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### THE PLAYWRIGHT OF MONTE CRISTO

Home is not where the heart is for Eugene O'Neill. The only home O'Neill had as a youth sits on Pequot Avenue facing the Thames River in New London, Connecticut. Known as Monte Cristo Cottage, the house is now being restored as a museum to help celebrate the world-famous playwright's beginnings. Visitors to the partially restored cottage come from all over — Japan, Korea, Scandinavia — but in New London, O'Neill is still something less than a favorite son.

Today, New Londoners may drive down Eugene O'Neill Drive, but some still purse their lips and shake their heads while doing so. In 1972, the proposal to change the name of Main Street to commemorate O'Neill inspired former mayor Thomas J. Griffin to call O'Neill "a stew bum . . . What did he do besides write plays? (He) never did nothing for New London."

Sally Pavetti, the cottage's curator, has found that some New Londoners have memories as long as O'Neill's plays and that O'Neill was thought of as a drunkard and a womanizer more than a playwright. "There is a two-generation hangover of antagonism against him here."

It could be argued that New Londoners have a point: O'Neill and his father, James, and his brother, Jamie, were all heavy drinkers and his mother, Ella, was a morphine addict. In their otherwise posh neighborhood, James did his own yard work, dressed in shabby clothes. Eugene's reputation was so low around town that when he courted a local beauty named Maibelle Scott, her mother told her daughter, "If you bring him to this house again, I'll shoot him!"

It was in New London that O'Neill found out he was better off writing fic-



*The O'Neill family cottage in New London, Connecticut, was named by father James after his popular title role in *The Count of Monte Cristo*.*

tion than nonfiction. A story he covered as a young reporter for the *New London Telegraph* met with this bit of sarcasm from his editor: "This is a lovely story about the Bradley St. cutting [murder]. The smell of the rooms is convincing; the amount of blood . . . precisely measured; you have drawn a nice picture of the squalor . . . of that household. But would you mind finding out the name of the gentleman who carved the lady and whether the dame is his wife or daughter or who? And phone the hospital for a hint as to whether she is dead or discharged or what? Then . . . send this literary batik to the picture framers."

In return, O'Neill considered New London prosaic, a hick town, but he loved it just the same. In spirit, he never left the coastal New England town. Six of his plays, including *Ah, Wilderness* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, are set partly or entirely in towns inspired by the unyielding New London.

Steve Kemper