

## Harvard's Patron: Jack of all Poets

By

Kevin Kiely

‘Dear Jack, Thank you for your Phi Beta Kappa poem (“An Arch for Janus”). I liked the poem. I found it moving, especially, for some reason, the reference to John Quincy Adams.’—T. S. Eliot

‘Jack Sweeney, he introJUICED Dylan [Thomas] to Harvard.’—Ezra Pound

‘You do know, don’t you, Jack, that I appreciate all you have done for me and think of you always with great fondness.’—Anne Sexton

‘Benevolent Jack Sweeney!’—Marianne Moore

‘My staunch friend Jack Sweeney (himself a poet) who runs the Harvard ‘record room’”—E. E. Cummings

‘Jack Sweeney, waiting, gracious, whitehaired, loveable, in the quiet sanctum of the poetry room.’—Sylvia Plath

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Front Cover PHOTOGRAPH:

*Front row (L to R): John Berryman, Adrienne Rich, Josephine Jacobsen and James Merrill;  
Back row (L to R): Stanley Kunitz, Richard Eberhart, Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur and  
William Meredith*

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Jack's approval was always something I wanted and sought; otherwise, his self-effacement, service to friends and others—the modesty of the man must be emphasised: these are memorable and magnificent qualities of his.

—Richard Wilbur, personal interview, 22 January 2008

It's a noble work you've undertaken and I heartily endorse it. I'm happy to be numbered among Jack's friends, for he was kind, generous and welcoming to me from the moment I got to Boston. I knew the Sweeney's apartment well and first met Ted Hughes and Sylvia [Plath] there right after they got to the States—the beginning of a precious friendship. What he made of the Poetry Room at the Widener must have been important to a whole generation and more.

—W. S. Merwin letter to the author

When Anne Sexton and I received grants from the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study, as it was then known in 1961, he arranged special dispensation for us to enter the hallowed Houghton Library, Harvard, you know, which was open to men only, so that we could access its poetry collection.

—Maxime Kumin personal-email

Jack Sweeney, that rare and wonderful gent, with his courtly manners and unselfish love of poetry. Yes, to be sure, he was a well-known presence on the Boston literary scene, and poets (like me) were certainly glad and grateful for his notice. He invited me to make a recording for the Poetry Room's sound archives, and to accomplish it he had me report to a little recording studio in an apartment on Beacon Hill in Boston, run by a guy named Steve Fassett. It wasn't far from the Sweeneys' apartment on Beacon Street.<sup>1</sup>

—X. J. Kennedy

Universities are our American equivalent for a church; they will give you peace. My error in life was in deserting their blessed peace.

—Henry Adams, Letter to William Roscoe Thayer

Be more Irish than Harvard.

—Robert Frost to President John F. Kennedy

These fragments I have shored against my ruins.

—T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land” ‘V’

These fragments you have shelved (shored).

—Ezra Pound, Canto ‘VIII’

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## Overview of Harvard's Patron: Jack of all Poets

Harvard's Woodberry Poetry Room was the location made famous by John L 'Jack' Sweeney (1906-1986), the Brooklyn born millionaire who provided patronage to more than 200 poets. He was active as a patron in other locations in the United States and Europe, and obsessively involved with the recording of poets reading their own work. Jack was the original pioneer of poetry recordings in Harvard's *Vocarium* which is now a prodigious worldwide resource.

The information within the academic discourse (here) is hardcore uncensored content, shining and glistening because of Jack's poets in their own words, especially their poetry, prose, letters, and interviews.

This book compliments the reading experience of the Internet Age which is highly visual and where textual material requires ideogram-blocks of information. Intellectual sound-bites cannot encompass the full texture of academic argument and discourse, whether online or in print. The ego-laden poets are, of course, investigated far beyond Wikipedia and Study Aids. Voluminous sources have been cogitated and assembled into the natural pattern that scholarship must achieve in order to render veracity to the academic traditions that began in Ancient Athens and Alexandria.

