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Lessing's Early Letters: A Prolific Personal Voice

Doris Lessing was a prolific letter writer. Her personal archive in the British Archive for Contemporary Writing at UEA includes a huge range and volume of material: 130 boxes amounting to thousands of pages of letters, faxes, notebooks, postcards, notebooks, dream diaries and other personal papers. There is more correspondence (as well as a significant number of literary manuscripts) at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, and a small but significant tranche at The Keep, University of Sussex, not to mention letters from Lessing held in several of her correspondents' archives. These letters present a complex and fascinating resource of paratextual material which enriches and challenges our reading of her published works.

I came to Lessing's letters through her correspondence with Muriel Spark, in which they articulate and negotiate experiences of being ageing women writers. I was struck by the clarity and immediacy of Lessing's letter-writing voice and by the capacious inclusivity of the form. My interest in the scholarly possibilities of her personal archive was deepened by subsequent work on the Centenary Exhibition of her archive materials in 2019. This exhibition, curated together with Matthew Taunton and Justine Mann, was key in opening up Lessing's personal archive to scholars and members of the public. It revealed Lessing's extraordinary creative and intellectual journey, which saw her move to London from Southern Rhodesia, travel to communist Russia, visit refugee camps in Afghanistan, grapple with Sufism and feminism and meet with NASA scientists. Since then, convinced of the material, historical and literary importance of letters as a specific mode of writing, I have begun the daunting task of collecting, editing, transcribing and annotating Lessing's letters.

As Edwina Preston's recent 'Friday essay: a lament for the lost art of letter-writing – a radical art form reflecting "the full catastrophe of life"' rightly notes, letters are particularly revealing of women's writing, enabling us to see the 'unspooling of self onto the page in real time' as well as their writers' networks and their engagement with the world around them. Preston celebrates the democratic, responsive and eclectic nature

of the letter-writing form, where ‘hierarchies of value don’t prevail’, and she laments the ‘disappearance of letter-writing from Western cultural life’ in a digital age, reminding us that this context sharpens the ‘disarmingly tangible’ qualities of letters.¹ I too am intrigued by the material tangibility of letters, by what these documents reveal about a writer’s inner life, and by how in them writing and life are negotiated through intimate engagement and dialogue with others and with the world.

In this short essay, I offer early reflections on working with Lessing’s letters towards a four-volume *Collected Letters* edition, give a very brief overview of the project – the first volume in particular – share some extracts from one of her early letters to give a sense of what these are like and consider some of the challenges of editing Lessing’s correspondence. My animating questions are: what insights do the letters and archive materials reveal about Lessing’s thinking and writing at this time? How might reading them energise our engagement with her life and work?

The overall aim of the Letters project is to contribute to and energise Lessing scholarship. I also hope to contribute to the growing field of scholarly work on and with correspondence archives and to our thinking about the art of letter writing. Lessing is a major twentieth-century figure, and her letter writing is as insightful as it is voluminous. She wrote to a wide variety of friends, lovers, intellectuals, fellow writers, fans, members of the public, editors, publishers and more. Together, this varied correspondence reveals and highlights the breadth and commitment of her anti-colonial activism and the development of her political, intellectual, spiritual and social thought across her long life. The letters also offer insights into her writing processes, literary influences and education, life experiences, personal reflections and friendships. They are by turns witty, gossipy, forthright, loving, acerbic and despairing. Their tone and voice diverges from and overlaps with Lessing’s narrative perspectives as an essayist and writer of fiction. In this, the letters offer an exciting opportunity to rethink and resituate Lessing.²

The volumes of Lessing’s letters will be organised in terms of time periods, but also in terms of particular phases of Lessing’s life as suggested by the archive itself: Volume 1, 1919–1950. Africa and Anti-Racism; Volume 2, 1950–1970. London, Communism and Feminism; Volume 3, 1970–1990. Sufism and Science Fiction; Volume 4, 1990–2013. Ecological Disaster and Ageing. Read together, the volumes aim to reflect the shifts and developments of Lessing’s key interests and ideas, as well as making clear the movement and development of her thought across the course of her life. Collecting and editing letters is a creative process, and the

four-volume edition will be a composite and multi-directional new work: letter editors select and arrange widely scattered materials into new representations of the writer's life, creative activity and social world.

