The Biography of John P. Marquand

He achieved popular success and critical respect, winning a Pulitzer Prize for The Late George Apley in 1938, and creating the Mr. Moto spy series. One of his abiding themes was the confining nature of life in America's upper class and among those who aspired to join it. Marquand treated those whose lives were bound by these unwritten codes with a characteristic mix of respect and satire.

John Phillips Marquand (November 10, 1893 – July 16, 1960) was born into a Newburyport family with a proud heritage of shipbuilders and mariners and was a great-nephew of Margaret Fuller and cousin of Buckminster Fuller. He considered his early years in Newburyport formative for his writing career and success.

His early years

On November 10, 1893, John Phillips Marquand is born in Wilmington, Delaware; shortly after, the family moves to Rye, New York, a wealthy suburb of New York City.

In the Crash of 1907, the family is devastated financially, and his parents send their son to live with two aunts and a great-aunt at Curzon's Mill; he attends Newburyport High School.

Marquand was a scion of an old Newburyport, Massachusetts, family. He was a great-nephew of 19th-century writer Margaret Fuller and a cousin of Buckminster Fuller, who gained fame in the 20th century as the inventor of the geodesic dome.

he was raised by his eccentric aunts, who lived in a crumbling Federal Period mansion, surrounded by remnants of the family's vanished glory. Marquand's ancestors had been successful merchants in the Revolutionary period and involved in Privateering during that same period; Margaret Fuller and other aunts had been actively involved with the Transcendentalist and Abolitionist movements.

Harvard Years

Marquand attended Newburyport High School, where he won a scholarship that enabled him to attend Harvard in 1911. As an impecunious public-school graduate in the heyday of Harvard's "Gold Coast,"

he was an unclubbable outsider. Though turned down by the college newspaper, the *Harvard Crimson*, Marquand succeeded in being elected to the editorial board of the humor magazine, the *Harvard Lampoon*.

As a reporter

In 1915, he graduated from Harvard; and the *Boston Evening Transcript* hires him as a reporter. Initially he worked as a reporter, later he worked on the *Transcript*'s bi-weekly magazine section.

His brief military service

While at Harvard, he joined the Massachusetts National Guard. In 1916, as a member of Battery A of the Massachusetts National Guard, which is activated for duty, he is sent to the Mexican border. This was at a time when word had spread that Germany was urging Mexico to attack the United States.

Marquand's life and work reflected his ambivalence about American society—and the power of its old-line elites. Being rebuffed by fashionable Harvard did not discourage his social aspirations. In 1922, he married Christina Sedgwick, niece of *The Atlantic Monthly* editor Ellery Sedgwick. The Sedgwicks were a prominent and well-connected family; *The Atlantic Monthly* was one of the country's most prestigious periodicals. In 1925, Marquand published his first important book, Lord Timothy Dexter, an exploration of the life and legend of eighteenth-century Newburyport eccentric Timothy Dexter (1763-1806). He will have a son and a daughter from this union.

His beginning years as an author

A prolific and successful writer of fiction for slick magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post*, in the mid-1930s, Marquand began producing a series of novels on the dilemmas of class, most centered on New England. The first of these, *The Late George Apley* (1937), a satire of Boston's upper class, won the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel in 1938. Other Marquand novels exploring New England and class themes include *Wickford Point* (1939), *H.M. Pulham, Esquire* (1941), and *Point of No Return* (1949). The last is especially notable for its satirical portrayal of Harvard anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, whose Yankee City study attempted (and in Marquand's view, dismally failed) to describe and analyze the manners and mores of Marquand's Newburyport.

In 1925, his first important book is published: Lord Timothy Dexter, a work of non-fiction.

In 1935, publication of *Your Turn, Mr. Moto* – first of a series that will bring him fame. Unfortunately, he and Christina are divorced. But shortly thereafter in 1936, he marries Adelaide Ferry Hooker; the couple will have two sons and a daughter.

Popular Fiction makes the money

Before gaining acclaim for his serious novels, Marquand achieved great popular and commercial success with a series of formulaic spy novels about the fictional Mr. Moto. The first, Your Turn, Mr. Moto appeared in 1935; the last, *Right You Are, Mr. Moto*, in 1957. The series inspired eight films, starring Peter Lorre, which are only very loosely based on the novels. James S. Koga states that Moto is not a proper Japanese surname. He notes that "[Mr. Moto] is never the main protagonist of the story—rather he appears at strategic points in the story, a catalyst for action." "The typical storyline," he says, "involves an American male, somewhat tarnished by past experiences in the U.S., who finds himself in the Orient ... overwhelmed by the foreignness of Asia. This protagonist gets involved in some international intrigue by happenstance; usually coinciding with meeting Mr. Moto... falls deeper into the plot and then finds himself in deadly peril. Along the way, he meets an attractive American woman who also becomes entangled, and by resourcefulness (and not a little help from Mr. Moto) overcomes the peril and then gets the girl."

