The Year’s Work on Katherine Anne Porter: 1995

By Janis P. Stout, Texas A & M University

With the present bibliographic essay, summarizing work on Porter reported in the MLA Bibliography for 1995, we continue a feature of the Newsletter of the Katherine Anne Porter Society initiated in Volume 3 (1997).

Items on Porter either published in 1995 or belatedly reported in the MLA bibliography for 1995 were less numerous than those for 1994. The list of books, articles, chapters, and dissertations that follows comes to only six. We are all accustomed to the ebbing and flowing of scholarly trends. It remains to be seen whether this drop in scholarly activity on Porter is indicative of such a trend or only an aberration.

To repeat: My plan for this annual feature of the newsletter is to use the MLA bibliography as the source, working from both the topical listing provided for “Porter, Katherine Anne” and the keyword listing, to the limit of my own intuition as to likely keywords. For dissertations, the report will be based on the abstracts published in DAI. I do not plan to list materials that contain

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only passing reference to Porter, since it would be virtually impossible to define the limits of such a survey.

Books
None.

Articles, Essays, and Chapters in Books
Publications in journals and edited volumes in 1995 did not continue the spirited pace of Porter scholarship we saw in the preceding decade and a half. I can report on only the following four essays—plus an extra.

John Blair’s “South by Southwest: Texas and the Deep South in the Stories of Katherine Anne Porter,” Journal of the Southwest 37 (1995): 495-502, takes up a topic of continuing interest: the dissonance between Porter's development of a self-myth linked with the Old South and her actual roots in an area and society more accurately described as the Southwest or the New South. Some readers may find that this essay adds little to the discussion of the topic in Katherine Anne Porter and Texas: An Uneasy Relationship (Texas A & M University Press, 1990). On the other hand, the essay provides a concise summary of prevalent thinking on the issue. Descriptions of the "fabled" Amy as "sedate" and of the Grandmother's governance as "paternalistic" are surprising. Blair concludes that Porter "works...our" her own childhood in the Miranda stories, the "most strongly southern" of all her works, but "the evidence seems to be that she borrowed freely from the more general family romance that attends the image of Southern aristocracy" in doing so.

Ann L. Putnam's "Tangled Together Like Badly Cast Fishing Line: The Reader and the Text in Katherine Anne Porter's 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider'," pp. 3-10 in Private Voices, Public Lives: Women Speak on the Literary Life, ed. Nancy Owen Nelson (University of North Texas Press, 1995) is a chapter in an innovative volume of essays on the life of literary scholarship as perceived by women who are willing to speak directly and in a personal tone. The volume as a whole deserves to be widely read and pondered. Putnam uses the "conflict between autonomy and connectedness" in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" as a basis for discussing her own "struggle[e] to balance the claims of connectedness and a sense of my own work in the world."


Jan Whitt, in "The Truth About What Happens: Katherine Anne Porter and Journalism," Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas 26 (1995): 16-35, argues that in stylistic and other respects Porter's "career in media most certainly affected her development as a writer of fiction," and did so in beneficial ways, but that in The Never-Ending Wrong Porter became so "overly involved" in the issue that she is "suspect as a reliable witness." The essay reiterates well-established ideas, but with fresh emphasis on the journalistic experience and a conjecture that Porter "may have left journalism to avoid the rampant sexism present there."

Contrary to my own best resolve (see above), I want to mention a brief reference to Porter (just two paragraphs on "Pale Horse, Pale Rider") in an essay by Margaret Higonnet in the volume Death and Representation, ed. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 192-209, simply because an idea Higonnet proposes is so different from the prevailing interpretation and so thought-
South Hill, 1941-1996

KAP "making cement" at South Hill during renovation, ca. 1941-1942. Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland at College Park Libraries.

Historic marker at South Hill, September 1996.

(Above and below) South Hill, the only home KAP ever owned, in 1941 before renovation. Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland at College Park Libraries.

KAP inscribed this photograph, "South Hill, September 1942." Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland at College Park Libraries.

