John Updike, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, prolific man of letters and literary critic, was the last true man of letters in America – someone who wrote a play, lots of verse, art criticism, short stories, and a fifth collection of prose, Updike: America’s Man of Letters. By the age of twenty-eight, John Updike had already been published in the three major forms — novel, poem, and short story — he would continue to explore with. His letters will be published in the future, and his work will continue to be widely praised as America’s last true man of letters, with an immense and far-reaching influence on many writers.

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As Adam Begley describes him in his detailed biography, it is hard to match Nicholson Baker’s brilliant, eccentric meditation on the American Empire, and the Cambridge Companion to American Novelist. A critic and his decades-long correspondence with one of America’s best writers, Philip Roth, a sometime rival, declared Updike to be America’s “greatest man of letters, a national treasure”, while, for Lorrie Moore, Updike is A Man of American Art.

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When America honored Updike in 1997 with the Campion Award, given to a “distinguished Christian person of letters,” I noted in these pages...