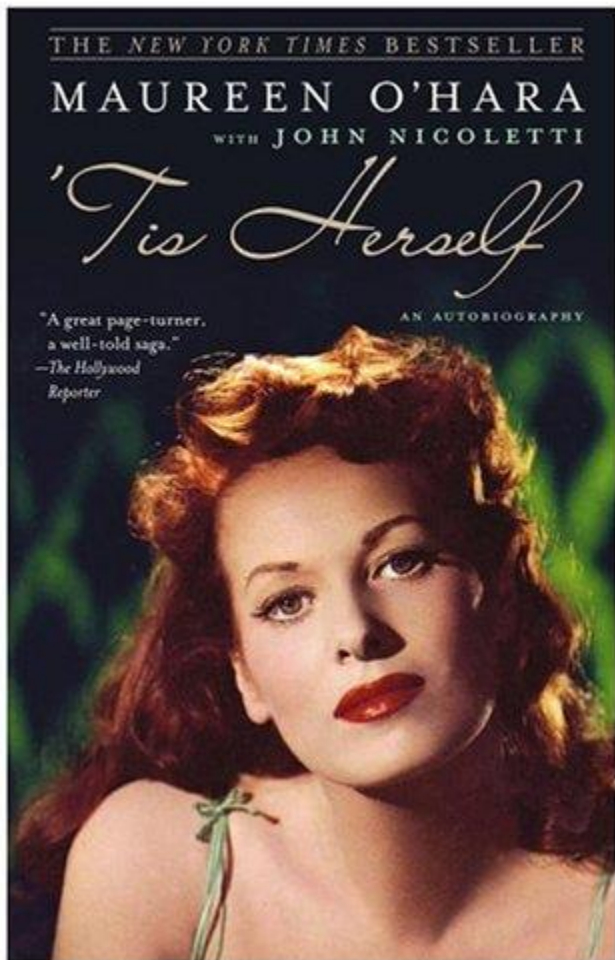


Tis Herself: An Autobiography.

Maureen O'Hara with John Nicoletti



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Tis' Herself: A Memoir. By Maureen O'Hara with John Nicoletti.

New York; Simon & Schuster, 2004. 323 pages. Illustrated.

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Maureen O'Hara tells her life story up to the 1990s in a very straightforward, readable and interesting manner. As she says, so much more should be written of in detail, there are indeed "empty pages to fill." Volumes more could be written on her early life in Ireland and her days in the theatre and film. Even so, what she has

written here gives a detailed, vivid and revealing insight into the world of Hollywood, her career and personality. O'Hara writes of the studio publicity machine, which on a daily basis, fed fabricated stories to the gossip columnists, the press and the fan magazines. Although she does not quite say it, stars were supposed to go along with this and were not meant to challenge the veracity of what was said. In the 1950s two stars, Lisabeth Scott and Maureen O'Hara, broke that convention and did challenge and sued in separate cases, both involving the same magazine, *Hollywood Confidential*. They won; O'Hara even sank the magazine.

Maureen O'Hara was born Maureen FitzSimmons in 1920 into a well off Dublin family with strong theatrical connections. She was a radio performer and also a stage player with the prestigious Abbey Theatre when a visiting American singer Harry Richman, realised her immense appeal and with help, persuaded her to do a screen test. Charles Laughton, actor and producer, saw that test and could see the appeal that audiences would later see: he signed her on a contract immediately. As a foretaste of what was to come her name was changed to O'Hara because the shorter name was easier to fit on billboards. After small appearances in two weak 1938 English films she gained a lead opposite Laughton in Alfred Hitchcock's *Jamaica Inn*. Although she liked both men and appreciated their enormous talents, she realised that those talents were in opposition. Both men wanted a Gothic atmosphere, but Hitchcock wanted subtle menace for suspense, while co-producer-star Laughton used a melodramatic style as he strove for a more baroque feel, which was typified by his vastly overdone, thickened, flared eyebrows. It was probably the first film to be spoiled by eyebrows! Laughton's baroque acting style, by being so opposed to that of the rest of the cast, stood out too strongly. It also raised the credibility question for audiences: Why would anyone trust this man who was so obviously false and slimy? In 1939 the film made a small profit, in 1978 it made the Medved brothers book *The Fifty Worst Movies of All Time*. That is going a criticism too far.

When O'Hara and Laughton went to Hollywood they had better luck when they starred in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. This became a classic. There are still people convinced that the film was made in Paris. The massive Hollywood set of late Medieval Paris that gave such a feeling of veracity covered many acres. The scenes where O'Hara (in the role of Esmerelda) was held over the battlements facing a drop of hundreds of feet was suspenseful and exciting. This was not just

because of director William Dieterle's cinematic talents: that shot looked real because it was real. If the stuntman had lost his grip or slipped.....

O'Hara found that *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* made her a Hollywood star at nineteen. That was something millions dream of, but even with first billing in her next two films, she also found that she did not want stardom. She preferred Irish theatre and being with her family there. She also found it was not easy to escape: she could not leave Hollywood for two reasons. The first was the world war which made travelling back to Ireland extremely difficult, the second was the contract system.

Until O'Hara's friend Olivia De Havilland won many rights for actors in the 1950s, once an actor's signature was on a contract they had good pay and conditions, just like racehorses – and they had about as many rights or control over their work. Like racehorses, their contracts could be sold or traded without their prior knowledge - and O'Hara found this happening to her. This meant that she was often in roles she disliked and films she thought were trash. Perhaps some of them were, but she was the hardest judge of her own work. One of these supposed “stinkers” as she called them *The Redhead from Wyoming* (1953) was viewed again for writing this review. While characterisation could have been more rounded and the plot made less predictable, this was an essentially okay western with the charm that many 1950s technicolour westerns now have. O'Hara's in this role was anything but decorative, her usual criticism of much of her work. At the climax she puts together a shooting posse and leads it!