(Left, above, and right) South Hill, September 1996.
Porter Activities at the University of Maryland at College Park
By Beth Alvarez, University of Maryland at College Park

This report on activities related to the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter and other Porter-related manuscript collections at the University of Maryland at College Park Libraries covers the period between January and April 1997. The demand for information about and access to the collections, particularly for photocopies of materials in them, remained heavy. Professors and graduate students from academic institutions across the United States continue to be the majority of those seeking access to the Libraries’ Porter collections. However, undergraduates and high school students have begun to contact me in increasing numbers, largely through Internet searches. Information about the Libraries’ literary manuscript holdings and the Katherine Anne Porter Room has been available on the Libraries’ homepage since 1995. (The URL for literary manuscripts is http://www.lib.umd.edu/UMCP/ARCV/ltmss.html.)

There is also a page for Miss Porter’s library at http://www.lib.umd.edu/UMCP/RARE/797hmpgM.html.) On-site researchers included residents of the states of Connecticut, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Telephone, mail, and e-mail inquiries have also been received from Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin as well as from Canada, Mexico, and Spain.

Popular interest in Porter also remained high. In the last four months, there have been more than 300 visitors to the Katherine Anne Porter Room. Prominent among them were Clark Dobson, whose recent donation of Miss Porter’s coffin was featured in the last issue of this newsletter, and Joe Mayhew, who painted the floral decorations on the coffin. In that issue, I failed to mention the Porter Room visitors at a reception held on December 10, 1996. The event celebrated the gift of a valuable hand-drawn 1853 map of the Riversdale plantation, commissioned by its owner Charles Benedict Calvert. Calvert played a key role in founding what is now the University of Maryland at College Park and provided the land for the campus from his Riversdale holdings. This occasion provided another opportunity to introduce Katherine Anne Porter to a new audience.

The primary reason for the large number of visitors during the four months covered by this report was the popularity of the exhibit, “Jim Henson and Sesame Street,” mounted in the Porter Room exhibit space between February 6 and March 21, 1997. Part of a campus-wide celebration of the life and work of Jim Henson, a graduate of UMCP, the exhibit in the Porter Room focused on Henson’s creative association with the popular children’s television program, Sesame Street, and featured materials from the Jim Henson Production Archives in New York and from UMCP Libraries’ National Public Broadcasting Archives. With the cooperation of departmental colleagues, the Porter Room was open to the public Monday through Saturday afternoons for the duration of the Henson exhibit’s run. The seven Porter Room docents, Freddy Baer, Shirley Bauer, Esther Birdsell, Dorothy Galvin, Rose Ann Jackson, Beverly Lewoc, and Betty Warner, served extra afternoons to make the extended operation possible.

The high profile of the Henson exhibit raised awareness of the existence of the Porter Room and the Libraries’ valuable Porter holdings. Jane Henson, Jim Henson’s widow and professional colleague, was one of those absolutely captivated by Miss Porter’s coffin at a February 13 reception.

After March 21, the hours of operation of the Porter Room returned to Monday and Thursday afternoons for the remainder of the semester. The unselfish support of the docents continues to make a significant contribution to the Libraries.

Important gifts have been added to the Libraries’ Porter holdings since my last report. Miss Porter’s nephew Paul

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Porter was again prominent among the donors. Occasioned by his relocation from Austin to Houston, Texas, Mr. Porter's most recent bequest consists of significant and highly valuable items of memorabilia that formerly belonged to his aunt. The donation includes numerous items of tableware: silver serving pieces (a covered bowl on plate, a soup ladle, a coffee pot, a Russian basket, a brandy warmer, and a serving fork), five gold-encrusted Wedgwood soup bowls, and four green and gold wine glasses. Other silver items include a pill box and three ornate frames, one of which holds a photograph of her mother, Mary Alice Jones Porter, annotated by Miss Porter. There are also significant pieces of Mexican folk art acquired by Miss Porter in the 1920s: two polychrome unglazed pottery vases, a glazed polychrome Tonala water jug and glass, a polychrome tole tray, three hand-carved coconut banks, and two museum-quality retablos (primitive religious paintings). Perhaps of most interest to the general public are Miss Porter's nativity scene and Easter egg tree. The former includes pieces that she acquired in Mexico in 1930 and to which she added over time. The latter was made for Miss Porter by Paul Porter and contains a dozen exquisitely hand-painted chicken eggs. The donation also includes a framed print of Miss Porter's photograph entitled "Rain and Sunshine," taken in Basel, Switzerland, and inscribed in her hand and a French wooden block used to print fabric that Miss Porter used as a wall decoration. All of these items are currently on display in the Porter Room and adjacent exhibition space.

