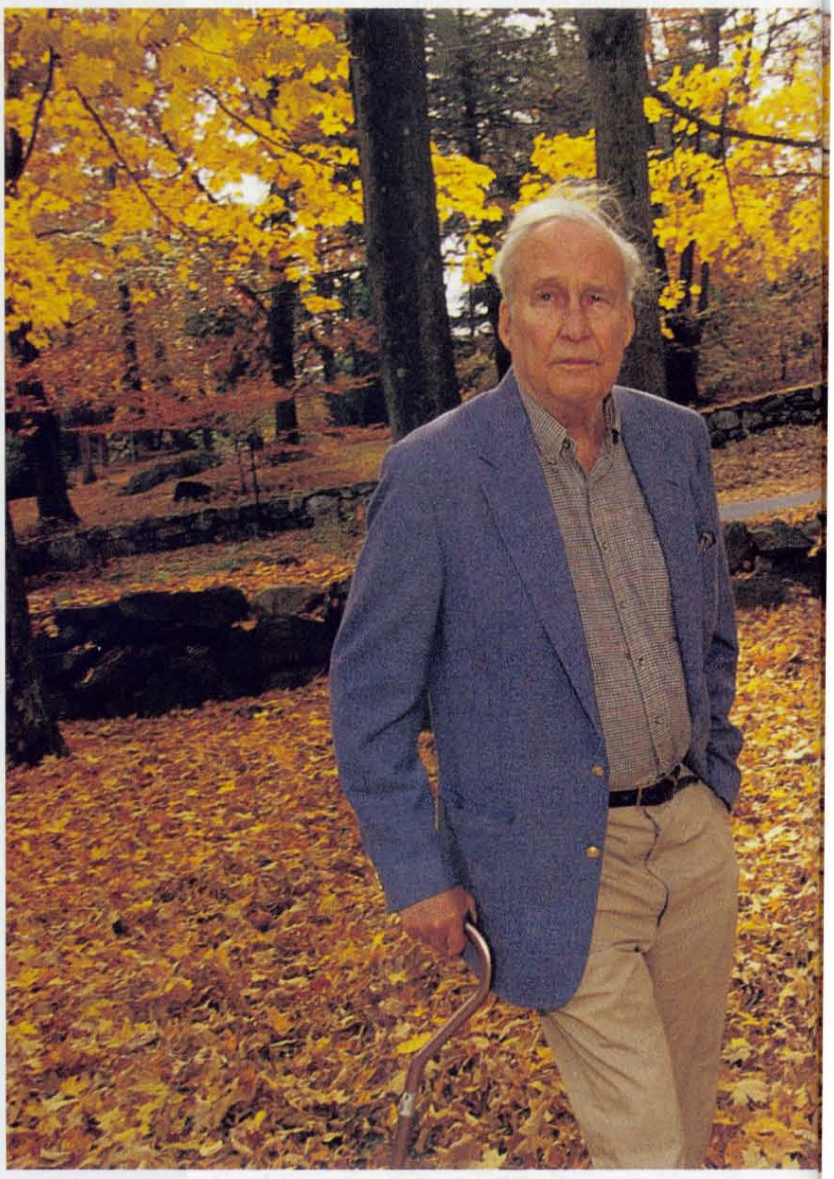
In 1934 Laughlin and three companions from Dartmouth went on a skiing trip to New Zealand. Though Laughlin was far from a championship-caliber skier, he did win a downhill race on Mt. Cook—by accident. "It was very foggy the day we raced," he recalls. "At one point all the others went off to the left, down the Tasman Glacier. They should have gone down the Ball Glacier!" Laughlin has skied all over Europe and the American West; at Sun Valley, Idaho, he once competed in a four-way event that included downhill, slalom, cross-country, and jumping. "The most sensual thing in skiing is making slow turns in deep snow, spray flying up all over you," he says with relish. And one of the most inadvertently exciting things is surviving an avalanche, which Laughlin has done: "You try to kick off your skis and then 'swim' in the snow, keeping your head above it. People get in trouble when they get buried."

Laughlin's favorite type of skiing is high mountain ski touring. "All over the Alps there are huts, high up," he says. "A couple generally lives there and tends the hut, which can usually accommodate up to twenty people. The huts are stocked with food and drink, and there are mattresses and blankets—no beds. You can ski from one hut to another without carrying food or sleeping bags. You move very slowly, maybe covering only ten miles a day to the next hut. As you move across the high terrain the mountain vistas change. There are huts in every alpine range, but my favorite chain is in the Oetztal region near Innsbruck."

Another favorite place is Alta, Utah, where you can ski from altitudes close to twelve thousand feet and that many experts would say offers the best skiing in the United States. A special combination of topographical and weather conditions blesses Alta. Winter storms begin in the Pacific, then travel east and get drier as they cross the Nevada desert, until they hit the Wasatch mountain range, of which Alta is a part. Their moisture saturation prevents the storms from rising above the range; instead, they unload tons of powder on the mountainsides before moving on. "I'd never seen snow like this—so much dry snow," says Laughlin, recalling his arrival at Alta in the 1930s. "In the Alps, the warm wind that comes up from the Mediterranean keeps the snow heavy."