The first volume, which I am transcribing and selecting for now, will focus on Lessing's wartime and post-war life in Southern Rhodesia and her move to London in 1949. It draws upon the Whitehorn Letters collection, as well as including letters from Lessing to Leonard Smith, her friends Nathan and Dorothy Zelter and her publishers. The Whitehorn collection is composed of 110 letters sent by Lessing to RAF servicemen John Whitehorn and Coll MacDonald. Lessing met these two young cadets and their friend Leonard Smith (known as Smithie) while they were training in Southern Rhodesia. Most of the letters were written from the mid-1940s onwards, when Lessing was married to her second husband Gottfried Lessing and engaged with communist politics. According to Smithie, John Whitehorn, Coll MacDonald and himself are the basis of the characters Paul Blackenhurst, Ted Brown and Jimmy McGrath from the African sections of *The Golden Notebook* in Anna Wulf's Black Notebook. Smithie was also involved in reviewing the draft manuscripts for Lessing's first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, and many of her doubts and queries about that book are recorded in her letters to him at the time. Lessing's letters to Nathan and Dorothy Zelter provide illuminating insights into her arrival in and first impressions of London.

Together, these early letters afford a complex picture of Lessing's life and thought before, during and after her move to London. They express her anti-racist political commitments while living in Southern Rhodesia: her involvement with communism and a left-wing study group; her work typing for Parliament and a firm of lawyers; her relationships with family, friends and lovers; her fascination with other people's relationships; the progress and processes of her writing; her reading and literary education; and domestic life and the struggles of early motherhood as well as general politics in Southern Africa, England and Soviet Russia.

I'd like to share one of Lessing's letters to Coll MacDonald as an example of the richness of this early material. It was sent on 3 May 1945 and is typically diverse in terms of the breadth and variety of its topics and content. I quote quite substantively from this letter to give a sense of its eclecticism, as well as of Lessing's highly engaging and amusing voice and tone. It begins:

My dear Coll, I got a letter from you this morning and a letter from John. Both were an enormous relief. I don't know quite where to start.

[...]

I find it impossible to think before about lunchtime. I usually spend the morning buying things, and walking up and down the room, invoking my dormant brain. At lunchtime it wakes with a rush of inspiration and then I have to get food for innumerable people who, now that, as they put it, I don't do anything, stream in to see me at all hours. With murder in my heart and with what I hope is exquisite politeness I give them tea, sausages etc., and wish they were dead.³

She goes on to talk about politics: the study groups of 20 odd people hosted by herself and Gottfried, which she says she loathes, and her feelings about the Communist party: 'I think I have been too involved in it for too long to ever leave it. On the other hand our cliches make me wild'.⁴ After humorous descriptions of losing her temper at the content and conduct of political meetings and discussing current events in Germany and Rhodesia, Lessing gossips about a friend of her mother's and Smithie's and describes her feelings about Coll and John: 'Darling Coll, I don't insist on your being in love with me ... In the meantime I have never in life been so much in love with anyone as I have with John'.⁵

Further on in the letter, Lessing discusses reading novels that her Marxist friends consider 'untruthful' and describes an argument with Gottfried during which she throws *To the Lighthouse* across the room at him.

