
THE WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS COLLECTION AT YALE
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BY DONALD GALLUP

As with some of Yale's most significant collections, especially in contemporary letters, the prime mover behind the acquisition by the library of the first editions and a substantial portion of the papers of William Carlos Williams was the late Norman Holmes Pearson, Professor of English and American Studies (hereafter NHP). While still a graduate student in English at Yale, he had first written to Dr. Williams in 1937 in connection with the *Oxford Anthology of American Literature*, which he was then editing with William Rose Benét. Neither Benét nor NHP knew Williams's poetry more than superficially, and eight of the eleven poems eventually printed in the *Oxford Anthology* were included at the suggestion of the author himself, who, moreover, sent typed copies "to save you the expense of buying my books."

Nullifying Dr. Williams's effort to save him money, NHP acquired as many of the books as he could find and quickly remedied his lack of familiarity with Williams's published work, both poetry and prose. Correspondence between the two flourished, and they met in 1938 at Sarah Lawrence and again in 1940. At that second meeting NHP, who was an active member of the Yale Library Associates, communicated to Dr. Williams his eagerness to build up a complete collection of Williams first editions for Yale; a letter written soon afterward mentions especially the first book, *Poems* (Rutherford, N.J., 1909). Only a few days later, on November 18, Dr. Williams was "tickled to death" to be able to write NHP that he had located a most desirable copy—that given and inscribed by the author to the printer, Reid Howell, and signed by both. It was not for sale, but Howell, who had just passed his eightieth birthday, would be happy to give it to Yale. If NHP in return wished to make a contribution to Dorothy Parker's fund for the rescue of Spanish children, Dr. Williams added, "consider that I've given you my apostolic blessing—you've got it anyway."

Earlier that year Dr. Williams had asked NHP if Yale would like to have some little magazines that he was planning to discard. Of course Yale wanted them; and a large group in due course arrived.

In February 1941, he sent an additional seventy-eight that the library did not have. NHP pointed out to Dr. Williams that they supplied some important desiderata in a collection that he and Donald Wing, the Yale accessions librarian, were especially eager to fill out.

A five-year break in the Williams-Pearson correspondence was caused by World War II: NHP, now an instructor in the English Department, left Yale to go first to Washington and then to England for duty with the Office of Strategic Services. But he returned to Yale in 1946 as an assistant professor, and the Williams-Pearson friendship resumed with the same old warmth and enthusiasm. (Dr. Williams had written NHP in 1938: ". . . the most remarkable thing is your enthusiasm. Where the hell you get that I don't know but, by God, you have it.") In January 1947, Dr. Williams sent NHP a typescript of his play "A Dream of Love," but their hope that a production at Yale might be arranged with the Drama School was not to be realized.

Meanwhile NHP succeeded in acquiring copies of almost all the Williams books, helped out now and then by the author himself. In March 1951, Dr. Williams came to Yale at NHP's invitation to give a reading, part of a round of strenuous activities which came to a halt with his first stroke at the end of the month. But he continued to keep NHP's collecting interests in mind and in September 1951 even managed to find for him one of his paintings, a small landscape of the Passaic River, and sent it up to be added to the large collection of graphic works by writers which NHP had designated his "Art for the Wrong Reason."

In January 1953, the Bollingen Prize award committee, meeting at Yale, voted to double that year's prize and give a thousand dollars to Williams and the same amount to Archibald MacLeish. From January 13 to 28, the Library had a small exhibition of the work of the two poets.

In September, Dr. Williams signed an agreement with John C. Thirlwall, Associate Professor of English at City College of New York, giving him, for a period of five years, non-exclusive authorization to work on a Williams biography. In selecting material for Thirlwall's use, Dr. Williams had found and sent off to New Haven a number of his books that NHP still needed for the Williams collection. He wrote on September 29 that this had made him begin to think of disposing of more of his books and of his manuscripts also, "for whatever they might be worth," and suggested that NHP might perhaps spend a day in Rutherford during which they could discuss

the matter. NHP well knew that Dr. Williams had for some time been giving many of his manuscripts and some of his correspondence to Charles Abbott for the Lockwood Memorial Library at the University of Buffalo (now the State University of New York at Buffalo). "It isn't," he explained, "that I've gone back on my dear friend Charles Abbott but he has so much of my material that I'd like other friends, yourself prominent among them, [to] take a crack at it."

Dr. Williams went on to describe, as an example of the books he still owned, an item he had just come across—his own retained copy of the true first edition of his *Poems* (1909). It had contained so many misprints that the entire edition had been destroyed and the book reprinted. This was the copy in which Dr. Williams and his father had marked the errors. "If the Yale library wants it as a curiosity, it has no other value that I can see, I will be glad to dispose of it for whatever it may be worth to you."