A 1992 profile of Laughlin in *The New Yorker* noted that Alta averages 550 inches of snow per year, and that in a good year eight hundred inches can fall. This compares with two hundred inches of natural snow in an average year at the ski resort of Killington, Vermont. During one 24-hour period last winter, 55 inches of snow fell on Alta. There, snow-making equipment is hardly ever used.

In 1939 there was a ranger station and a tiny six-room lodge at Alta. The mountains were on Forest Service land. Members of the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce had pioneered skiing at Alta but didn't want the bother of running a resort and invited Laughlin to take it over. "I said, I'll enlarge the lodge; give me a twenty-year free lease," he recalls. Laughlin bought into Alta very gradually, acquiring bits and pieces of land from the Salt Lake City Winter Sports Association until he eventually had a controlling interest. Today his children own the resort.



At his home in Connecticut, where he has lived for about fifty years.

Beginning with a little ski lift built with telephone poles and old mining machinery, Laughlin and his group added more, until now Alta has eight modern lifts. The skiing is still magnificent, but success exacts a price. "What I loved was its wildness. You were plunked down in nature. In the early days there might be

only ten skiers on the hill, carving up the powder," Laughlin recalls. "Today there are four thousand skiers on a good Sunday; we've had to build big parking lots. At some resorts the skiers get involved in self-presentation; all these silly things—après ski, fancy clothes . . . you can go to St. Moritz for that."

Since most of Alta's land is leased from the Forest Service, it is difficult for developers to get a foothold there. "In Aspen there's a ten-story hotel and condos all over the mountain; it's just ruined—because it was private land, you see," Laughlin explains. "Developers sell the ground, and people build homes, and then you have a mountain town. We've tried to avoid the nightlife at Alta: there's only one quiet little restaurant, so it's dinner, VCR, and bed. Up in Aspen they'll be dancing all night; it isn't like real mountain skiing—you're in a resort. We try to keep it simple."

JIM HARRISON

Laughlin admits that "the publishing business suffered from the amount of time I spent skiing" but says "it was possible to do both. I would stay at Alta while doing some book projects and would answer New Directions correspondence with a dictating machine. The worst incident was when a Delmore Schwartz manuscript got lost under the floorboards of the Alta mail truck for a few months." Sometimes skiing and literature would come together, as when Laughlin would camp and ski with poet Kenneth Rexroth in the Sierras. "Kenneth would dig a small cave in the snow and line it with fir branches, where we slept," Laughlin recalls.

Laughlin no longer skis, but at 80 he leads an active life with his third wife, Gertrude, a painter, in their capacious residence (known as Meadow House) in northwest Connecticut. A dozen black-faced Highland sheep graze on the property, which Laughlin first visited as a student at Choate, when his Aunt Leila lived there. Laughlin inherited Meadow House from her and has been in residence for about half a century. He ventures forth to do things like receiving an honorary degree from Yale in 1982, or teaching courses in modern poetry at Brown. Age has forced a few compromises but shows little effect on his nimble mind. On a snowy Saturday morning, as a lively flock of chickadees attacks two bird feeders just outside a picture window, Laughlin sits in a kitchen chair and reflects on the publishing adventure.

"We're very democratic at New Directions," he says. "There are four editors, and at least two of us have to like something or we won't publish it. The office sends me a lot of mail; writers want me to tell them that they are wonderful poets, and I do. I usually work up until Ted Koppel time.

"It's harder to keep books in print now," he continues. "When we first started, binderies would store books for free. Now it's two cents per book per year for storage. Add that up and it's a big item. We do selective remaindering; after five years we look at the sales figures and see how many books we need to stay in print for ten years, then remainder the rest. I like to do things the way I did it fifty or sixty years ago—letterpress, linotype."

These days Laughlin's central creative focus is his own poetry, which he produces steadily. The London literary journal *Ambit* is serializing his ongoing autobiographical poem "Byways," which is now up to fifteen hundred lines. Several volumes of Laughlin's poetry have appeared, most recently *Collected Poems* (Moyer Bell, 1994). Turkey Press of Santa Barbara, California, will soon bring out a limited edition of his epigrams, *Heart Island*, and a volume of new poems and segments of "Byways" will appear in 1995. Unlike some New Directions authors, Laughlin writes poetry of great clarity. "There's been so much unnecessary hiding of meanings," he says. "That gets tiresome to me."

Another thing Laughlin finds tiresome is computers, which for years he "fought tooth and nail. But New Directions has a computer system now," he says. "My son Henry is a computer bug. He gave me a Macintosh to 'improve my writing of poetry.' But so far the struggle with the monstrous machine is a losing battle. The Mac makes me write things I have no intention of saying. I don't believe that computers are about to replace books. Think what a fine thing it is to read a book in bed—are you going to take a computer to bed? Since Gutenberg, books have done pretty well for us." ▽

Craig A. Lambert '69, Ph.D. '78, is an associate editor of this magazine.