

Regime Change on Gramercy Park

By Jennifer Wright
April 19, 2011



On March 6, dozens of zebra finches were found dead outside the National Arts Club, at 15 Gramercy Park South. They belonged to the club president, O. Aldon James. The ASPCA is investigating the situation, though it's been suggested that Mr. James was likely responsible for their demise.

"The finches, it was absolutely him," said Helga S. Orthofer, an artist and former club member. "He did not know what to do with all the birds, and saw he had too many, and, idiot that he is, he let them out in the most horrendous storm."

Birds have brought Mr. James trouble before. In 2000, renowned biographer and Pulitzer Prize finalist Nancy Milford told *New York* about Mr. James—a self-professed "bird man" and avid collector—and his problems feeding an endangered infant raptor. While she was staying at the club finishing a biography on Edna St. Vincent Millay (published in 2002), she said, "One night he just opened the window to his bathroom and released the bird, just let it free into Manhattan."

Shortly after the discovery of the dead finches, the club announced that Mr. James would be going on a "well-deserved vacation." Many current and former members of the club, some of whom spoke to *The Observer* on the condition of anonymity, believe the vacation should have come long ago.

The National Arts Club was founded in 1898 with a mission "to stimulate, foster and promote public interest in the arts." Its members have included three presidents as well as distinguished artists, architects and actors. (Current members include Martin Scorsese, Ethan Hawke, Robert Redford and Uma Thurman.) The club's building, the Tilden Mansion, erected in the 1840s, houses a public space, where events are hosted, and private apartments for some members. (The Poetry Society of America is also a tenant.) Long regarded as a treasured part of the Gramercy Park community, the club has become, under Mr. James' presidency, one of Manhattan's most controversial institutions.

Bizarre stories about the club seem lately to emerge on a monthly basis. In January, hoarding taking place in private suites was exposed by Luis Garcia, Mr. James' erstwhile assistant, who posted photographs of rooms on the Web site Flickr. There were questions, too, about who occupied the rooms. In January, the local news site DNAinfo reported that Mr. James was offering a reduced rate to a former Mr. India New York, Robert "Bobby" Abit, whom Mr. James was said to introduce as "my pharmacist." Most recently, former staffers told Gawker that Mr. James had paraded around calling minority employees words like "Japs" and "Tokyo Rose."

Known for his bow ties (which he likes to refer to as "textile butterflies"), pinstriped suits and rose-tinted glasses, Mr. James is said, according to tax filings, to serve as president without pay—save for a ceremonial \$1 a year. Yet, those filings report, he ran up a \$37,000 tab for club travel expenses alone. He has occupied a duplex apartment with his twin brother, John James, overlooking Gramercy Park. Former residents of the club who had been members since Mr. James' arrival told *The Observer* it might have rented for \$8,000 to \$12,000 per month; documents from 2008 and 2009 show that Aldon James paid \$1,143 a month and John James \$356. The president enjoyed hosting parties at the club for his friends—free of charge, according to Ms. Orthofer. Club newsletters captured Mr. James, a

chronic name-dropper, in nearly every photo with his arm slung familiarly around celebrities from Anna Wintour to Betty Friedan.

While Mr. James cultivated a glamorous public persona, he indulged his private eccentricities. Club regulars say that the James brothers engage in frequent fistfights, and the president was frequently seen to be injured. "They get into physical fights with each other all around the neighborhood," said one regular. "Recently, Aldon had his hand and head bandaged. He said he was mugged, but we knew it was them fighting each other again."

Another former member, who also preferred not to be named, confirmed, "They beat each other up. A friend of mine saw Aldon punching John all over the head. This is not just rumor. Aldon's father once said, 'It could have been worse. They could have been triplets.'" Aldon James is a native of Baltimore whose youthful ambition was to become a physician. He dropped out of Dickinson College in his first year; some claim that the departure followed a nervous breakdown. He's not known for any significant artistic achievement, though he did supposedly spend his early years appraising antiques. One former member said, "When Aldon became president, we were delighted because he'd never had a profession, so we knew he could spend more time than any of us could."

In 2000, *New York* reported Mr. James' family fortune was built on AT&T stock, though that's difficult to confirm otherwise, and one family friend who knew Mr. James' father well said, "AT&T? He probably had one share of stock in it. [Aldon] claims his father was a surgeon at John's Hopkins! His father was a country doctor. Aldon gets away with lying about his background because so many people exaggerate, and tell stories, but they rarely outright lie. He's capable of lying about everything."

Steve Miller, a former member of the club, and the recently retired executive director of the Morris Museum, told *The Observer*, "We never knew how Aldon became czar of the club. Was it voted? No information was ever available to us."

Several years ago, Mr. Miller was among a group of members organized as the Concerned Members of the National Arts Club that pushed for greater transparency in the club's

operations. They wanted to see a full list of members, to know about voting procedures and to have some sense of how the club's funds were being allocated. For instance, though Mr. James was said to serve as president without pay, the group wanted to know if there were other ways he was being compensated. Ultimately, they wanted little more than to be informed of the most basic elements of a club to which they belonged.

Their requests were met with hostile resistance. "Aldon went after me and suspended my membership," Mr. Miller said, "and I have no idea why. It was fine; I went on to join a more prestigious club. But I still remember walking into the club and he'd be standing on the staircase shouting epithets at me, screaming things like, 'We've got you figured out!' I'd just look at him and think, 'You are crazy.'"

he accounts of members about how Mr. James became president suggest he has good reasons for wanting those circumstances to remain opaque.

When Mr. James was first introduced to the club, by his old family friend Steve Leitner, it was being run by Adriana Zahn. A member of the club since 1933, Zahn was made president in 1974. She was said to be running the club with efficiency and grace, until Mr. James became her assistant.

