

"excuse the scrawl"

literary letters
from St John's special
collections

an exhibition
St John's College Library
Trinity Term 2017

you for mentioning
the fault in the work,
because as an Author
I expect high praise about
I been perfectly right in
my glad to hear how
not & approbation must
at all wonder at the
well as Cecilia at the
does not become a Susan
being ruined by his
he you would not let
I do not object to the
profession; - it is such the
that I dare say Adela
will be opened. — I need
Ben's opinion. — I think
to it, I think he must
the other being much
to wonder at his not
That is a source of
be competent to. — In
novels, especially good

Poets of the First World War

Siegfried Sassoon to Robert Graves, 7th December 1957

Sassoon's letter to Graves, tipped-in to his own copy of the second edition of *Goodbye to All That*, Graves's war-memoir. The letter concerns Sassoon's conversion to Catholicism and his changed attitude towards Graves's portrayal of the friendship between the two poets in the book. At the time he had fallen out with Graves publicly for what he then saw as a cruel representation, but in the letter he calls the book "extremely generous—beyond my deserts".

'Crossword for idiots' and a sketch up the garden path

Spike Milligan to Robert Graves, undated, ~1965

Spike Milligan's drawings are as key to his comic output as his writing, so it is perhaps unsurprising that some of his correspondence with Robert Graves comes adorned with sketches and doodles.

He and Graves shared a lengthy correspondence after Milligan had invited him to appear as a guest on one of his TV shows *Muses with Spike Milligan*.



*Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster and
The Bloomsbury Group:*

**Noni Jabavu to Beryl
Graves , 28th October 1989**

In these letters to Robert Graves's widow, Beryl, Noni Jabavu, the first black South African woman to publish her own autobiography, gleefully remembers meeting E.M. Forster— a "BORING OLD MAN" - when she was living in Oxford as a teenager in the 1930s.

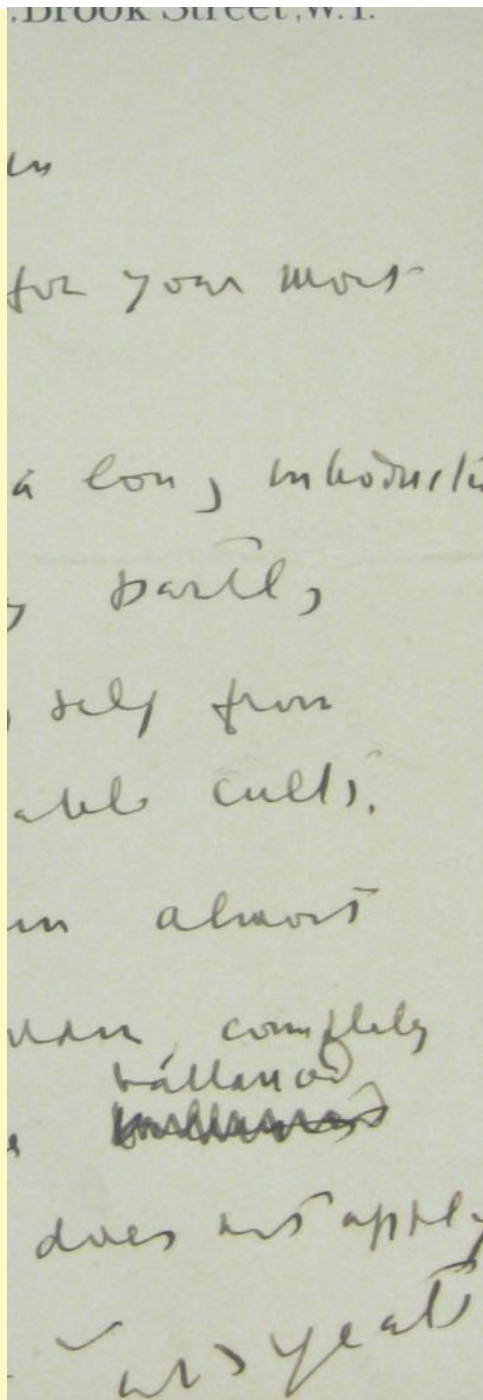
As an adult, Jabavu turns back to Bloomsbury, but finds Woolf to be "UNREADABLE!!" and her Group to have "incredible incestuous lives".

The Irish Academy of Letters

**W.B. Yeats to Charlotte Shaw
22nd September(1932)**

This letter is part of the inception of the Irish Academy of Letters, a political organisation intended to organise Irish writers to oppose certain issues within the arts such as censorship. Whether this aim was achieved is debatable as members of the group would complain that the group primarily became a literary social club and prize-giving society.

The portrait of Yeats accompanying the letter is a print of a 1907 etching by Augustus John, a Welsh artist.



Sketching characters

**Edward Ardizzone to
Robert Graves ,
24th November 1959**

In preparation for illustrating a book of Robert Graves's poems for children, Ardizzone gives a suggestion of the style in which he would like to draw the characters: "the 1910's sailor suits, straw hats + girls white + bunchy with black stockings, though I shall be quite happy in the 19th century if you prefer it."