I lent poor Virginia to Dorothy Zelter, who professes a love of Art, and when it was returned she said 'such a sweet book, Tigger. But it has no beginning and no end'. What I cry, outraged. Yes, it just stops in the middle. Whereupon I hurl *To the Lighthouse* across the room and flounce into bed. Then G [Gottfried Lessing], annoyed says, don't be so intolerant. Do you really think that one should assess people's intelligence by whether they say what you consider to be true about Virginia Woolf? Whereat I am humbled. Do you think, I say meekly, that Lenin would have liked Virginia Woolf? No, says G firmly, therefore the conversation is closed irrevably [irrevocably]. But G says Lenin had a very fine taste in literature.⁶

As these examples suggest, the letters reveal and weave together Lessing's life, love affairs, politics, thinking about literature and literary education; they describe her voracious reading and thoughts about the books that she is swapping with Coll and John. In the last example in

particular, there is an emerging sense of Lessing's thinking about modernism, social realism and communism that recurs later in her published writing.

One of the challenges of editing letters is deciding what to do about a writer's typing errors and eccentricities, which, in the case of Lessing, frequently occur and which she was well aware of. In one letter she mentions John Whitehorn's remarks about her erratic typing – she resolves not to make one typing error in the ensuing letter, but by the second paragraph, the typos begin again. In a letter to Nathan Zelter, written once she had secured a secretarial job after just moving to London with her son Peter in 1949, Lessing predicts she will not be an efficient secretary because of absentmindedness and an incapacity to take invoices seriously; she jokes that her pleasant personality will no doubt make up for this.

Lessing's handwriting and typing both raise questions and challenges for editing her letters. After just one handwritten letter to the Zelters, which they find unreadable, Lessing promises to type from then on. But Lessing was a fast, often furious and inaccurate typist too. It has felt important to find a might touch editorial approach which is able to maintain her idiosyncratic uses of spelling and punctuation because of how much personality these features communicate. Crossings out are included where the word change is illuminating, for example. Some of the wider editorial questions raised by working with letters are: the notion of a letter-writing persona; the letter as 'experiment' in terms of either technology (especially typewriters) and technique; how to preserve, communicate and work with the materiality of letters (stationery, watermarks, envelopes, etc.); what to do about eccentric spelling and punctuation; reading difficult handwriting; vague, inaccurate or misleading dates; style, content and extent of annotation and other framing.

Another question arising from the Letters project, given the richness and variety of texts included in Lessing's personal archive, is the question of what to do with materials that are not letters, how these might be included in or alongside a letters project. When putting together an exhibit on *The Golden Notebook* for the Centenary Exhibition, my focus was on selecting materials that might offer insights into Lessing's writing process. While the Harry Ransom Center archive holds many manuscript materials, no manuscripts for Lessing's books before about 1970 survive. So, for thinking about the writing and composition of *The Golden Notebook*, we have to turn to Lessing's personal archive, to her notebooks, dream diaries and scraps, including the correspondence. The Whitehorn Letters have much to offer not only in terms of thinking about characterisation – as Smithie's claim that Paul, Ted and Jimmy in

The Golden Notebook were based on him, John and Coll suggests – but also in terms of the first Black Notebook section of the book’s setting in Southern Africa. These letters included, the wider personal archive materials reveal a range of ways in which *The Golden Notebook* draws on Lessing’s early life in Africa, on her always ambivalent communist politics, her love affairs and her experiences of living as a single mother in London in the 1950s. And given the anecdote about *To the Lighthouse* and Lessing’s defence of Woolf in the letter to Coll cited above (despite throwing the book across the room!), it is perhaps not insignificant that the protagonist’s surname is ‘Anna Wulf’.



