

## JACK CONROY - WRITER FOR THE DISPOSSESSED

BY HARRIET GOTTFRIED

"The mine is a tomb and once the earth gets over you, it's hard to hump up and cast it off. It crushes them all in the end" from *The Disinherited*

On February 28, 1990 one of America's great radical writers died. Jack Conroy's life began in America's heartland. His writing sprang from his own experiences as an ordinary laborer trying to eke out a living during the early days of the Depression. Born in 1899 in the Monkey Nest Coal Camp near Moberly, Missouri, Conroy experienced firsthand the effects of joblessness, poverty and hunger on the human spirit. After his father and two half-brothers were killed working in the coal mines, Jack spent his twenties and thirties searching for work; riding the rails for short-lived dangerous industrial jobs in mills and factories. A fellow laborer introduced him to the work of H. L. Mencken. Soon after Conroy began writing poetry and fiction, turning his struggle to survive into art. In 1933, his first novel, *The Disinherited* was published. In simple vivid language, *The Disinherited* brought alive the world of the exploited American worker of the 1920's and 30's; the grinding poverty, the dangerous working conditions in the coal mines, mills and factories, and the efforts of working people to organize themselves.

I wanted to be a witness to the times, to show how it feels to be without work and with no prospect of any, and with the imminent fear of starvation, to move people to think about those things, and, what was more important to move people to do something about it. 1

Although well received at the time, *The Disinherited* became a neglected classic but was reissued in 1963 and then again in 1982 and is used today in labor history classes for its graphic account of the terrors of the depression.

Jack Conroy went on to produce an impressive body of work. In 1935 his second novel, *A World to Win* was published. In the early 1930's Conroy was the editor of *The Rebel Poet*, and later of *The Anvil*, two publications which featured the work of radical writers such as; Meridel Le Sueur, Langston Hughes, Erskine Caldwell, Frank Yerby, Richard Wright, William Carlos Williams, Nelson Algren, and Conroy, himself. In 1936 Conroy worked on the Missouri Writers Project until the efforts of the writers to organize a union fell through. He joined Nelson Algren on the Illinois Writers Project in 1938 and collaborated with Arna Bontemps on a study of Black History which produced *They Seek a City* (1944) and *Anyplace But Here* (1966). The two men also wrote several children's books based on industrial folk narratives including the classic, *The Fast Sooner Hound*.

Jack Conroy lived with his wife and children in Chicago until 1966 working as an editor on the *American People's Encyclopedia*. He continued to produce book reviews, articles and short stories. His stories are notable for their evocation of the oral narratives of working people.

In 1966 Jack Conroy retired to Moberly living close to where he was born. He continued to write until a few years ago when physical limitations made it impossible. In 1985 a collection of his work, *The Weed King and Other Stories* was published. He remained a critic of the American political scene commenting caustically that President Reagan's solution to today's disinherited seemed to be similar to Herbert Hoovers'. He considered himself to be a rebel of the left and proudly called himself a *political anarchist*. Reading his stories and sketches of the 1920's and 30's which so urgently present the desperation of the poor as they struggled against society's injustices is like looking into a mirror which reflects the faces of today's homeless as they stand on the long lines in New York, California, Illinois or Missouri waiting for a meal, a bed, or a chance at a job. His writing stands today as part of our national literary heritage. When asked in the early 1970's what advice he would give to a young writer of today, Jack Conroy responded,

Write as lucidly, strongly, and truthfully as you can about things that are close to your heart. Hew to the line; let the chips fall where they may. And, as a parting injunction: *Non carborendum illegitimi*. If your Latin is a bit rusty, I'll translate this for you as: *Don't let the bastards grind you down.* 2

You didn't Jack. We'll miss you.

### NOTES

1. Conroy, Jack. *The Disinherited*. Westport, Ct., Hill and Wang, 1982. Introduction. p. ix

2. Salzman, Jack and David Ray. *The Jack Conroy Reader*. New York, Burt Franklin. 1979. pp. 177-182, 222.