A private and public voice

**Jane Austen to her niece
Anna, 8th September
1814**

Anna Austen is writing a novel which her aunt Jane looks over and critiques. Austen's comments include criticising Anna's heavy use of clichés and stereotypes, with her familiar sharp wit.

On one character who must 'plunge into a "vortex of Dissipation"' Austen writes that it is such overdrawn language "I dare say Adam met with it in the first novel he opened".

you for improving in
its fault in the work,
because as an Author
I expect high fun about
been perfectly right in
my glad to hear how
ent & approbation must
at all wonder at his
as well as Cecilia at first
does not become a Susa
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novels, especially good

Unpicking his own poetry

A.E. Housman to John Sparrow, 3rd October 1924

Here Housman seemingly responds to seventeen-year-old John Sparrow's query after the meaning of the nineteenth poem of *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), 'To An Athlete Dying Young'.

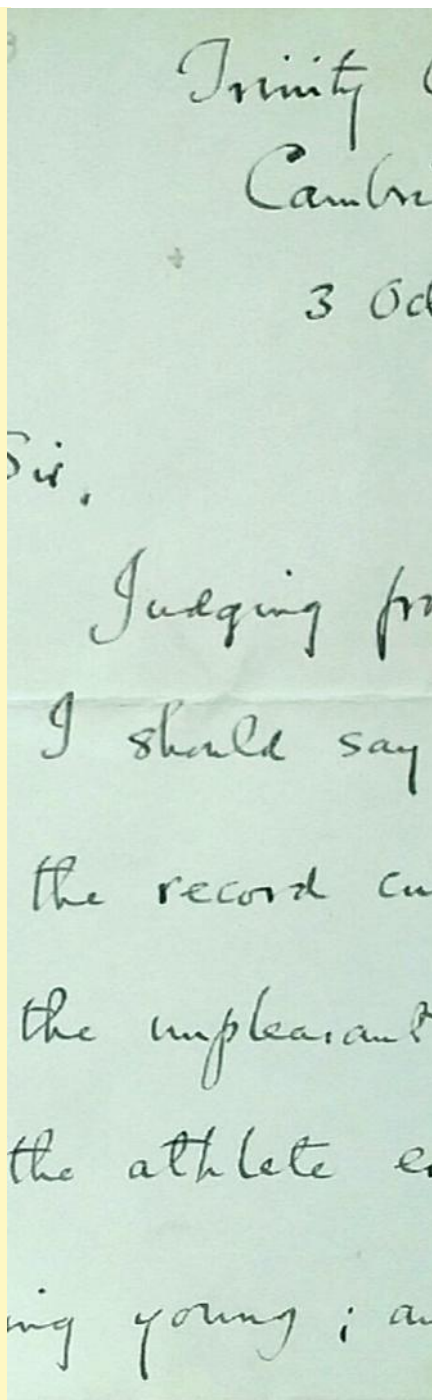
Housman, in deciphering his own poem, is vague and non-committal, only directing Sparrow to consider that 'having the record cut is one of the unpleasant things which the athlete escapes'.

"I shall have to see it in print"

Agatha Christie to Robert Graves, 30th December, [1942] 31st January [1943]

Christie, a neighbour of Robert Graves's when they both lived in Devon during World War Two, writes to him about her 37th and 38th novels, *Five Little Pigs* (1942), and (most likely) *The Moving Finger* (1943).

This marks the mid-point of her writing career; she would go on to publish 37 more novels during her lifetime.



Trinity
Cambr
3 Oct
Sir,
Judging from
I should say
the record cut
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the athlete es
ing young; an

The Movement and St. John's

**Kingsley Amis to
Robert Graves, 2nd and
25th October 1954**

Amis writes of his high respect for Graves and his work, and to acknowledge their shared alma mater: "I'm Oxford too—St. John's, where I think you went".

Here too, Amis dismisses the recent concept of "the Movement" which described a group of contemporary English poets including himself, Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn as not "a movement at all, just a lot of writers".

An individual style

**e e cummings to Robert
Graves, February–March
1957**

Robert Graves came into notoriety in the 1950s when he gave the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge. In these lectures Graves derided many contemporary poets: Eliot, Auden, Yeats, Pound, Dylan Thomas. The few praiseworthy included Sassoon, Frost, Alun Lewis and e e cummings.

The letters from cummings are trifling in content but are as stylised in form as his poetry.



The Valley of the Latin bear

**Alexander Lenard to
Robert Graves partly in
Latin, 14th September
1965**

Lenard found unexpected fame in the 1960s for producing *Winnie Ille Pu* after his young Latin students requested something as fun to read as A.A. Milne's 'Winnie the Pooh' stories they had studied together when learning English.

