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## Lewis Fried Collection of Jack Conroy

1931-1981

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A voice of the radical working class during the Great Depression, Jack Conroy was the son of a union organizer, born and raised in the mining camps near Moberly, Mo. His novels *The Disinherited* (1933) and *A World to Win* (1935) were among the best known works of "proletarian" American fiction to appear in the 1930s.

The Conroy Collection includes a series of 24 letters from Jack Conroy to Lewis Fried, a professor of English at Kent State University and UMass PhD, along with a small number of letters by associates of Conroy, and a selection of publications associated with or including work by him. Of particular interest are Fried's oral history interviews with Conroy (1971) and Sally

Goodman (1978).

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## Background on Lewis Fried

A voice of the radical working class during the Great Depression, Jack Conroy was the son of a union organizer, born and raised in the mining camps near Moberly, Mo. Conroy was weaned on Socialist thought through his father and the nickel pamphlets of the Haldeman-Julius Company, and was encouraged to pursue an interest in literature. As a boy, he wrote and edited his own four-page newspaper, printing it by hand on scraps of butcher paper and distributing it among family and neighbors, and by the time he was admitted to the University of Missouri in 1920, he was already showing a distinctively populist edge.

The University, however, was not in his future. After only one term, Conroy dropped out of school rather than take part in the compulsory military training, and went on the road, traveling the country by boxcar, taking odd jobs as a migrant worker, in auto factories, and steel mills. Barely managing to stay afloat financially, he married Elizabeth Gladys Kelly in June 1922, with whom he had three children.

Neither poverty nor the rigors of work held Conroy back from his goal of becoming a writer. In the late 1920s, he began to publish poetry and essays reflecting a working class perspective on the inequities of life in America, writing in a style he later described as "vivifying the present." Intensely political by nature, he associated broadly with a number of rebels, Communists, and working class radicals, though Conroy himself was never doctrinaire, often earning criticism from the more dogmatic for being insufficiently radical, and criticism from the right for being too radical.

In 1931, Conroy took over as editor of the *Rebel Poet*, a "little magazine" associated with the International Workers of the World, and soon enjoyed his first literary success. A short story he published in *New Masses* attracted the attention of H. L. Mencken, who asked Conroy for a contribution for the *American Mercury*. The result, "Hard winter," was lauded by Mencken and held up as a gripping account of what life in the Depression was really like. Mencken became one of Conroy's biggest supporters, accepting several more of Conroy's stories (yielding much-needed income), and helping him to land the contract for his first novel. Based loosely on his experiences riding the rails and working in automobile factories, *The Disinherited* (1933) sold poorly, but was a critical sensation. It has been described as the first "proletarian" novel written in the United States by a true proletarian, and since the 1960s, it has become a minor part of the cannon of Depression-era literature. His second and more polished novel, *A World to Win*, appeared two years later to similar acclaim, but even poorer sales.

Conroy launched a second little magazine in 1933, the *Anvil*, transforming it in just over three years into the most successful of the radical literary magazines of the decade. The *Anvil* published works by young writers such as Nelson Algren, Richard Wright, Louis Zara, and Erskine Caldwell, and although much of the writing was "roughhewn and awkward," in Conroy's words, it was fueled by working class rage, "bitter and alive from the furnace of experience." The success of the *Anvil*, however, led to it being swallowed up in a power play by the *Partisan Review* in 1937, freezing a bitter Conroy on the outside. At Algren's suggestion, he moved to Chicago in March 1938 to join the Illinois Writers Project and launched a third little magazine, the *New Anvil*, attempting to pick up where the lamented *Anvil* left off. The magazine debuted in March 1939 with a lead work by William Carlos Williams, but lasted only seven numbers before it succumbed during the war.

After the failure of the *New Anvil*, Conroy took a position as associate editor with the *New Standard Encyclopedia*. His later books include five works of juvenile fiction co-authored with his friend Arna Bontemps, and numerous works on folklore and folk humor. Conroy retired to Moberly in 1966, continuing to write well into his 80s and mentoring younger radicals. He died in Moberly on February 28, 1990.

## Scope of collection

The Conroy Collection includes a series of 24 letters from Jack Conroy to Lewis Fried, a professor of English at Kent State University and UMass PhD, along with a small number of letters by associates of Conroy, and a selection of publications associated with or including work by him. Of particular interest are Fried's oral history interviews with Conroy (1971) and Sally Goodman (1981).

In his letters and in the oral history, Conroy discusses his career in writing, his novel *The Dispossessed* and other literary activities in the 1930s, with occasional comments on current events. The letters of Irving Friedman, Percival Goodman, and Walter Snow all relate to Conroy and proletarian fiction, while James T. Farrell, who often clashed with Conroy, simply denies Fried access to his papers. The collection also includes a typed copy of Michael Gold's review of the *The Dispossessed* that appeared in the *New Masses*.

The small assortment of printed items include copies of the populist magazines *Foolkiller* (two issues) and *North Country Anvil*,

and an issue of the *American Book Collector* that includes an article on Conroy and bibliography of his writing. There are, as well, photocopies of several of Conroy's stories from the *American Mercury*.

