



ENDOWMENT FUND

**WINCHESTER'S GOLDEN GRADUATES  
JOHN TAGGART – FROM CLASSMATE TO CLASS ACT!**

**By Daly Walker**

One of the most acclaimed literary figures in America is the experimental poet, essayist, and teacher John Taggart. Professor Taggart's work won a Ford Foundation grant, a Distinguished Academic Service Award from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and two National Endowments for the Arts Writing Fellowships. Other honors Taggart received included the Commonwealth Award for Academic Service from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, a Pushcart Prize, and the *Chicago Review* Poetry Prize. John Taggart graduated from Winchester's Driver High School in 1961.

John was born in 1942 in Perry, Iowa. His father was a Methodist minister. (Ironically, In Gaelic, Taggart means "priest's son.") As Methodist ministers tend to do, Reverend Taggart moved his family often from town to town and parish to parish, settling in Winchester, Indiana in the summer of 1959 where he was minister of First United Methodist Church. The Taggart's lived in the Methodist parsonage, a two-story gray house on the corner of Meridian and George Street a couple of blocks south of the Church.

John said of his youth, "Growing up in a series of small Midwestern towns, some of which were quite attractive, it's fair enough to say that the world of books was much more alive and real to me than my immediate surroundings. And this extended to the church. I had, of course, to go every Sunday. But I would always go with at least one book of my own choosing, which, whatever else, would *never* be the Bible. What biblical knowledge I have is either the product of much later reading or recollections from Sunday School or my Father's sermons. Enforced attendance makes for resistance and so I was a rebel, if on the subdued side, from the beginning. Dostoevsky or A. J. Cronin, or Salinger would always be in my church suit pocket or craftily (I thought) secreted inside my hymnal."

In spite of reading from a novel concealed in his hymnal while his father preached, the sermons influenced John's development as a philosopher/poet and taught him the importance of language and the power of words.

"I listened closely to my father," John said, "always on the lookout for flaws in his arguments, weaknesses in his presentations. It made me keenly aware of the public (spoken) exertion of power. I couldn't help noticing how he moved a congregation one way or another. And there were other things I couldn't help but notice: the theatre component of the service — robes, costuming, music, liturgy, the ritual of communion."

During John's high school years in Winchester, it was the legendary English teacher, Joe Casey, who influenced him the most.

"He (Mr. Casey) could be and often was strict in his requirements of correct grammar and clear thinking in my writing," John said. "His classes were lively, and he was well informed about literature. He had a sneaky Socratic way of teaching. He would put a complicated question in simple terms and in a very humble seeming way ask your opinion. And of course the first question would be followed by others. No surprise, the simple turned out to be not so simple--and you learned a lesson about active thinking in the process."

Outside the classroom, John would often stop by the Casey house to talk about the books he had been reading on his own.

"Those conversations, which often included Mrs. Casey, were wonderful moments for me," John says.

Mr. Casey once gave John *Form and Value in Modern Poetry*, a classic book of literary criticism that John credits for teaching him that he had much to learn.

Like many Hoosier high school students, John was influenced by basketball, but not in the usual way. John views his failure to make the varsity team as beneficial because it taught him the obvious — that he had other opportunities and other things to do.

After graduating from Driver High School, John attended nearby Earlham College where he majored in English Literature and Philosophy and graduated with honors. For the first two years of college John wrote fiction, publishing some of his stories in the student magazine. But John grew dissatisfied with the mechanical aspects of fiction writing and turned to poetry because as he said, it gave him a direction of thought. At the end of his junior year, John won a scholarship to a summer-long session at the Aspen Writers Workshop.

"That was the decisive turning point," John says. "I learned a lot and for the first time was in the company of others (not only young people) more than casually involved in writing."

As the author C.D. Wright wrote of John: "He wanted to get down on knees with the language and dig in with both hands."

It was after Aspen that John began writing the poems that were to become some of the most distinguished of the postwar period in America. Three of the poems he wrote as an undergraduate, "Upon the Sweeping Flood," "An Egyptian Cat," and an "Evening with Anna Akhmatova," were his first published work when they appeared in *Crucible*.

From Earlham, John matriculated to the University of Chicago where he received a M.A. in English Literature and Creative Writing. He left Chicago for Syracuse University. There he

completed a Ph.D. in the Humanities Interdisciplinary Studies Program. His dissertation was a discussion of the work of avant-garde poet, Louis Zukofsky, who was the founder of the Objectivist group of poets of which Taggart is considered to be a "second generation" member.

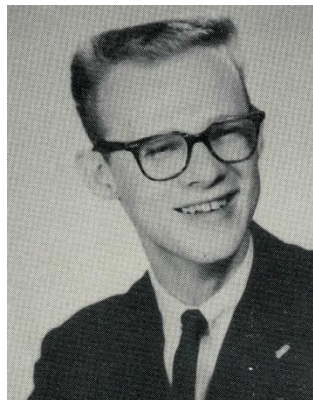
John spent his academic career as a professor of literature and creative writing at Shippensburg State University in Pennsylvania where he taught and wrote his acclaimed verse. John authored more than a dozen collections of poetry, including *Is Music: New and Selected Poems*, *Pastorelles*, and *Dodeka*. His prose includes *Songs of Degrees: Essays on Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, and *Remaining in Light: Ant Meditations on a Painting by Edward Hopper*. That his poetry has been translated into French, Italian, and Spanish is a source of satisfaction to John. So also has been the achievements of his former students who have gone on to careers of their own. In addition to his writing, John published and edited the influential literary magazine *Maps*.

John's poetry is impossible to characterize in simple terms. It is deep and complex, layered and repetitive, and ultimately about language. It has its roots in art, music, literature and spiritual matters. It is also true that his recent work takes off from living in the country and coming to know local history. He has been influenced by the poets Charles Olson and George Oppen, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, and novelist Herman Melville, among many others. A distinctive musical style appears in John's most recent work that he describes as an attempt to get beyond "the silent reading eye." He draws from the hymns he heard in his father's church, classical music, as well as the R&B he listened to in high school, and the jazz of Coltrane and Monk. His poems themselves, with their emphasis on sound and voice, then become song-like. As John says, "Each poem is a journey, a process of thought that comes to song."

After more than 30 years of teaching, John retired in 2001 from his professorship at Shippensburg State University. Selections of his papers are archived at the University of Connecticut, Syracuse University, and the University of California-San Diego. John and his wife, Jennifer, now live in a converted farmhouse in rural Cumberland Valley near Newborn, Pennsylvania surrounded by her perennial gardens and his own woodland garden. He is currently completing a critical prose book and trying to keep trees and bushes going in a dry summer.

When I asked John why poetry matters, he quoted the poet Wallace Stevens who was the subject of his senior thesis at Earlham: because "it helps people lead their lives."

John Taggart in 1961



John Taggart today