There is no overall academic theory in the text; neither structuralism, post-structuralism, or any 'ism'. Academic works generally adhere to their theoretical exegesis like the narrative arc in pulp fiction unravelling the clues, chapter by chapter to reveal the outcome. Whereas here, there is the human factor often in excess and the actions of a patron readily visible and fully analysed. The good guy patron is easily recognised. The scope and outcomes remain sublime in their collective apprehension and unveil the mysterious process of poetry 'helped' by patronage.

Still, no large body of text can survive without appealing fast and furiously, taking hostage of the reader by a glamorous seduction, promising complete pleasure and satisfaction amidst the scholarly foundations. Especially, where there are no high definition graphics or the visual advantages of the movie, documentary, screen performance and exhibition.

However, poetry has been conjuring verbal images, high definition imagery, emblazoned language, and sensual reproductions among its pleasures long before Socrates was in his infancy, or Charlie Chaplin and his descendents put together their screen-poetics, or before Edward R. Murrow reported from the London Blitz heralding modern TV news and documentary. Behind these genres were heavily bankrolled institutions, but alas for poetry, the fickleness of state patronage never dispensed fairly, and the resultant tragedies of need and want, go hand in hand with the obsessed poets willing to persevere like addicts in pursuit of their drugs, dreams, and visions. Jack's obsessive nature provided many types of patronage as discussed in the Introduction and explicitly discoursed and analysed in the A-Z.

During the great technological evolutions and innovations, the poetry horizons of poems getting made in the modernist and postmodernist era, evolved through various schools and originally through highly individual autonomous poets, in its form and content. From before the Roosevelt era, through Pearl Harbour and WWII, Truman and Los Alamos, the Ike Age, JFK, Johnson, and beyond to bad-boy Nixon, Ford, Carter and up to early Reagan—which is the historical period under scrutiny in terms of patronage: its complex presence and woeful absence.

Real poetry is still, of course, under threat from so much, and always has been, unless there are patrons and exemplary ones like Jack, the hero in my non-fiction, that is, if an academic work aimed at being popular can be permitted an eternal hero. A screenplay about Jack would encompass a glittering cast of over 200 poets with criss-crossing storylines, and a sound track of the greatest American poetry of many eras, as well as Europe, China and the World. The text reveals that Jack was not like Woody Allen's Leonard Zelig, merely peripheral to history, or Gatsby shady and criminal ending up face down in the pool, or Kane playing with jigsaws and his life in tatters, or Joe Gillis selling himself into trouble: another writer ending face down in the pool, off the wrong end of Sunset Boulevard.

Jack, fortunately for his poets, was the definitive action-man in the role of David against the Goliath of HU, and other mammoth institutions who absorb and usurp for their own dissemination the very authority of poets, therefore 'when the public fails in its duty, private men must take its place.'<sup>2</sup> Such is Emerson's plea which Jack resolved into action, inviting diverse poets into the academy through the Woodberry Poetry Room from 1942-1969, and, independently in his later life, free of Harvard. Thus, his dream was realised from early pioneering work that involved and evolved through recording poets reading their work, promoting them, nurturing them, and enabling them wherever possible. He discovered and recorded for the first time a host of poets who went on to achieve fame, notoriety and a distinguished body of work. These poets were the fruits of his patronage but there are many more whom he helped and who achieved their poetry and personal destinies.

The arrangement of the book is not redundantly wrapped around the interior core text, in that 'The Editorial Note', 'Acknowledgements', 'Note on Sources', 'Note on A-Z' and the 'Endnotes' because every page unveils the essential kaleidoscope of contiguous information pertinent to the superstructure. The use of a central body of text, namely, the A-Z reflects the reader's experience whether online or in print as text, holdall, appendices, and index, and, is in fact cumulatively the lifetime experience of Jack amongst his poets, their poetry, and how they progressed emotionally, tragically, comically, financially, and in every other way. An A-Z transport map for a city provides the arrival-departure points where curious visitors easily get to know the urban environment in significant detail, and soon find their way around like expert cab drivers. Any A-Z instruction manual provides the intended information, but the A-Z here speaks literally for many volumes referenced in the basement (back of the book) 'Endnotes'.