Lenard, a physician and polyglot, begins the letter in English before seguing into Latin to en-

μετά-poetry and old age

**Robert Bridges to A.E.
Housman, 19th October
1922**

Also encouraging his correspondent to continue writing is Robert Bridges. He deplores A.E. Housman for calling his most recent poetry collection *Last Poems* (1922) and suggests that the Greek term *μετά* (after, subsequent, superior) may be useful to him.

Bridges explains that he had encountered writer's block aged 76 before finding inspiration again and writing copiously.

ME? α = may help
It happened to
be . net 77
the arabic in the
the first return
and I write for
months . some
may hereafter
to finish my
I am now by
the v. s. A
to buy them in
I / what they ca
they have as yet
only on verses

'a real classical scholar'

C.S. Lewis to J.B.

Leishman, 26th July 1940

Leishman at St. John's, Lewis at Magdalen, the two Oxford professors' correspondence concerns particular Latin citations.

Although Lewis has redirected a number of Leishman's inquiries he is able to lend a certain degree of advice in identifying quotations from Ovid's *Tristia* and Lucan's *Pharsalia* as well as explaining a phrase concerning the seven liberal arts—a topic which Lewis repeatedly writes on in his academic works.

In languages dead and alive

Walter Headlam to A.E.

**Housman partly in Greek,
15th December 1905**

Unlike the research concerns of Lewis's letter, Walter Headlam is writing to A.E. Housman about various scholarly frustrations of the early twentieth century:

- a prose translation of Aeschylus's verse is snubbed by the Classical Review
- a professorship he wanted has been snapped up
- printing for one lecture costs 5% of his salary.

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some teaching
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Christmas: j
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yours since
Walter H

'a plea for clemency'

**T.S. Eliot to Robert Graves
about Ezra Pound's upcoming
trial, undated (~1946)**

While Eliot was a publisher assigned to Graves at Faber and Faber, this letter does not concern their working relationship. Instead, Eliot is requesting Graves to join him in vouching for Ezra Pound's literary importance before he went for trial by signing a letter from poets.

Graves, who was a fan of neither Ezra Pound's nor T.S. Eliot's poetic output, did not sign the letter.

'my first contributor'

**Kaye Webb to Robert
Graves , 15th February 1961**

A very different request for Robert Graves's help comes in this letter from Kaye Webb, newly instated editor of Puffin Books.

Initially, Webb shares anxieties that "everybody is waiting expectantly for me to produce something good and original which alarms me fearfully."

However, she soon makes clear that she has many big ideas for the imprint—Birthday Books, books for older children—for which she hopes to have Graves on board.



a distinctive hand

**J.R.R. Tolkien to J.B.
Leishman 7th-9th Novem-
ber 1945**

In a hand reminiscent of the elvish script in his Middle-earth books, Tolkien writes to Leishman with practical advice on living as an Oxford academic.

He also writes of the difficulties the university and English department found themselves in during the Second World War: a lack of space and funding in college, and how the departments “need some help desperately” in finding enough tutors for the number of students.

... and author to publisher

**Philip Larkin to Charles
Monteith, 13th March 1967**

Unlike the formal, business-like tone of Woolf’s letter, this letter—and birthday cards—from Larkin to his publisher is much more friendly in tone.

The letter, sent after a party at All Souls College, is primarily about Larkin feeling relaxed in a space which used to make him uneasy. One circumstance which is mentioned is Larkin meeting Robert Lowell. Larkin felt himself being “a bit reserved” since “famous poets bother me”.



publisher to author ...

**Leonard Woolf to J.B.
Leishman, 14th January
1935**

In a focused and professional letter from publisher to author, Woolf prepares Leishman's translation of the poetry of German author, Rainer Maria Rilke.

Woolf both nit-picks—"the word 'plies' is extremely awkward, and in some curious way throws the whole thing out" - and makes broad statements of criticism—"I am worried about the Introduction".

calligraphic script

**Anthony and Lily West to
Robert Graves for Graves's
birthday, 29th July 1965**

Anthony West, son of novelists Rebecca West and H.G. Wells, was a novelist and literary critic in his own right, although his life was often overshadowed by his parentage.

The Wests give some idea of the scale of Robert and Beryl's busy social life when they write that having come to spend time together in Deya, "we have a very small part in your life, but ... you have a large one in ours."



"a war of coincidences"

Gertrude Stein to Robert Graves during the Second World War, undated

Tipped-in to Robert Graves's copy of Stein's book for children *The World is Round* (1939), this letter references Stein's friendship with one of Graves's German relatives, Hubert von Ranke.

The letter's style reflects on Stein's written idiosyncrasies such as the lack of punctuation in "the end of the drama your drama was curious" and the phrase "a war of coincidences".

A man of letters

Robert Graves to Robert Frost, 4th June 1962

The library owns many letters received by Graves, but there are far fewer in his own hand.

This example concerns Graves's introduction to Frost's *Selected Poems* (1963).

This is a particularly complimentary letter to Frost from Graves. As a post-script Graves notes that "it is so good to have someone older and still active to admire—the younger ones have let us down".