Of course the Yale library did want it and although it was not, as the author then believed it to be, unique (he had forgotten that Mrs. Williams had her own copy, which she later gave to the University of Pennsylvania), the one hundred dollars that the library paid for it in 1953 seemed even then to be a sum well spent. Certainly the author's own copy of the first edition, taking its place beside the copy of the corrected edition presented by the author to the printer, made a superb cornerstone for the Yale collection.

In October 1953, the connection between Dr. Williams and Yale was further strengthened by the agreement, arranged by NHP, for the publication of his translation of Quevedo's *The Dog and the Fever* by the Shoestring Press in Hamden, Connecticut. Although the press had no official connection with Yale, it was owned and operated by the Associate Librarian, John Ottemiller, and his wife.

NHP made the proposed visit to Rutherford in December 1953 and, on January 14, 1954, wrote for the Yale Librarian, James T. Babb, a memorandum on the understanding he had come to with Dr. Williams about "the purchase of his manuscripts, correspondence, etc. now in his possession and not already . . . given to the University of Buffalo." In return for the sum of five thousand dollars, to be paid him over five years at the rate of a thousand dollars a year, or to his estate in the case of his death, Yale would have the papers in its title, although Dr. Williams would retain custody of them until his death if that seemed desirable to him. Yale would receive also a selection from his library of those volumes which seemed significant for the Williams collection. NHP felt that the chief importance of such a ges-

ture on Yale's part would be the boost to Dr. Williams's morale as well as to his security. "He could not accept a sheer gift of money without losing pride, yet his life is tormented by financial worries which are real as well as imaginary."

Jim Babb was enthusiastic about the arrangement with Dr. Williams and agreed that the money could somehow be found. A draft agreement was drawn up in April 1954 by the University's lawyers, who warned that "Yale's title will be precarious in this case, where the seller is to retain possession of some of the property sold." At their insistence, the Library agreed to insure the Williams materials it was purchasing, and some kind of list thus became necessary.

Dr. Williams had been, characteristically, worried that since he had already given Buffalo so much of his manuscript material, there might not be enough left for Yale to get its money's worth. On May 15, 1954, he wrote NHP in some relief:

Jack Thirlwall has just left, Sat. afternoon, 5 p.m. We have been in my attic since 2 going through my papers, old junk that (in some cases) I have not looked at in years. I hasten to tell you that we found (without disturbing it) a large quantity of the original manuscripts of Paterson 1, 2, 3 & 4! It contains all my scribbled notes on the margins of pages, rejected first draughts etc such I think you will be anxious to have. I am keeping it for you to pick up at your leisure.

I can't tell you how pleased I am at the discovery since I was afraid, after your generous offer, that I would not be able to find any material to compensate you for it. I was really amazed to find so much material—now I can sit back without fear that you will be disappointed. . . .

I couldn't wait to get this down although I had written you a letter no longer ago than this morning. So be it.

On December 1, 1954, NHP and I drove down to Rutherford for lunch with Dr. and Mrs. Williams. NHP and I went over the books in the attic and in the library with Dr. Williams, and I made notes of some of the more important ones that would be earmarked for Yale. And we brought away all the newly found material relating to *Paterson*. From these manuscripts and my notes a list for insurance purposes was completed to the satisfaction of the lawyers. The formal agreement was signed for Yale by the Secretary, Ben Holden, on January 26, 1955, and I forwarded it to Dr. Williams on the same day. He returned it signed on February 1, adding that he had come across "nearly a trunkful of manuscript" that he had completely forgotten about when NHP and I were there. The first Yale check had gone off on January 31.

In June 1954, seeds of future unhappiness had very obviously been

sown for John Thirlwall: Dr. Williams warned us that we must be "on guard"; he had come to distrust Thirlwall's judgment in utilizing the material placed in his hands. Work on the biography continued, however, and Thirlwall over the years brought to the library on the author's behalf manuscripts and correspondence for the Williams collection. Dr. Williams continued actively to help him and prodigiously supported his labors in preparing a selection of Williams letters for publication. This project had been initially suggested by NHP, and a preliminary gathering of material for the book had been sent to New Haven for his opinion. Under the press of his many duties at Yale and elsewhere, NHP kept the typescript for more than a year before finally agreeing that the book should be published. It appeared in Thirlwall's edition in 1957; but the plan for the biography was doomed. Mrs. Williams came to share her husband's distrust, and Thirlwall was eventually obliged to give up the project.