It is as simple as that on this grand tour of the poets, their poetry, and everything in between: the hazards, collisions, and the dazzling high times, not excluded. The poets are explored from behind the scenes, their enigmas, and the remaining enigma of Jack's plain goodness easily proven, if hard to define, and virtue does not always immediately make the headlines.

No other patron in the twentieth century had the empathy that Jack possessed for so many poets whom the academy felt were idle bums, gadabouts, and ne'er do wells, suffused with their own importance, narcissism, and messy lives. This is the secret of Jack Sweeney, enclosed and exposed here. He realised the flaws of the artists being a poet himself, and understood their difficulties amongst the majority of the professoriate. Jack was a professor at HU, and met the needs of his poets as a hugely generous patron while others of similar wealth not imbrued with the patron's conscience and ethics of behaviour and imperative to action, would have felt such demands from poets as the wilful beggary of disreputable characters. He did not judge any poets as low life hang outs existing to write poetry as their main excuse and primary indulgence. Jack wanted to secure alliances between poets and the academy, between professors and poets. The ensuing events of poets, poetry, and poetry cultures are outlined in the Introduction, and minutely brought to light in the luminous voices within the A-Z.

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<sup>1</sup> X.J. (Joe) Kennedy, personal email, 16 Mar. 2008. Full Text, 'How heartening that you have chosen to write on Jack Sweeney, that rare and wonderful gent, with his courtly manners and unselfish love of poetry. Your artillery of thought-demanding questions left me stunned, so it has taken me a while to recover. I realise that I didn't ever know Jack Sweeney well, but did have a chance to see him in action as a generous friend to poets and poetry. Yes, to be sure, he was a well-known presence on the Boston literary scene, and poets (like me) were certainly glad and grateful for his notice. In 1962, I took up teaching duties at Tufts, about four miles down the road from Harvard Square, and it wasn't long after that I heard from Jack. He invited me to make a recording for the Poetry Room's sound archives, and to accomplish it he had me report to a little recording studio in an apartment on Beacon Hill in Boston, run by a guy named Steve Fassett. It wasn't far from the Sweeneys apartment on Beacon Street. While Jack claimed that Fassett could get recordings of superior sound quality, and that may have been true, I reckoned that Jack liked it for its handy proximity and for its old-Boston funkiness. I have a blurred memory of the place as full of overstuffed furniture and hanging tapestries, where all the while I read into a microphone, Jack sat at attention in a rocking chair, a courteous audience, but now and then insisting on re-recording something to get it right. I found his reactions to my work helpful and educational. I recall singing an awful song about a dying Marine that I never printed, though I fear it must still exist in the dusty sound archives, and although Jack listened to it tolerantly, a faint frown deepened as he heard it, and politely, he did not spit. After that, my wife Dorothy and I received a dinner invitation to the Sweeneys' at 51 Beacon St. We were impressed to realize that a small Picasso on the wall wasn't a reproduction, but no doubt had been obtained with the aid of Jack's brother James Johnson Sweeney, curator of the Museum of Modern Art. Our fellow dinner guests were an impressive crew, apparently chosen for their literary notoriety: Mr & Mrs I. A. Richards (Richards was teaching at Harvard at the time, and held sway in the dinner conversation, talking mostly about his admiration for the primitive science-fiction novels of Jules Verne!), Adrienne Rich and her husband, William Meredith and his sister. Fine wine was poured in quantity, and graciousness prevailed. Jack spoke of his long-held desire to move to Ireland when he retired. I can't answer your other questions.

Best wishes,  
X. J. Kennedy

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Antislavery Writings* ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995)102.