Bill Wilkins, who with his wife Fern has previously donated memorabilia for the Porter Room, generously parted with thirty-two audio recordings he had acquired from Miss Porter's estate. Primarily of music, these recordings augment the collection of 693 audio discs already in the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter.

A happy development of these last four months is the successful completion of negotiations to purchase Mrs. Toni Willison's collection of correspondence written by Miss Porter to Mrs. Willison and her husband between 1935 and 1978. My husband and I had a delightful visit with Mrs. Willison at South Hill in September 1996, when I learned that she wished to sell the collection. In 1946, Mrs. Willison and her husband George bought South Hill, the only house Miss Porter ever owned, directly from her. Mrs. Willison had met Miss Porter in 1934 in Paris. Miss Porter's next contact with the Willisons came when she reviewed George Willison's Saints and Sinners in 1945. At that time, Mr. Willison, who wrote speeches for Averill Harriman when he was governor of New York, was one of the main editors on the WPA state guide series. In fact, it was the Willisons' intense dislike for the climate in Washington, DC, where they were living at that time, that led to their buying South Hill. Between 1946 and 1954, the Willisons carried on frequent and lively correspondence with Miss Porter as they paid off South Hill. Miss Porter's letters to them spell out the details of this transaction as well as her financial state during these years. But they include much more: lively discussions of her activities, politics, gardening, illness, reading, and mutual acquaintances. Over the years, the Willisons apprised Miss Porter of the renovations that they were making to the house—very few actually: changing entrances, enlarging what KAP called the "hidey hole" into an office, digging a pond, landscaping the grounds. When KAP received her honorary degree from Skidmore in the 1970s, she stayed at South Hill and asserted her approval of these changes.

The assistance of a small group of donors, including W. Hewitt Bayley and E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr., has made purchase of this collection possible. Mr. Bayley of Scarborough, Canada, is the husband of the late Isabel Bayley, former Literary Trustee of the Estate of Katherine Anne Porter. Mr. Prettyman, a prominent Washington attorney, was Miss Porter's lawyer for the last twenty years of her life. Mrs. Willison has selected the Papers of George and Toni Willison as the formal name for the collection which will include all the Porter-related correspondence and materials she owns. The Libraries expect to make the collection available to the public shortly after its arrival in College Park.

The Libraries and Professor Jordan Pecile, who teaches at the United States Coast Guard Academy, have agreed to remove most of the restrictions on access to his correspondence with Miss Porter among her papers. In 1991, the Libraries agreed to restrict access to this correspondence except to those individuals granted written per-

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mission by Professor Pecile. The restriction now applies only to a few passages in the entire correspondence. Professor Pecile has graciously complied with the Libraries’ request to alter this agreement in order that the forthcoming microfilm edition of Miss Porter’s papers can be as complete as possible.

Formal notification that the National Endowment for the Humanities has fully funded the Porter proposal submitted last June came in mid April. The endowment will provide in excess of $158,000 to fund a project archivist, student support, and microfilming of 100,000 of the most fragile and valuable pages of the collection. The grant period will run eighteen months. During part of this time, portions of the collection will be closed to researchers at different periods while the preparation and actual filming take place. The proposal calls for a third of the 100,000 images (half of the correspondence) to be closed to researchers in September 1997, the second portion (remaining half of correspondence) in January 1998, and the third portion (clippings, financial, legal, and personal materials; manuscripts and notes) in June 1998. Those seeking to consult the papers will be inconvenienced during this period, but ultimately, conducting research on these materials will be significantly easier. The microfilm edition will enable the Libraries to circulate portions of the papers by means of inter-library loan.

