



HOWE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA - GEORGE A. SMATHERS LIBRARIES - SPECIAL COLLECTIONS - FALL 1998

All My Love, Marjorie

Correspondence of Mr. and Mrs. Norton Baskin, 1943-1953

An important new acquisition for the Department of Special Collections

The George A. Smathers Libraries nearly doubled the number of its letters of Pulitzer prize winning novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings with the recent purchase of correspondence between her and her second husband, Norton Baskin. The nearly 500 letters written by Rawlings join more than 150 of her letters to Baskin already in University ownership. This collection augments the correspondence between Rawlings and first husband Charles A. Rawlings, Jr., described in the last issue of the *Newsletter*. Marjorie Rawlings's letters to her two husbands comprise the majority of the more than 1,100 letters written by her in the Rawlings Papers.

Unlike the Marjorie/Charles Rawlings letters, which were primarily written while the couple was still courting, the Baskin letters were almost all written after he and Rawlings were married in October, 1941. As true love letters, the Marjorie/Charles Rawlings letters mostly track the development of their relationship. While naturally Marjorie frequently reiterated her love for Norton, the greatest value of the Rawlings-Baskin letters is for tracking Marjorie. So far as is known, Marjorie never kept a journal; thus, these candid letters constitute the most concentrated picture we have of her life over a long period of time. Although the Baskins were once apart for over a year, the letters also document frequent though less lengthy periods of separation. The letters cover the span of their marriage, which ended with Marjorie's death in December, 1953.

The longest period of separation was during Norton's wartime service as an American Field Service ambulance driver on the India-Burma front in 1943-1944. From his departure in July, 1943, to his return in October of the following year, Marjorie wrote almost daily. Other extended glimpses are from the summers of 1950 through



This photo of Marjorie, Norton, and Moe, probably taken before their marriage has been published on occasion with Norton cropped out. There are few photos of them together.

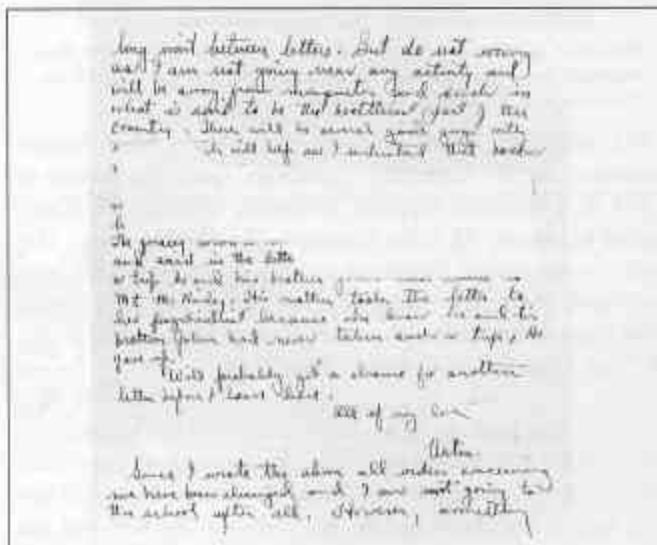
1953, which she spent in upstate New York, while Norton remained in St. Augustine. Rawlings spent the winter of 1953 in Richmond, Virginia, gathering material for a projected biography of Ellen Glasgow. The Baskins were also apart on numerous shorter occasions, some involving professional, or family obligations, or during Marjorie's periodic trips to her second home at Cross Creek, while living at "The Cottage" at Crescent Beach.

The bulk of the letters were written within two years of the publication of *Cross Creek*, many of them from the Creek. To readers of the book, the letters from this period will seem like a sequel. Marjorie moved between the Creek and the cottage at Crescent Beach, doing little other

traveling because of gasoline rationing. While at the Creek, she kept Norton up to date in a most candid fashion on the same cast of characters that readers came to know through the pages of *Cross Creek*. Her "perfect maid" Idella, her tenants the Mickens family, other African American laborers at the Creek, her neighbors, the Basses and the Glissons, and other friends are all prominent in the letters. Although none of the people mentioned in *Cross Creek*, except for Zelma Cason, appeared to take offense at their portrayal in the book, they might have been offended at what she was writing to Norton. Beyond reporting the truly scandalous, and at times seemingly mean in her comments, Marjorie's natural medium seems to have been satire. Few opportunities to point out a friend's foibles, or to poke fun were overlooked. The special place in Marjorie's hell was reserved for Zelma, who had brought a libel suit against her.

News of the suit and gossip about Zelma is a continuing topic of the letters. Marjorie's barbs, however, were not just for her enemies, or neighbors at the Creek. Her closest friends, Julia Scribner and Edith Pope, for example, were equally targets of criticism, when they visited a bit too long. Edith's custom of monopolizing the one bathroom in Marjorie's home was a big complaint, especially when it appeared that she had spent one and one-half hours studying a wildflower book there. In general, Edith, author of a successful novel, *Colcorton*, seems to have been more fastidious than was Marjorie, and many of her ways seemed pretentious to the earthier Rawlings. (Edith Pope's Papers are also in the Smathers Libraries.)

Julia Scribner, daughter of publisher Charles Scribner, was a much younger woman whom Marjorie regarded and loved as if she were a daughter. She suffered from severe migraine and other ailments, which Marjorie regarded as neurotic symptoms. Generally Marjorie was more sympathetic towards Julia than perhaps anyone else, but still her comments became noticeably more critical during a long visit, as the two got more and more on each



Norton's description of where he believed he was about to be sent apparently was too specific for the military censors.

other's nerves. The relationship was perhaps almost destroyed when on the next to last day of her visit, Julia narrowly escaped serious injury in one of Marjorie's many automobile accidents. When Julia remonstrated about Marjorie's driving, particularly when she had been drinking, Marjorie took serious umbrage and ignored Julia for several months, before forgiving her.

