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## Introduction

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## *Introduction*

by CHARLES BASSETT

LITERARY FASHION HAS not dealt kindly with John O'Hara. Probably the most popular serious novelist and short story writer in America in the 1950s and 1960s, O'Hara has—since his death in 1970—suffered a serious eclipse in both popularity and reputation. Mention O'Hara in a Modern American Literature course in most colleges and students in the Nineties will think of the poet Frank O'Hara. Very little academic literary criticism is devoted to the analysis of John O'Hara's work.

And yet a devoted legion of John O'Hara fans continues to exist. A large number of O'Hara's novels and stories are still in print, and new editions of his best work are being published in The Modern Library every year. Beginning in the 1970s, several scholarly meetings have concerned themselves exclusively with O'Hara, and there have been "O'Hara sessions" at the now trendy conventions of the Modern Language Association.

But nowhere is John O'Hara more appreciated (and vilified) than in the "Region," the hard coal hills of northeastern Pennsylvania. O'Hara was born in Pottsville and spent his first 22 years in that little coal city and its environs. O'Hara wrote several novels and over 60 short stories using the "Region" as a setting, and his admirers have come to know anthracite Pennsylvania as well as they know Faulkner's fictional Mississippi county, Yoknapatawpha. Pottsville even has a John O'Hara Street, and a plaque proclaims the house on Mahantongo Street as the birthplace of the famous author.

The year 1995 marked the ninetieth anniversary of O'Hara's birth and WVIA, a public radio and television station in Pittston, Pa., serving the O'Hara "Region," devoted an entire year to their native author. The station showed film adaptations of O'Hara's novels, and dramatizations of O'Hara's short stories were featured on FM radio. O'Hara scholars from both inside and outside the "Region" were interviewed about O'Hara, and the year had its culmination in a John O'Hara conference in Pittston in September 1995. The papers in this special issue of *Colby Quarterly* were either presented at or inspired by the September conference. The last of O'Hara's surviving siblings, the charming Kathleen O'Hara Fuldner, reminisced about the O'Hara family's life in Pottsville and her relations with her famous brother. O'Hara's only child, Wylie O'Hara

Doughty, brought her family from Massachusetts for the occasion. And all the “O’Hara people” who could attend trekked to Pittston for a beautiful fall weekend to hear the famous (Fran Lebowitz) and the not so famous talk about John O’Hara.

Those of us who have spent many years working on O’Hara are very grateful to WVIA for sponsoring and financing this important conference and for producing a set of taped interviews about O’Hara for the dedicated fan (available from WVIA, 70 Old Boston Road, Pittston, PA, 18640). One of O’Hara’s most renowned biographers, Frank MacShane, unable to attend the September meeting, can be heard on these tapes, as can several other important O’Hara scholars.

But listening to O’Hara’s critics and reading analyses of his work are necessarily supplemental. Not since the *John O’Hara Journal* expired in the early 1980s has an entire issue of any scholarly magazine been given over exclusively to O’Hara. We present the six essays in this issue as representative of the conference and as examples of the kind of work being done on O’Hara in 1996.

We can only hope that this issue of the *Colby Quarterly* will make some readers think of JOHN (not Frank) O’Hara in the immediate future.

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