Eugene O'Neill Society

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Eugene O'Neill's Boston

In 1914 there were at least several Eugene O'Neill's living in the Boston area. Of the two listed in the 1914 Boston City Directory, one was a gasfitter, the other a commercial traveller. But still another Eugene O'Neill, who was unlikely to be listed in any such directory, was attempting "to be an artist or nothing" in Cambridge. The latter was, of course, Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, the Eugene O'Neill.

Having recently committed himself to becoming a serious playwright, Eugene G. O'Neill, age 26, during the 1914-1915 school year, was participating as a special student in George Pierce Baker's famous English 47 class, for aspiring playwrights, at Harvard. Going to class, he often could be seen conspicuously carrying a copy of his first book, Thirst and Other One Act Plays, which had been published just that summer by the Gorham Press across the river in Boston—O'Neill's famous actor father, James O'Neill, a longtime favorite with audiences in Boston's rialto, having paid $450 for the book's publication.

Not only did Eugene O'Neill have his own published collection of plays to display in Baker's class, but he had a rich and varied--to say the least--storehouse of personal experience to draw upon as well; his adventures at sea figuring prominently in this. The start of these great sea adventures began in Boston in 1910, when O'Neill, at the age of 21, shipped out of Boston harbor for Buenos Aires on a Norwegian windjammer, the Charles Racine. This was one of the great voyages of his life, perhaps the greatest, and one that influenced the writing of many of his most important plays, from The Hairy Ape to Long Day's Journey Into Night.

Without question, Boston played an active role, early on, in Eugene O'Neill's personal and artistic development. Ironically, it also played a significant role in his tragic and painful end.

In 1948, O'Neill came once again to the Boston area to live, this time with his third wife, Carlotta. The O'Neills bought a small house on Boston's North Shore, in Marblehead, hard by the sea. Although O'Neill himself was pleased to be living once again close to the sea, he was far from able to fully enjoy life there. Not only was he suffering from a rare disease affecting his nervous system, which made it impossible for him to work, but his relationship with Carlotta was a painful and, at times, unbearable one. In the early 1950's, after a brief separation, O'Neill returned to live with Carlotta at the Shelton Hotel in Boston, off Kenmore Square. They lived there together in virtual seclusion overlooking the wide Charles River and the Cambridge of O'Neill's earlier days until--his health steadily worsening--the end came for him on the afternoon of 27 November 1953. He was 65. Carlotta, strictly adhering to O'Neill's request for an ultra simple funeral, say to it that he was buried in near secrecy several miles away at Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston's Jamaica Plain.

What is left of O'Neill's Boston? A number of curious addresses mainly, and, of course, his tomb. Out of no little symbolic importance, there is also the harbor that O'Neill shipped out of in 1910 for Buenos Aires on the Charles Racine as a quasi passenger who had light work duties aboard ship. Gone are the old salts, the waterfront dives, and the windjammers, but the basic structure and shape of the harbor is the same.

For a Look at the Waterfront: locate the intersection of Tremont and Court Streets, near Government Center. Walk down Court, which eventually turns into State St. Follow State all the way to the harbor. Or, by subway, take the Blue Line from Government Center station and get off at the Aquarium stop. Not far from the waterfront, at 340 Fanueil Hall Market Place, near trendy Quincy Market, is Durgin-Park, a restaurant that O'Neill and his Harvard cronies frequented back in the days of George Baker's English 47 course. The fare is traditional American, served in simple surroundings on red-checked tablecloths. The restaurant is a Boston institution and there are frequently lines. Phone: 227-2038.

Massachusetts Hall, Harvard Yard

Massachusetts Hall, the handsome 19th century brick building in Harvard Yard where Baker conducted his playwriting class, is an easily accessible O'Neill landmark. To Get to Harvard Yard: From Boston, take the subway, Red Line, to Harvard Square. Leave the Harvard Square station via the Harvard Yard exit. Massachusetts Hall is ahead of you to your right, on the other side of the iron fence, as you emerge from the station. The building presently houses the President's Office.