Progress continues on processing Porter materials. As part of an internship, graduate student Patty Retting is completing the work on the Prettyman papers begun by docent Esther Birdsall. The guide to these papers should be completed in early May. As I write this report, we are racing to complete the reprocessing of the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter and the writing of an entirely new guide to the collection. All of the collection except Series II, the manuscripts, has been arranged into final order. Student assistants Jim Harmon and Jennifer Pitts are making a final check of the materials before they are transferred into new boxes. Only the arrangement and description of Series II, my portion of the work, and the final physical preparation of the clippings remain to be completed. With some luck, I will make a presentation of the completed guide at the society’s business meeting at the American Literature Association Conference in Baltimore on May 23.

Please direct any questions about this report or the Libraries’ Porter holdings to Beth Alvarez, Curator of Literary Manuscripts, Archives and Manuscripts, McKeldin Library, UMCP, College Park, MD 20742. My e-mail address is ra60@umail.umd.edu. My telephone number is 301-405-9298. FAXes reach me at 301-405-9191.

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provoking. The proposition Higonnet develops in “Women in the Forbidden Zone: War, Women, and Death” is that Miranda’s experience of near-death “aligns her with Adam rather than separating them” and “sets them apart from the moral death of a jingoistic society.”

Dissertations

The one dissertation on Porter that I can report from the 1995 bibliography, Nancy Pollina Ford’s “Tropes, Exempla, and the Rhetoric of a Feminine Corrective in Selected Short Fiction of Katherine Anne Porter,” was actually reported in the last issue of the newsletter, but shouldn’t have been (under my own system), since it was not listed in the MLA Bibliography until the volume for 1995—even though the dissertation was actually completed in 1994. It is a rhetorical analysis of thirteen stories indicating that Porter’s rhetorical stance suggests a feminine corrective that is decidedly political.

If anyone wishes to send addenda for incorporation into the next report, my e-mail address is j-stout@tamu.edu, and paper-mail address is Department of English, Texas A & M University, College Station, TX 77843-4227.

KAP at 1996 WLA
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of Porter and Jean Stafford (in Texas and Colorado, respectively) helps explain the two authors’ responses to Nazi Germany, which they encountered during their visits to Europe in the thirties. Western values predisposed their choices of narrative perspective, axiomatic values, and eventual judgment of the experience.

Janis Stout of Texas A & M University presented “Katherine Anne Porter and Mark Twain at the Circus.” She compared chapter 22 from Huckleberry Finn with “The Circus,” using Bakhtin’s notion of the “carnivalesque” as a theoretical basis. Miranda’s and Huckle’s childlike perceptions of the crowds at the circus give rise to interpretations of such questions as identity, masking and mirroring, and existential unease.
Texas A & M Graduate Seminar
Makes Porter Pilgrimage

Members of a graduate seminar on Willa Cather and Katherine Anne Porter being taught during the spring semester at Texas A & M University met on Saturday, April 5, for what might be called a three-stage Porter Pilgrimage. Along with their professor, Janis Stout, five members of the class met in Austin at El Sol y la Luna Restaurant for breakfast with Beth Alvarez, who was in Austin to assist Paul Porter with arrangements for shipping his donation of Porter memorabilia to the University of Maryland at College Park Libraries. In attendance were Robin Cohen, Molly Johnson, Willa Jan Little, Tomas Pollard, and Patricia Wiese. Their purposes, besides enjoying migas, were dual: to learn about the resources at McKeldin Library and to enrich their understanding of the influence of Mexico on Porter’s work.

There was so much to be said about the first that the group’s discussions never reached the second. Alvarez distributed informational materials to help the students plan future work in the collection and related collections and answered questions, which ranged from the variously-published texts of “Flowering Judas” to resources related to Porter’s stay in Berlin.

After breakfast and after Dr. Alvarez was delivered to the Austin airport, members of the class drove on to Kyle, where they were given a leisurely tour of the Porter home by Yana Bland.

The third stop was the Southwest Writers Center at Southwest Texas State University, where Special Collections Assistant Steve Davis provided an overview of facilities and holdings. The Center’s resources on Porter include several letters and a recipe for mole. Other holdings include papers of Southwest writers John Graves and R. G. Vliet, as well as extensive materials relating to the filming of Larry McMurtry’s Lonesome Dove.

At least one research trip to the University of Maryland is being planned as a direct result of the session with Alvarez. An additional reward of the excursion was a Sour Cream Pie baked from KAP’s recipe (found in a collection at Kyle) and brought to the following week’s seminar by Pat Wiese.