## Inventory

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Conroy, Jack: Biographical materials

1972-1978, undated

Conroy, Jack: Correspondence with Lewis Fried

1969 June-1978 Sept.

24 items

Conroy, Jack: Interview with Lewis Fried

1971 June 13

18p.

Conroy, Jack: Interview with Lewis Fried

[1971 June 13]

14p.

Version edited by Fried.

Conroy, Jack: Writings: Book reviews

1968 May 19-1972 January 9

9 items

Conroy, Jack: Writings: "Hard Winter," *American Mercury* 22 (86): 129-137

1931 February

Photocopy

Conroy, Jack: Writings: "Home to Moberly," *MLA Quarterly*: 41-50

1968 March

Offprint

Conroy, Jack: Writings: "Life and death of a coal miner," *American Mercury*

n.d.

Photocopy

Conroy, Jack: Writings: "Memories of Arna Bontemps: friend and collaborator," *American Libraries*: 602-606

1964 December

Photocopy

Conroy, Jack: Writings: "Pipe line," *American Mercury* 27 (105): 98-107

1932 September

Photocopy

Conroy, Jack: Writings: "Rubber heels," *American Mercury* 25 (100): 431-440

1932 April

Photocopy

Conroy, Jack: Writings: "The Siren," *American Mercury* 29 (113): 70-79

1933 May

Photocopy

Farrell, James T.: Correspondence with Lewis Fried

1979 April 21

2p.

Refusing access to his archives

Friedman, Irving: Correspondence with Lewis Fried

1976, n.d.

5 items

Gold, Michael: "A letter to the author of a first book," *New Masses*

1934 January 9

Review of *The Disinherited*

Goodman, Percival: Correspondence with Lewis Fried

1979 Nov. 20

2p.

Re: Goodman's scheme for a city of the future at the 1939 World's Fair: not radical enough for *New Masses*, too radical for anywhere else.

Magazines: *American Book Collector* 21 (8)

1971 Summer

1 item

Includes Conroy's article "Days of the Anvil," pp.14-19 and "A preliminary checklist of the writings of Jack Conroy" by John Gordon Burke, 20-24.

Magazines: *Foolkiller* 3 (1, 2)

1976 Fall-1977 Winter

3 items

Magazines: *New Letters* 39 (2)

1972 December

1 item

Magazines: *North Country Anvil* 1

1972 June

1 item

Menn, Thorpe: "Depression days: 'Furnace of experience,' Kansas City *Star*

1874 December 16

Photocopy

Mumford, Lewis: Correspondence with Lewis Fried

1984

3 items

Notes that his omission of Jacob Riis was not due to carelessness, but to the fact the Riis was of an older generation and had no impact on him.

Snow, Walter: "Walter Snow's selected poems published," Hartford *Courant*, article by Thora Young

1973 January 24

2 items

Also includes photocopy of announcement for publication of *Anvil* and *Partisan Review*

Snow, Walter: Correspondence with Lewis Fried

1972 December 27-1973 January 31

3 items

Reminiscences of Conroy and critique of Fried's work on him. Includes photocopy of "That literary 'shotgun marriage,'" a submission to *New Letters*

Miscellaneous materials

1970, n.d.

7 items

Includes two small religious tracts, "The supreme moment of a lifetime" and "This sin-stained world: a fool's paradise," and a solicitation from the Kent Legal Defense Fund

Conroy, Jack: Interview with Lewis Fried

[1971 June 13]

Cassette tape

Goodman, Sally: Interview with Lewis Fried

1981 January 15

Cassette tape

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## Administrative information

### Access

The collection is open for research.

### Provenance

Acquired from Lewis Fried, 1984, through the auspices of Jules Chametzky, in honor of the 20th anniversary of the graduate program in the UMass Department of English.

### Processing Information

Catalogued rsc, 2005.

### Processing Information

Processed by Ken Fones-Wolf, September 1985.

### Related Material

The major collection of Conroy Papers is held at the Newberry Library, Chicago, with additional material at Southern Illinois

University; the Department of Special Collections at Kent State University (newsclippings); and the Moberly Area Community College, Moberly, Mo.

## Bibliography

Conroy, Jack. *Writers in Revolt: The Anvil Anthology* (New York: L. Hill, 1973). Call no.: PS536 .C56 1973

## Language:

English

## Acknowledgments

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## Search terms

### Subjects

Anvil  
Bontemps, Arna Wendell, 1902-1973  
Communists--United States  
Depressions--1929  
New Anvil  
Working class authors

### Contributors

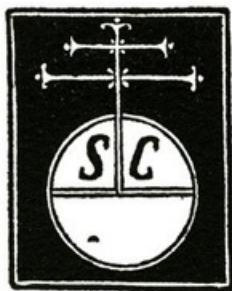
Fried, Lewis, collector [main entry]  
Farrell, James T. (James Thomas), 1904-1979  
Gold, Michael, 1894-1967  
Friedman, Irving  
Goodman, Percival  
Goodman, Sally  
Snow, Walter  
Fried, Lewis Frederick, 1943-

### Genres and formats

Oral history

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