"I'm pretty familiar with when he overthrew Adriana Zahn," one former member who lived at the club through the 1980s and early '90s told *The Observer*. "She was a classy older woman. ... She was threatened by Aldon and Steven [Leitner, a club trustee]. These guys said they were going to the attorney general with information that she'd been using club funds for car service to go home at night. She was an older woman! Of course she was using car service! And that was what they threatened her with! That was the best thing they had on her.

"Aldon had been her personal assistant for years. And she then got scared. He ruined her life. [Afterward] she would come in sometimes, and they'd give her a special table, but she finally resigned. She sent us a letter saying that she just couldn't bear it anymore, the humiliation, and the way the place was being run."

In 2002, when asked by Elisabeth Franck of *The Observer* about Zahn and the car service, Mr. James said, "No one booted her out because of that. The club wouldn't put an older person on the subway at night!" (Attempts by *The Observer* to contact Mr. James for this article went unanswered.)

Annette Green, a friend of Zahn's and a former board member, notes, "She was an elderly woman, and easily intimidated. I quit the board over it. You just don't do [what Aldon did] in civilized society."

In a letter from the period, former member Bill Mayer, also part of the Concerned Members of the National Arts Club, suggests that it was Mr. James himself who convinced a septuagenarian Zahn to make use of car service on nights when she worked late.

After Zahn's ouster, Mr. James was free to install a puppet board. "He replaced all her friends with his friends," a former member recalled. "Aldon would appoint a nominating committee and tell them who would be nominated, and they were appointed," another former member said. "It turned it from a democracy into a dictatorship."

The tenor of meetings became uncivil. "I'll never forget in my life when I was trying to stand up at a board meeting," said Ms. Orthofer. "Another member suggested I prepare a letter when I wanted to present my objection to this federal lawsuit the NAC was involved in. I prepared a beautiful letter. And I wanted to present. A few people said, 'You won't be able to make your point, better prepare a letter.' I have never been as yelled at in a board meeting as I was then. And it was exactly what happened to the chair of the literary committee—except I didn't burst into tears. It was so incredible the way he yelled, just bellowing. They didn't say a single sentence. Aldon just yelled. And didn't let me speak, and I kept saying, 'Could you calm down?' And they didn't let me get a point in. I gave up."

The abuse was not restricted to meetings. "There was harassment every day," said Miguel Serrano, who served as the club doorman for a decade. "I complained a couple of times, but no one did anything. Why? Because if they said something, they were out. Aldon, he was screaming and yelling at people for no reason! Not just at workers, at people coming in. He was always eavesdropping on people, too, and making notes, and making up stories that never happened."

With fewer members presenting objections to Mr. James' administration, conditions at the club deteriorated, and the building itself fell into disrepair. One former member—who claims that most of the apartments suffer from water leaks—recalled that if resident members wanted repairs done to their rooms, they would have to make a contribution to the club, a portion of which was said to be put toward renovations. And then there were the rooms filled with Mr. James' personal paraphernalia. Mr. Serrano said that the James brothers "have at least 10 to 12 apartments filled with junk."

Brooke Geahan, the founder of the now defunct Accompanied Literary Society, who subleased one of the suites at the club in 2004, told *The Observer*, "We walked in and there were boxes stacked up 12 or 14 feet high. It was falling apart. Walls were leaking. It was all his stuff in detritus. We found everything from bags of sharks' teeth, to an entire collection of baby birds made from cotton balls, to pots and pans."

Ms. Geahan said that Mr. James' use of the space went from inconvenience to abuse. "There was a fantastic collection of Warhols in the basement when it flooded. I remember a staff member coming up in tears saying that there was a water leak and [the art] was completely ruined. And they had so much space. That never needed to happen."

Mr. James, said a former member familiar with the club's financial difficulties, "hated spending any money on infrastructure. Mostly it was cosmetics. It's never been rewired. It's a firetrap at this stage of the game. Money always went for parties and events and things that were fun, nothing structural."

Although the membership more than doubled under Mr. James' leadership, members say that the quality of people at the club declined. There was suddenly, said an artist and member who showed his work at the club, "a regular basis of fishy people he hung out with."

And those people were shown a good time. "At this point," said one member who quit the club in 2003, "the club is just for people around Aldon who get to have a moment of greatness and see someone famous and have a good meal. The medals there have been greatly demeaned. The medal has gone downhill, not uphill; it's not a venerable institution anymore. It's a laughingstock amongst a lot of people. The merit of that experience—it's become a catering operation. It's become a two-medal-a-month club."

When *The Observer's* repeated attempts to contact Mr. James went unanswered, we tried stopping by the club. Events are still being hosted for various groups, and art is still being displayed, though frantic cleaning appears to be under way. Employees there said that Mr. James' "well-deserved vacation" is inside his NAC apartment, where he is still living. If acting president Diane Bernhard—an accomplished painter who was awarded the 2003 Gold Medal of Excellence by the National Arts Club, and served as chairwoman of the Exhibitions Committee—is attempting to establish a new regime, it may be difficult to do with a deposed tyrant still residing in the tower.

"He's not coming back," said a former member, who claims to "know the place like the back of my hand," of Mr. James' "vacation." "There's no way. They're just saying that to have him save face. Imagine if they did fire him and severed the tie. They'd have to admit the reasons and that they knew all along."

Mr. Serrano, on the other hand, is optimistic. "I am sure it will overcome all of this with the people they put in charge," he said. "These are good people, professional people. It is going to be a different place. People will be able to speak their minds. This is going to be a very credible place, now."

Well, hope is a thing with feathers