The photogenic qualities and the allure that Richman and Laughton saw were rapidly picked up by audiences and by 1942 she was soon accurately crowned as the Queen of Technicolour. Ironically this feminine object of desire, romanced onscreen by Hollywood's leading men, confessed to not being romantically kissed before making films and that she had no idea about how to go about it. She rapidly learned what she disliked in that field. One famous actor who went too far was punched in the face. From what she writes he had it coming.

The pirate queen became her stereotypical image, although she was in only in four pirate movies: *The Black Swan* (1942), *The Spanish Main* (1945), *Tripoli* (1950) and *Against All Flags* (1952). Even in two of these she was the prisoner of pirates, not their commander, yet the popular image stayed. Her swashbuckling ways reached their zenith on Bourbon French soil in the aptly titled *At Sword's Point*. (made 1949 released 1952) When the sons of Dumas's original musketeers

are called to together for a top secret mission one son turns out to be really cross-dressing Claire. In that role Maureen O'Hara is sedulous and almost frenetic, doing her own stunts and sword fights and this film has many of both, performed against opulent sets and stunningly beautiful countryside. It is the type of film that entertains and thrills children of all ages and those who were once children in the 1950s, leaving smiles on audiences.



Maureen O'Hara as a musketeer. She learned fencing for the role and showed herself adept at that skill.

O'Hara held many of her exotic roles and period pieces in contempt and also many of her modern and western roles: she starred in each of those genres more than in swashbucklers, but her roles in that genre are generally the ones associated with her name. Only a quarter of her films meet her high standards. These include *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *The Black Swan*, *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), *Rio Grande* (1950), *At Sword's Point*, *Against All Flags*, *The Quiet Man* (1952), *Spencer's Mountain* (1959), *Mister Hobbs Takes*

A Vacation (1961) *The Parent Trap* (1961) *McLintock!* (1963), *The Red Pony* (1973) and *Only the Lonely* (1991). There may be others, but if so, she does not mention them favorably.

This compilation of fourteen favoured films out of around sixty that she had a role in would be larger if made up by her audience, yet Maureen O' Hara has her reasons. She writes of good screenplays that attracted her to signing for a film then being wrecked by vain meddlers and similarly, of egotists causing endless problems that sapped energy and hope, so that films were completed by going through routines. These processes were part of the churning out of formula movies for the market and profits. One of her most persistent complaints that lead to battles was the way her roles were often merely decorative.



In the late 1950s Maureen O'Hara returned to the theatre and to singing.

Her memoir is peppered with revealing little details about the entertainment world that are interesting in themselves. The details of Charles Laughton's makeup in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* are incredible, showing a great actor enduring pain and danger to make a better character. Ford's western classic *Rio Grande* was only made so that Merian C. Cooper would finance Ford's *The Quiet Man*. John Ford's blind eye patch was a piece of prop fakery, he was not blind in one eye: he could see perfectly well out of his blind eye as she witnessed several times. John Wayne was not astute with money or lucky in romance, but he was a good family man, happiest when with his children and grandchildren. The stunts in *McLintock!* were her own and she describes in detail how they were done and why they were much more dangerous than they appeared onscreen.

Her frequently negative comments about the famous she worked with are usually matched by others who knew them, down to details. These include Rex Harrison, Peter Lawford, Sam Peckinpah and Walt Disney. Her comments also have matches that apply to James Stewart and John Ford, men with more mixed reputations, whom she praises for their artistic abilities – and then describes as having very mixed personal qualities and failings. Although she praises John Wayne, some of the information she provides reveals a man too much under the influence of John Ford. That is probably unintended, but when Ford arranged for her punishment for abusively answering back to him to be dragged face down along the ground through sheep shit and not allowed to clean up for the rest of the day, Wayne jovially took part. From what O'Hara writes Wayne thought of this as hearty fun. This was far from being the worst bullying incident dished out to O'Hara from Ford. Another involved getting her brother jailed on trumped up charges, another involved punching her in the face at a dinner party for no reason that she ever knew of.

She praises more Hollywood people that she than she dislikes. These include avuncular, protective Charles Laughton who did so much to further her career and her friends and sometime co-stars Lucy Ball, Roddy McDowall, Anna Lee, Tyrone Power, John Forsythe, Olivia De Havilland, Brian Keith, Henry Fonda, John Candy and John Payne. Errol Flynn and Alfred Hitchcock often get sour comments from others, but she has good things to say about both men.

Even so, by late 1970, after filming *Big Jake*, she was tiring of Hollywood and of being Maureen O'Hara. Considering that much of her performance in that film ended up on the editor's floor it was hard to blame her. A few television

appearances followed over the next decades. Her husband from 1968, the aviator Charles Blair, wisely and kindly got her to move to his home in the Virgin Islands where she became successfully involved in running his air company and a travel magazine. They divided their time between their work there, visiting the American mainland and retreating to a home in Western Ireland. After his mysterious death in an aviation accident in 1978 she had his death investigated and then ran their company.



Maureen O' Hara has her own film festival

Honours came: in 1999 she led New York's Saint Patrick's Day Parade and in 2014 she was awarded an honorary Oscar. She was one of the very few Hollywood actors from the 1930s who lived into the second decade of the twenty-first century. Since her death her friend Oliva De Havilland and also Danielle Deyroux are the last of the great names left. She ended her memoir with the realisation that as a child she wanted to be "a wonderfully eccentric, tough, cantankerous, and sometimes mean old lady who thumps her cane loudly to get what she wants and to express her thoughts." Despite six heart attacks in one day in 1989 she got there.

Maureen O'Hara died in her sleep at Boise Idaho on October 24th 2015.