In April 1955, Dr. Williams had come to Yale to give another reading, this time at the Elizabethan Club. In these years, the friendship between Dr. Williams and NHP grew even closer. A letter to NHP on April 27, 1957 mentions "my dear friends, you first among them." The Pearsons had taken a steamboat trip down the Mississippi River the previous autumn and, inspired by their example, the Williamses decided to make the trip down and back in May 1957. It went off most successfully, thanks at least in part to the help that the Pearsons had provided. The high point in the Williams-Pearson relationship was reflected in a letter from Dr. Williams to NHP on February 19, 1959:

I have been closely attached to you ever since we met at Sara[h] Lawrence one evening so many years ago. Something took place then which has to do with human dignity if not survival. Maybe it was love, who knows? and whatever that is.

In these months of deteriorating health, Dr. Williams became increasingly concerned about the books and manuscripts which, now that the final payment had been made in January, 1959, belonged to Yale. In the letter of February 19 he had proposed that NHP and I make another visit to Rutherford in the spring and added, "Please let it be a clean sweep this time." But in March NHP was in hospital with a bleeding ulcer, and the trip had to be put off. Two years later the books still had not been picked up. On February 24, 1961, Dr. Williams wrote me that he wanted us to collect them without further delay. He repeated that it should be "as clean a sweep as possible," and added a final paragraph:

Speed, speed, is now of the essence!

The very next day he wrote again, countermanding his request.

Dr. Williams died March 4, 1963. Although neither NHP nor I was aware of it, events had conspired to destroy the close relationship built up over almost a quarter-century. NHP, in London during the War, had become a close friend of both Hilda Doolittle and her friend Bryher, the British novelist, whose literary affairs he was now handling. In the *Autobiography* (1951), Williams had made some statements about his old friend HD and Bryher, and their friend Adrienne Monnier, who ran La Maison des Amis in Paris, that angered Bryher so greatly that she contemplated bringing legal action against him. NHP and her lawyers managed to dissuade her from taking such a step, but she came to regret having followed their advice. When her own memoir, *The Heart to Artemis*, appeared in 1962, she exacted her revenge. NHP persuaded her to tone down considerably her comments on Dr. Williams. They seemed to him so much less angry as printed than as originally written that he had not foreseen how deeply they would offend Dr. and Mrs. Williams. That they would hold him personally responsible did not even cross his mind. Although he had heard nothing from Dr. Williams during the last year of his life, he assumed that the friendly feelings continued. NHP was therefore as shocked as I was at Mrs. Williams's letter to me of May 11, 1963, in response to the note of condolence I had written her. She told me of "a very disagreeable affair concerning Norman Pearson":

You of course know that Norman is Bryher's agent?—advisor—or what have you.—

Norman O.K.'d a passage in Bryher's book concerning Bill which is 100% false—and how Norman could do such a thing is beyond us.—Bill was so incensed—when he read it that he said he never wanted to see or have anything further to do with Norman—

Norman has sent Bill affectionate cards—telegrams etc. and also sent me a wire when Bill died which I have not acknowledged & will not—ever.—

So—when you plan to come here to collect the material you are entitled to—please remember that Norman Pearson is not to come with you.—

I went to Rutherford—without NHP—on June 4 and picked up all the rest of the materials earmarked for Yale. But it was saddening to think that he, who had done so much to make all this possible, was not on hand to share in its culmination. (A few years later NHP and Mrs. Williams were, happily, reconciled.) Besides some additional

bits of manuscripts and correspondence, there were more than a thousand issues of periodicals, many with Williams's own contributions, and some nine hundred volumes from his library. These included books—mostly first editions, many with presentation inscriptions from their authors—of Robert C. Brown (10), Basil Bunting (2, including *Redimiculum metallarum*, Milan, 1930), Kenneth Burke (9), René Char (6), Cid Corman (9), e. e. cummings (8), Nancy Cunard (4), Edward Dahlberg (5), Allen Ginsberg (3, including *Siesta in Xbalba*, Icy Cape, Alaska, 1956), Horace Gregory (6), Alfred Kreymborg (8), Irving Layton (6), Henry Miller (7), Marianne Moore (4), Merrill Moore (10), Anaïs Nin (5), Kenneth Patchen (9), Ezra Pound (20, including *A Draft of XVI. Cantos*, Paris, 1925; and *A Draft of Cantos 17-27*, London, 1928, both on Roma paper), Kenneth Rexroth (7), Charles Reznikoff (7), Theodore Roethke (6), Gertrude Stein (5), Wallace Stevens (6), Allen Tate (6), and Louis Zukofsky (6). There were, besides, some thirty of Williams's own books and offprints.

On June 9, the break with Thirlwall was complete; Mrs. Williams wrote me that she did not want to see him again. Gradually he released to us the Williams material he had continued to hold in the expectation of being able to use it his work. (The manuscript of the early Keatsian "epic," which Viola Jordan had given to Yale through him along with most of her Williams letters in 1957 did not reach us until 1968.) In 1971 he gave his notes of his conversations with Dr. Williams with the understanding that, during his and NHP's lifetimes, they would be available to no one except NHP.