Call for Papers

Plans are being made for a session on Katherine Anne Porter at the April 1998 meeting of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature, in Charleston, SC. The topic of the session will be “KAP and Southern Folk.” One or possibly two papers have already been committed, but submissions are invited for the other one or possible two places on the panel. Send title and one-paragraph abstract no later than October 15, 1997, to Janis Stout at j-stout@tamu.edu, fax (409) 862-2292, or mail to Department of English, Texas A & M University, College Station, TX 77843-4227.
Stout Wins Holman Award

On December 29, 1996, the Society for the Study of Southern Literature recognized Janis Stout’s Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times with its C. Hugh Holman Award. The presentation was made at the society’s “Southern Women’s Autobiography” program at the 1996 Modern Language Association Convention held in Washington, DC. Named for the late C. Hugh Holman, former editor of the Southern Literary Journal and Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the award honors the best scholarly or critical book in the field of Southern Literature which was published in a calendar year. In her acceptance, Professor Stout recognized those whose scholarship and assistance had enabled her work to win this prize. This group included Thomas F. Walsh, whose Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico was a Holman winner in 1992. Professor John Idol, president of the society, presented Professor Stout with a certificate and read the following citation:

Janis Stout’s Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times, a volume in the University Press of Virginia’s series Minds of the New South, is an important and well researched, well conceived and well written book which provides significant new and sometimes corrective, or at least alternative, focuses on Porter’s life, thought, career, and reputation. It is an interesting biographical and critical study which offers an enlarged context for understanding her mind and work, for better understanding both the what and why of her accomplishments. The book emphasizes Porter’s “intellectual growth, her opinions and cast of mind—her sensibility” and her “extraordinary breadth of acquaintance with the events and people who contributed in varied and sometimes decisive ways to the growth of what might be called the twentieth-century mind” and her responses to them with intensity and insight. It shows how Porter developed “a keen sense of her times, particularly with respect to the arts and politics and [to] the complex intersections of the two,” affecting a literary artistry “generally considered one of the stellar achievements of modernism.” Yet it also reminds us that her wide ranging and long life, covering most of a century, began with her as a Southerner by birth, lineage, and upbringing, against which she rebelled and became a cosmopolitan figure and writer, while still yearning for the South, which “remained at the center of her allegiances and her social affections,” the “anchor to which she was tethered and around which she ranged.” From the numerous good possibilities Professor Stout’s book is, indeed, the appropriate winner of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature’s C. Hugh Holman Award for the best historical or critical book in the field of Southern Literature which was published in 1995.

Katherine Anne Porter Museum News

The Katherine Anne Porter Museum in Kyle, Texas, will sponsor a special event on May 15, 1997, Katherine Anne Porter’s 107th birthday. A talk will be given by Don Graham, the J. Frank Dobie Regents’ Professor of American and English Literature at the University of Texas at Austin, who was the principal speaker at the November 1996 Katherine Anne Porter Literary Festival in Kyle. Professor Graham’s article “Katherine the Great” appears in the May issue of Texas Monthly. Also forthcoming is an article on the museum by Ann Fears Crawford, which will be published in the Houston Chronicle in June.

At present, Southwest Texas State University, in nearby San Marcos, hopes to acquire the museum as a writers’ residence for its creative writing program. The building would continue to serve as a museum but perhaps on a smaller scale. Yana and David Bland, the current owners and operators of museum, plan to continue the annual autumn Katherine Anne Porter Literary Festival, which has grown in the past three years.

Until the writers’ residence is established, the museum will remain open to the public on Saturday, from 10 am to 4 pm, and the first Sunday, April through August, from 2 to 5 pm. Admission is free. As a non-profit organization, the museum is dependent upon memberships, donations (monetary or items), and community events in order to remain open to the public. It is available, by appointment, for meetings, classes, and weddings. Memberships range from $10 to $1000. Membership pledges and other inquiries may be sent to the Katherine Anne Porter Museum, P. O. Box 615, Kyle, Texas 78640. The telephone number is 512-268-2220; the Fax number is 512-268-1557.