Numerous Marquand novels became Hollywood films, but several bore little resemblance to the books. Mr. Moto, a tough-minded spy in Marquand's novels, became a genial police agent in the Peter Lorre films of the 1930s. The final Mr. Moto novel, in the 1950s, was filmed as a spy story, but Moto's character was eliminated.

Marquand's 1951 novel, *Melville Goodwin, USA*, was unrecognizable in the 1958 motion picture *A Top-Secret Affair*. The book was a satire about publicists trying to cover up a general's adultery, but movie writers transformed the general into a bachelor.

According to Marquand's biographers, he took these Hollywood liberties in stride.

In 1938, he wins the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Late George Apley*, published in 1937.

In 1940, he addresses the first meeting of the Association of Library Friends in Newburyport.

In 1942, *H.M. Pulham, Esquire* is published. Like many of his novels, it becomes a well-received movie (in this instance, one directed by King Vidor and starring Hedy Lamarr and Robert Young.)

In 1949, he publishes *Point of No Return*, a satirical novel about W. Lloyd Warner's Yankee City project (a sociological examination of Newburyport)

In 1957, He completes and publishes his last of the Mr. Moto stories, as serialized in the *New York Post*, then published as *Stopover: Tokyo*, another best seller.

In his later years, Marquand also contributed an occasional satiric short story to Sports Illustrated. A collection was later published as a book, with the title *Life at Happy Knoll*. The stories humorously dealt with the problems of an "old-line" country club as it tried to adjust to changing times and a competing "upstart" country club located nearby.

For all of his ambivalence about America's elite, Marquand ultimately succeeded not only in joining it, but in embodying its characteristics. He forgave the upper crust classmates who had snubbed him in college (relationships he satirized in H.M. Pulham, Esq). He was invited to join all the right social clubs in Boston (Tavern, Somerset) and New York (Century Association, University). Through his second marriage to Adelaide Ferry Hooker, he became linked to the Rockefeller family (her sister, Blanchette, was married to John D. Rockefeller III). He maintained luxury homes in Newburyport and in the Caribbean.

His scorn for academics

Marquand died in Newburyport in 1960. Although his major work is largely out of print, his spy fiction remains in print. Like his contemporary John O'Hara (and with a lighter touch), Marquand addressed issue of privilege and inequality. Marquand's financial success and seeming veneration for the upper classes, like O'Hara's, was sufficient to cause academia to ignore him. Marquand was unsparing in his own scorn for academics, notably in Point of No Return (in which he lampoons anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner) and Wickford Point (in which he mocks a prominent member of Harvard's English Department).

In 1958, he and Adelaide divorced.

Finally, on July 16th, 1960; he dies in Newburyport at his beloved Kent Island estate.

His mysterious obscurity

That Marquand has almost vanished from the literary landscape is an unfathomable mystery. From ... 1937 until 1960, Marquand was one of the most popular novelists in the country. The literati turned up their noses at him (as they do to this day) because he had done a fair amount of hackwork in his early career and continued to write, unashamedly, for popular magazines such as the Saturday Evening Post."

Critic Martha Spaulding, writing in The Atlantic Monthly in 2004, noted that "in his day Marquand was compared to Sinclair Lewis and John O'Hara, and his social portrait of twentieth-century America was likened to Balzac's Comédie Humaine, [but] critics rarely took him very seriously. Throughout his career he believed, resentfully, that their lack of regard stemmed from his early success in the "slicks". Praising his "seductive, sonorous prose", she states that he "deserves to be rediscovered."

The Tragedy of Kent Island

John Marquand bought a small farmhouse on a 466 acre tract of land called Kent's Island in Newbury, Massachusetts in October, 1935 for less than $5,000.(perhaps because the water supply was unreliable and the home required renovation). However, by the year of his death, his home at Kent's Island had been transformed into a rambling mansion by Marquand and his second wife. The couple had made numerous additions to the original structure which held a collection of museum-quality antiques and

family heirlooms; including a Gilbert Stuart portrait of a Marquand ancestor, as well as a silver tray fashioned by Paul Revere.

