

Justine Mann

Lessing's Legacy Explored Through Her Personal Archive

In 1998, having just published the second volume of her autobiography, 'Walking in the Shade,' Doris Lessing appeared at the University of East Anglia's Literary Festival for the third time in a decade. At the end of the interview while still on mic, following audience questions and during rapturous applause, her interviewer and friend, Professor Christopher Bigsby, asked Lessing if he could announce what they had just been discussing regarding her papers. Lessing gave a firm no in response.¹ Privately, Lessing had told Bigsby that she had decided to bequeath her personal correspondence and working papers to the University of East Anglia (UEA). Bigsby had known Lessing since 1980 when he first interviewed her at the BBC. They had formed a friendship, and Lessing had already made several trips to UEA campus to work with students. Bigsby, who had researched the embargoed Arthur Miller Archive at the Harry Ransom Center during the writing of his two-volume biography, understood the incredible generosity and magnitude of this surprising gift. Literary archives of preeminent writers can command vast sums. Lessing had already sold her manuscripts to the Harry Ransom Center and could have sold her correspondence. This generosity is entirely in keeping with Lessing the benefactor who, it is clear from her archived private correspondence, quietly made a very large number of generous charitable gifts during her lifetime, giving regular sums of money to friends, associates and organisations, even paying for several children's school fees throughout their education.

However, the news of Lessing's planned donation was not universally celebrated at UEA. The announcement caused considerable anxiety within the university library, with the then Librarian rightly concerned that UEA's modest infrastructure would not do justice to such a high-profile deposit. While Faculty staff lobbied for the proposed gift to be acknowledged as soon as possible, Lessing confirmed the arrangement in her will. The Librarian of the day was overruled by stealth. The infrastructure was upgraded in 2005 and officially opened by the novelist, Rose Tremain, in 2006.

In November 2007, Francis Fitzgibbon, the stepson of Lessing's lover, John Whitehorn, deposited the first Lessing material at UEA - 110 love letters written by Lessing in her mid to late 20s to Whitehorn and his friend, Col McDonald between 1945 and 1949, mostly from Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, with the final few written from London shortly after her arrival. The letters, often thousands of words in length, are an extraordinary account of Lessing's writing, politics and motherhood. Both correspondents were RAF officers. At the time of the deposit in 2007, Lessing remarked on her decision not to re-read them: 'There is a good deal of pain in those long ago far-away things'.² Correspondence to a third RAF officer, Leonard Smith, was sold by Smith to Sussex University in the mid-1990s. The lack of consultation about the sale, and the attempt by Sussex to purchase John Whitehorn's collection of letters, infuriated Lessing.³

A year later on 13 February 2008, the year after her final appearance at UEA and the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Lessing wrote to Bigsby to tell him she had suffered a heart attack and would like him to send a car to collect some of her papers. She deposited an initial tranche of material consisting of 29 boxes (7 linear metres) from more than 1100 correspondents including Salman Rushdie, Rebecca West, Clancy Sigal, Nadine Gordimer and Muriel Spark to name just a few. A particular strength of the collection is that Lessing retained copies of a great deal of her outgoing correspondence, so that, unusually for a physical literary archive, both sides of a conversation were preserved together.

In 2009, Margaret Drabble deposited her correspondence from Lessing. The letters reveal a warm and intimate friendship between two women and contain glimpses of their discussions on writing and literature.

These three deposits, totalling 31 boxes (or 7.5 linear metres), provide fascinating insights into Lessing's life and the times in which she lived. But this was not the entirety of the archive.

Lessing died on 17 November 2013 at the age of 94. Shortly afterwards, the remainder of her archive was moved to the University. This material is fully catalogued but remains under embargo awaiting the publication of Lessing's authorised biography, which the late Patrick French was working on when he died on 16 March 2023. French enjoyed privileged access to the material, in accordance with Lessing's will, and was afforded access to 40 years of personal diaries, otherwise embargoed until 2043.

This tranche of archive material consists of a further 109 boxes or 27 linear metres, 31, if we include Lessing's personal diaries.

So, apart from her personal diaries, what did Lessing hold back for her posthumous deposit? It includes more intimate correspondence reflecting close personal friendships and relationships. It also contains material showing greater detail regarding her political life, her activism, for example, in Afghanistan and her studies of Sufism and her research.

There are also dream diaries, travel diaries and notebooks which form part of Lessing's creative process and an excerpt of which was curated by Nonia Williams, Academic Curator of the Doris Lessing Archive at UEA, during centenary celebrations.

Doris Lessing at 100: The Writer's Quest

In 2019, UEA hosted Doris Lessing at 100, a series of events to mark Lessing's centenary year including an international conference of 85 delegates and an exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts which attracted 3835 visitors. There was also a series of public events with speakers such as Margaret Drabble, Roberta Rubenstein, Rachel Cusk, Lara Feigel and Emma Claire Sweeney.

Conversations began with the Sainsbury Centre in late 2016. The original exhibition space was earmarked as 3 m² before it was moved in 2017 to the mezzanine space of 29 m × 13 m. This move changed the nature of the exhibition from the presentation of perhaps twenty items to several hundred. The exhibition would also become ticketed, to recover some of the costs.

The project team responsible for selecting material from the archive were all literature specialists and so were fascinated by Lessing's letters. But as the Curator of the Sainsbury Centre kept insisting: 'You cannot put a book on the wall'.