A ten minute walk away from Harvard Yard is the site of the apartment house, at 1105 Massachusetts Avenue, where O'Neill roomed with the "psalm-singing" Ebel family for $30 a month during his Harvard sojourn. Directions: Leave Harvard Yard via any of the gates to the rear or right of...
Massachusetts Hall, turning left onto Mass. Ave., continue walking for several blocks, making certain that you keep to Mass. Ave (its identity may be confusing at times), until you reach 1105, now a high-rise concrete structure of predictable qualities.

The Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Boston, at 15 Arlington Street, across from the Public Gardens, besides being one of the world's great hotels, was also home to O'Neill and Carlotta for several months in 1948. DIRECTIONS: The Ritz is about a block away from the Arlington Street stop on the Green Line branch of the subway.

For truly incorrigible saunterers who wish to see something of Boston's renowned Back Bay area while looking at the Hub O'Neill knew, proceed from the Ritz along Arlington St., heading away from the Arlington subway station, toward Beacon Street. Note on your way 8 Arlington, which is the dignified home of The Atlantic Monthly. Turn left at the intersection of Arlington and Beacon; continue your walk along Beacon. The territory here is all manner of brownstone--and brownstone related--architecture; an exciting stretch for any admirer of urban geography. 375 Beacon St. was the home of O'Neill's closest friend from the Baker class, Felton "Pinky" Elkins. According to accounts given by fellow classmates, many happy times were had by all, including O'Neill, at dinners given by Pinky and his wife at their Beacon Street home. One reveler referred to the place as a mansion, but as you will see, it's not quite that--at least from the outside.

Continue down Beacon St. After crossing Mass. Ave., it might be prudent to stop at Brodigan's Crossroads bar for a well-earned Guinness in order to prepare for the final leg of the walking tour. The atmosphere at the Crossroads is less than O'Neillian and the place has no known connections to the playwright other than the fact that there are shamrocks on the sign outside and the beer is cold. Resuming the journey, carry on in the same direction as before, but on the opposite side of Beacon St. After several blocks, you'll notice an abrupt change in the continuity of the architecture; before long an ugly highway bridge will appear, which you pass under. Bay State Road will snow shortly, veering off to the right; turn on to it when you reach it. The neighborhood that you will encounter looks like no other in Boston, really. It has the feel of some comfortable, not terribly old, obscure end of London.

Several blocks down Bay State Rd., at number 91, is the former Shelton Hotel, O'Neill's last address.

How many of the Boston University students who live in this building, now a dormitory, know that the man who wrote Long Day's Journey Into Night spent his last days in suite 401? It is a ghastly building, that sums up in cold characterless brick and jutting right angles the terrible disappointment of O'Neill's last painful years. Of all the myriad monuments and landmarks in Boston, none other is quite as odd or chilling as this one.

Around the corner from the Shelton, at 495 Commonwealth Avenue in Kenmore Square, is J.S. Waterman & Sons' funeral home, a turfed red-brick structure, which handled the hush-hush details of O'Neill's funeral.

FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO RIDE OUT TO VISIT THE FORMER SHELTON HOTEL, there is a subway station conveniently located in Kenmore Square on the Green Line. When leaving the station, exit to your right: outside, look for Deerfield Street, a sidestreet off the intersection of Commonwealth Ave. and Beacon St. Bay State Road crosses Deerfield after...
one block; 91 Bay State Rd. is quite near this intersection.

FOREST HILLS CEMETERY, WHERE O'NEILL IS BURIED, CAN BE
REACHED BY: riding the subway, Orange Line, to Forest Hills
station; or by taking the Arborway subway car, Green Line,
to Forest Hills. Be advised, though, that some people may
consider such subway travel unsafe. The cemetery located
at 95 Forest Hills Avenue (524-0128) is about a half-mile
walk away from the subway station. Conference going to
New London will automatically visit the cemetery en route
to Connecticut.

O'Neill's gravesite is a quiet, peaceful place, sit­
uated in a park setting. His granite tombstone is large
but simple, with only his--and Carlotta's--date of birth
and death inscribed upon it and the words Rest In Peace.

Monody shall not wake the mariner.
This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps.

Hart Crane

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