Marquand expressed concern for the future of his estate shortly before his death. In "Marquand," biographer Millicent Bell wrote: "He wondered what would happen to Kent's Island when he died; he willed it to his three younger children but foresaw a time when they might not want it and imagined it enduring [...] under the protection of a preservation agency." Marquand's concern was not unfounded. The children sold the vast property in April, 1974 for $305,000 to Massachusetts. The state maintained the mansion and kept a state police trooper there as a caretaker until 1978 when the well finally went dry. After the well dried and the home became vacant it deteriorated rapidly. By 1984, the mansion was in poor condition due to vandalism and exposure to the elements.

During 1984, a ten-year-old boy named Jeffrey Noonan wrote a letter to then-Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis asking that action be taken in order to begin efforts restore the home. His letter was answered by the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. The letter effectively informed the child that there were plans to raze the building. He took the letter, pedaled a bicycle to the office of the "Newburyport Daily News" and asked to see the editor. The newspaper interviewed and photographed the child for a front page story. This started a local interest in the cause to save the home of the Pulitzer-Prize winner from destruction.

"Newburyport Magazine" re-visited the story in its Fall, 2008 edition and interviewed Jeffrey Noonan (aka Jeffrey Justice) for the article. Discussing the youth's tenacity, the writer mentioned that the state was ready to pursue the demolition by 1984. "But they hadn't reckoned with Jeffrey. The fifth-grader kept up a barrage of publicity-- more newspaper stories and an interview on a Boston TV station. He went to the State House to talk to legislators."

The article also allowed for a broader understanding of the nature of the opposition: "There was a backlash, too. Noonan- now a 34-year old licensed psychic who goes by the name Jeffrey Justice -- recalls an angry telephone call, possibly fueled by alcohol, from a woman who had worked for Marquand, and other comments from older Newburyporters who hadn't approved of the novelist's sometimes messy personal life."

In 1989, John Marquand's Kent's Island home was ultimately torn down. A visit to the island today is discouraging, as there seems to be no trace of the big house or ruins of any of the smaller buildings present.

References:

Bell, Millicent (1979) "Marquand" Little, Brown and Company, pp. 477-478

"Newburyport Magazine" Fall, 2008 edition.

An address, "Fathers, Sons, and Grandsons: John P. Marquand," by Richard E. Welch III, delivered in the Meeting House of the First Unitarian Society (Unitarian Universalist), Newburyport, Massachusetts, February 17, 2002.

Total works by John Marquand:

Those works related to Newburyport:

Lord Timothy Dexter (1925)

Wickford Point (1939)

Point of No Return (1949)

Sincerely, Willis Wade

H.M. Pulham, Esquire (1941)

Women and Thomas Harrow

Lord Timothy Dexter Revisited (1960)

Other works:

The Late George Apley (1937)

The Unspeakable Gentleman

Melville Goodwin, USA, (1951)(became an unrecognizable 1958 motion picture A Top-Secret Affair.)

Your Turn, Mr. Moto (1935) became a motion picture movie

Thank You, Mr. Moto (1936)

Right You Are, Mr. Moto, (1957)

Life at Happy Knoll (1957)

O Rare Chris Morley: Obituaries

So Little Time (1946)

Last Laugh, Mr. Moto (1942)

Mr. Moto's Three Aces: a John P Marquand Omnibus (1938)

John P. Marquand Quotes

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“Distrust the book which reads too easily because such writing appeals more to the senses than to the intellect. Hard reading exercises the mind.”

-John P. Marquand, The Late George Apley

I know a fellow who's as broke as the Ten Commandments.

-John Phillips Marquand

When I'm writing a novel, I'm dealing with a double life. I live in the present at the same time that I live in the past with my characters. It is this that makes a novelist so eccentric and unpleasant.

-John Phillips Marquand

It is worthwhile for anyone to have behind him a few generations of honest, hard-working ancestry.

-John Phillips Marquand

There is a certain phase in the life of the aged when the warmth of the heart seems to increase in direct proportion with the years.

-John Phillips Marquand

His father watched him across the gulf of years and pathos which always must divide a father from his son.

-John Phillips Marquand

“Someday you will know that there is a beauty of the soul that is more important than worldly beauty. Remember this when you see worldly beauty.”

— John P. Marquand, The Late George Apley