There were several challenges posed by the exhibition:

Lessing's life spanned the major global events of the twentieth century. Her literary output was vast and varied, her involvement in politics, activism and her study of Sufism was frankly intimidating. The exhibition would need to involve an interdisciplinary team from within and beyond the University to interpret the material and to contextualise.

UEA wanted to include selected material from the embargoed deposit, and this required delicate negotiation with the Lessing Trustees. Only two staff members were allowed to consult the embargoed material in its entirety – me as Archivist, and Paul Cooper an assistant curator and PhD student working under a confidentiality agreement.

The breadth of material was so rich and the scale so great that the selection process was extremely challenging and beyond our expertise. We identified the dominant themes and major preoccupations in Lessing's life by noting subject categories where the volume of material was greatest. We then checked this understanding against that of the biographer's. An initial decision to exclude material relating to Lessing's 1962 novel, *The Golden Notebook*, and to focus on the 'unknown Lessing' was later abandoned in favour of its inclusion, given the centrality of this text to Lessing's life and the archive.

Having identified the themes, selected material in a rough way, and sought clearance from Lessing Estate Trustees, we invited others to assist with selection and interpretation as follows:

Africa and Lessing's move to London - Matthew Taunton and Nonia Williams

Communism and the New Left - Matthew Taunton (Curator)

Lessing's Activism: Cold War and Afghanistan - (All)

Sufism - Nile Green/Paul Cooper

Space Fiction - (All)

Feminism and The Golden Notebook - Nonia Williams (Curator)

Legacy - (All)

Nonia Williams's work on *The Golden Notebook*, and its structure, and the thematic parallels with the archive, informed the design and colour scheme of the exhibition. *The Golden Notebook* consists of different coloured notebooks, representing different aspects of the protagonist, Anna Wulf's life, and these colours became the way in which exhibition themes were marked out.

The requirement for visual material to recreate the backdrop to the different thematic and chronological stages in Lessing's life was a further challenge. While the project team wanted only to select visual material that Lessing herself had experienced, or collected, this was not possible. There was insufficient material of that nature in her archive, which is mostly text. Our museum and gallery colleagues knew some visitors would engage more in the text if a visual drew them in to a particular historical moment or landscape. They asked us to research visual material, unrelated to Lessing, that would conjure those key touchpoints in Lessing's life.

The final exhibition included loans from a private collector of Sufi objects (Olive Hoare), the British Museum, which lent an ancient Sufi scroll depicting the kabbalah, which Lessing had once sketched.

Magnum supplied images of Lessing but also of NASA, where Lessing had once visited as part of her research of preparation for life on Mars, and images of Africa and Afghanistan.

Other loaned objects did have a direct relationship with Lessing: the National Archives' records of Mi5 surveillance of Lessing in the 1950s, a sketch of Lessing hung in the National Portrait Gallery.

A late addition came when Lessing's friend and Trustee, Chloe Diski, daughter of Jenny Diski who lived with Lessing as an adolescent and young woman in the 1960s and 1970s, loaned some of Lessing's favourite possessions including: a globe, clothing, a favourite jug and tea cup, a sewing machine and record player and some jewellery and some carvings from Africa. This material lent a different kind of intimacy with Lessing, unlike the letters and other texts revealing Lessing's wit and the force and playfulness of her intellect and voice.

The exhibition was critically acclaimed, with significant media coverage. Feedback from visitors suggested that the situating of object and text or visual and text, rather than being incongruous, worked together to conjure these contrasting periods of Lessing's life.

While the programming of the exhibition within a major space gave the archive a wonderful canvas on which to share Lessing's incredible archive, we were conscious that we would only reach a particular demographic at the Sainsbury Centre. Norwich is fortunate to have one of the most visited libraries in the country, with an average of 2000 visitors per week.

Lessing valued libraries. After her death, her library of books was gifted to Zimbabwean public libraries by her family. She once said:

'A public library is the most democratic thing in the world. What can be found there has undone dictators and tyrants: demagogues can persecute writers and tell them what to write as much as they like, but they cannot vanish what has been written in the past, though they try often enough...People who love literature have at least part of their minds immune from indoctrination. If you read, you can learn to think for yourself'.⁴

Nonia Williams worked with the Library service to introduce a series of free reading groups to examine Lessing's work. A free exhibition was installed by the Archivist and the Sainsbury Centre's Learning and Interpretation team within Norwich Millennium Library where facsimiles (of some of the original material on display at the Sainsbury Centre as part of the main exhibition) were displayed alongside students' creative responses. These activities culminated in a 'Lessing in the free Library'

panel event and discussion. On reflection, it is this particular aspect of the ‘Doris Lessing at 100’ celebrations which feels closest to Lessing’s spirit and legacy.

Notes

- 1 Lessing, D, 1998. Doris Lessing at the UEA Literary Festival, Autumn 1998 (videorecording), UEA Literary Festival Archive, FES FES/I-L/Lessing/3/4574. (Norwich, UK: British Archive for Contemporary Writing (hereafter BACW))
- 2 Lessing, D, 2000. Correspondence from Chris Bigsby, 1999-2000 (typescript), Doris Lessing Archive, DL/A-Z//BIGS/003, (Norwich, UK: BACW)
- 3 Lessing, D, 1993. Correspondence with John Whitehorn, 1993-2003 (typescript), Doris Lessing Archive, DL/A-Z//WHITEH J, (Norwich, UK: BACW)
- 4 Doris Lessing, *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 206

Author Biography

Justine Mann is a Project Archivist at the University of East Anglia’s British Archive for Contemporary Writing and was a Project Curator of the Doris Lessing at 100 exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre in 2019–2020.