Much of Marjorie's time at Crescent Beach was spent with a heavy drinking, bridge playing group with a connection to Norton's Castle Warden Hotel. One of these friends, Ruth Pickering, along with another woman, died in a fire at the Castle. This caused Marjorie great grief, as well as guilt, since Ruth was in a room acknowledged to be a "firetrap." Although the facts surrounding the fire have been known before, Marjorie's emotional reaction to it may not have been fully recognized. This accident, along with concern for Norton's welfare, Zelma's suit, and general wartime anxiety, surely ranks as one of the major events depressing her attitude during this period.

Although Norton must have written Marjorie as often as possible, fewer of his letters are included in the new acquisition. These few indicate acute observation of the scene around him and a good style for narrating events. The sharp, sensitive knife of the military censor, however, defaced many of his letters.

Some other topics followed throughout the letters include:

Writing and reading — Marjorie recorded her progress, or often lack of it, over the nearly ten years that she worked on her final book, *The Sojourner*. She was an avid reader and kept Norton up to date on what she was reading as well as sending him many books. Marjorie read many of the "classics," at this time, including *Ulysses*, which she initially praised, but later she became lost in Joyce's stream of consciousness. She was appalled at Rousseau's immorality and depressed by *Crime and Punishment*. She also read many best sellers and serious works of non-fiction.

Servant situation, especially Idella. — Marjorie was dependent on household help. Her struggle to find and keep a satisfactory maid and cook was an ongoing ordeal. Paramount was the effort to hold onto Idella Parker, who obviously offered a great deal of companionship as well as help. Idella entered and left Marjorie's employment on several occasions, each departure being seen as a betrayal and involving inner conflict between wanting her back or not.

Civil rights. — Although not known as a civil rights activist, Rawlings expressed strong support for equal rights, going so far as to write Norton that the war would have been fought in vain, if blacks at home were kept in their same oppressed condition. Much of her resolve,

as expressed in letters to Norton, was inspired by her friendship with the black novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston.

Wartime activities – The letters show a view of what the wartime was like not only for Marjorie, but also for many Americans. Foremost there was concern and worry for loved ones in danger and for the progress of the war. Although Norton was far away, the war must have seemed very close when she reported to him of having found a sailor's dog tags washed onto the beach near her home. At home there were inconveniences and hardships from shortages and rationing. There was service. Marjorie at times expressed guilt for not making greater wartime participation. Still her letters show that she did aircraft spotting, Red Cross volunteer work, and responded to hundreds of servicemen, who wrote her after reading her books in Armed Forces editions. She was not always a happy camper about wartime regulation, complaining rather bitterly at times, and expressing fear that it would continue even after the war. Still the amenities of life went on. Movies, books, bridge and hunting, in addition to eating and drinking, were her usual diversions, wartime or not.

Pets — Marjorie loved children and animals. While she had no children, she was never without pets. Few letters to Norton were complete without a report on the daily antics of the pets in residence, especially a pointer named Moe. She referred to them as family and truly they were.

In her letters, Marjorie expressed the belief that her enduring reputation might rest not on her Florida works, but on her final novel, *The Sojourner*. Indeed her reputation might come to rest on neither, but rather on her mastery of the personal letter. As factual, detailed resources, they are the principal source for her biography, almost constituting an autobiography. As literature, they are often gems. Both bitter and sweet, they display a wide range of emotion. Detailed observation, expert narrative skill, extended characterization, self-revelation, and humor are among their qualities. The addition of so many of Marjorie Rawling's most personal letters has truly made her correspondence one of the treasures of the Smathers Libraries.



Frank Orser

Norton Baskin
in his American
Field Service
uniform.

Christmas, 1943 – Being apart, both Marjorie and Norton prepared for “blue” Christmases. As it turned out, both had pretty good days. Here are excerpts from the letters each wrote on Christmas Eve.

Vol. Norton Baskin
American Field Service
APO 465 Postmaster
New York City 12/24/43

Dec. 24, 1943

Dearest Marjorie:

Xmas Eve – phooey—I've never felt less like it in my life and shouldn't be writing a letter in this mood but I feel like talking. It is ten in the morning and except for an hour or two working on the car we have nothing to do until after Xmas. This would be fine and fitting if there were anything to do but as it is we would much rather be busy. At least the day might pass unnoticed if we were busy but this way it is brought into higher focus when the whole world is out of focus.

I'm a walking mass of revolt. Mind and muscle, belly and bristle all stand in rebellion. My brain rebels against the idiocy – the waste and the horrors of war. Against the snobbishness and caste system in the military set-up. And against anything that separates people who shouldn't be separated. I'm homesick and I miss you terribly because I love you so much. I know this was my own choosing and am afraid that given the choice again I would have to choose the same course because I still have the same feelings and beliefs I had when I joined. Maybe intensified. But I still resent the necessity.

Dearest:

.....I think I have muffed my Christmas, just by being afraid of a little work, and it serves me right. The Lyons might not have been able to come, but I wish to God I'd asked. I'd so much rather be here, and if it weren't that Jean is counting on me for holly and cream and butter for her party tomorrow, I'd wire that I am laid up with rabies. You and I certainly share the trait in common, of never knowing what we're going to want to do until the moment comes. Today, it would seem like no more work to cook all day than to scramble things together and drive slowly across the state to a place I don't want to go to!

.....I had a jolly little old Christmas present yesterday – the threat of another lawsuit. A firm of Los Angeles lawyers wrote that a client of theirs had owned a pet deer which died last year, and in 1935 she had an article in some magazine I never heard of, and that there were so many points of similarity they had a claim for damages, infringement of copyright, plagiarism, etc.

All my love,
/s/Marjorie