The Golden Notebook exhibit⁷

The materials I selected for *The Golden Notebook* exhibit included letters, notebooks, photographs, postcards and more, with the aim of offering a multidirectional, tentative and necessarily speculative sense of Lessing’s thinking and writing towards the novel – something that would not anyway be visible in the same way via manuscript versions of the book, even if we had them. One object included in the exhibition which I became particularly interested in was one of Lessing’s writing notebooks, A4 and spiral bound, with a dark-blue hard cover. This notebook contains a multitude of detailed character sketches and begins with pages of quotations from novels and other literature. On one page of the writing notebook is Lessing’s description of one of her lovers, the American Writer Clancy Sigal, who was written into *The Golden Notebook* as the character Saul Green.⁸ The notebook also contained loose bits of paper with headings such as ‘Blue’ and ‘Yellow’, corresponding to the colours of Anna Wulf’s notebooks. While the volumes of letters will be printed and will therefore create a cumulative and to some extent linear narrative across Lessing’s life, alongside this I hope to put together an interactive digital version of *The Golden Notebook*, which

would enable readers to encounter and engage in different ways and different directions with the variety of materials that contributed to Lessing's writing of this book. This proposed digital version would aim to enable the reader/viewer to encounter a non-linear, complex and multiple sense of Lessing's processes of thinking and writing and bring archive materials into direct dialogue with the published material.

Together with the rich and multifaceted resource of the letters, such a digital edition would showcase how Lessing's prolific personal archive offers scholars further layers of insight into her published writing as well as into the broader contexts of twentieth-century history, literature and politics that she was so entangled with, and so intimidatingly, engagingly articulate about.

Notes

- 1 Edwina Preston, 'Friday Essay: A Lament for the Lost Art of Letter-Writing – A Radical Art Form Reflecting "the Full Catastrophe of Life"', *The Conversation*, 17 March 2023; <https://theconversation.com/amp/friday-essay-a-lament-for-the-lost-art-of-letter-writing-a-radical-art-form-reflecting-the-full-catastrophe-of-life-197420> (accessed 23 May 2023). There is much fascinating recent work on the material qualities and scholarly potential of correspondence archives; see, for example: Maryanne Dever, *Paper, Materiality and the Archived Page* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- 2 My work on Lessing's letters builds on some key initial work engaging with these archive materials: Peter J. Kalliney, 'The Activist Manquee, or How Doris Lessing Became an Experimental Writer', in *The Aesthetic Cold War: Decolonization and Global Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2022), 151-179; Matthew Taunton, 'Communism by the Letter: Doris Lessing and the Politics of Writing', *ELH*, 88:1 (2021), 251-280; Henry Stead, "'Comrade Doris": Lessing's Correspondence with the Foreign Commission of the Board of Soviet Writers in the 1950s', *Critical Quarterly*, 63:1 (2021), 35-47; Pamela Thurschwell, 'Falling in Love with Everyone: Lessing's Letters to Smithie at the Keep, University of Sussex', *Critical Quarterly*, 63:1 (2021), 48-59; Lara Feigel, *Free Woman: Life, Liberation and Doris Lessing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
- 3 Lessing, D, 1945. Letter, Doris Lessing to Coll Macdonald, 03/05/1945. [typescript] Doris Lessing Archive, Whitehorn Letters, 026. Norwich, UK: British Archive for Contemporary Writing. Cited here by kind permission of the Doris Lessing Estate.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.* It is interesting, for example, to read this letter alongside something like Lessing's essay 'The Small Personal Voice', in which questions of form and political commitments, and the potential tensions between modernist experimentalism and social realism, are considered in quite different terms. See *A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 7-26.

- 7 Image taken by Justine Mann, *The Golden Notebook* exhibit, Sainsbury Centre of Visual Arts, October 2019.
- 8 For more on Lessing's writing of Clancy Sigal, and indeed of each's writing of the other into their fiction, see Roberta Rubenstein, *Literary Half-Lives: Doris Lessing, Clancy Sigal, and Roman à Clef* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Author Biography

Nonia Williams is a lecturer in modern and contemporary writing at UEA. She is lead researcher on the Doris Lessing Collected Letters project. Recent publications include *The Precarious Writing of Ann Quin* (2023); '(Re)turning to Ann Quin', *Women: A Cultural Review* (2022); and 'Doris Lessing at 100: the Writer's Quest', *Critical Quarterly* (2021).