The rather undefined arrangement between Dr. Williams and Thirlwall led to a good deal of confusion about the status of material we received through him over the years. A group of Williams letters to Pound that Pound had sent to Williams in response to a request for help with the *Selected Letters* came to us from Thirlwall. It was only several years later and from James Laughlin that I discovered that Mary de Rachewiltz felt that her father had merely lent the letters to Dr. Williams. They were of course returned to Mary but, happily, came back to Yale in 1974 when, after long years of negotiations, we acquired the Pound archive. In the same way, Allen Ginsberg had, he thought, merely lent his Williams letters. When he discovered that they were at Yale (they had been handed us by Thirlwall), he wrote asking that they be restored to him. Of course we complied with his request. Most recently, only a year or two ago, Paul Mariani happened to mention to Eric Williams that some of his letters from his father were in the Yale files. Eric had wondered for years what

had happened to those particular letters, mostly written to him during the war period, and was delighted to have them returned to him.

From Dr. Williams under the purchase agreement Yale received some two hundred eighty-six manuscripts and typescripts, mostly individual poems and short prose pieces, including multiple drafts of many of them. By far the most substantial were the autograph manuscript (1,595 leaves) and a corrected typescript (725 leaves) of the *Autobiography*. There were also typescripts, many with manuscript notes and corrections, of "The Cure," *A Dream of Love*, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, *The Farmer's Daughters*, "The First President," "Many Loves," "Measure," "The Poem as a Field of Action," "Sauerkraut to the Cultured" (a comedy), the translation of Soupault's *The Last Nights of Paris* (with manuscript corrections by Louis Zukofsky), "Tituba's Children," *The Wedge*, "Women Are Such Fools" (an unwritten play) and *Yes, Mrs. Williams*.

As for the Williams incoming correspondence, although in 1955 a great deal of it had already been turned over to Buffalo, a very substantial amount eventually ended up at Yale. This now fills the greater part of three standard file drawers and includes letters and cards from Charles Abbott (40), George Antheil (7), William Bird (13), Kay Boyle (42), Robert C. Brown (15), Kenneth Burke (84), Cid Corman (40), Robert Creeley (38), e. e. cummings (5), Nancy Cunard (7), Edward Dahlberg (41), Babette Deutsch (48), Hilda Doolittle (4), Richard Eberhart (36), Lawrence Ferlinghetti (18), Charles-Henri Ford (5), Allen Ginsberg (15), Mimi Goldberg (20), Joe Gould (17), Josephine Herbst (5), David Ignatow (9), Randall Jarrell (5), James Laughlin (131), Denise Levertov (30), Robert Lowell (28), David Lyle (29), Robert McAlmon (60), David McDowell (9), Norman Macleod (57), H. L. Mencken (3), Thomas Merton (2), Henry Miller (1), Marianne Moore (42), Merrill Moore (14), Marcia Nardi (30), Henry Niese (8), Anaïs Nin (7), Dorothy Norman (9), Charles Olson (16), Norman Holmes Pearson (75), Ezra Pound (216), James Purdy (6), Carl Rakosi (9), John Crowe Ransom (9), Kenneth Rexroth (19), Charles Reznikoff (5), Theodore Roethke (37), Charles Sheeler (30), Gertrude Stein (1), Wallace Stevens (12), Alfred Stieglitz (2), Allen Tate (15), John Thirlwall (26), Charles Tomlinson (13), Byron Vazakas (21), José Garcia Villa (12), Ben Weber (5), Theodore Weiss (18), Henry W. Wells (12), Nathanael West (12), T. C. Wilson (12) and Louis Zukofsky (109).

Even before the agreement with Dr. Williams had been formally signed, Yale had acquired material for the collection. The setting typescript for *In the American Grain* had been purchased in 1944. In early January 1955, David McDowell had sent the setting typescripts for the *Autobiography* (1951), *The Build-Up* (1952), *Selected Essays* (1954), and *The Desert Music and Other Poems* (1954), volumes published by Random House during the brief interregnum when Williams books were not being issued by New Directions. And additions have come from other sources over the years. Edith Heal had worked closely with Dr. Williams on *I Wanted to Write a Poem* (1958), and in 1959 she gave her notes of her interviews with him—the basis for that book—along with drafts and proofs. NHP turned over his huge Williams collection of some fifty-five first and limited editions shortly after Dr. Williams's death in 1963 (his letters came with the bequest of all his correspondence in 1975). In 1966, NHP purchased and gave to Yale the copy of *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), in dust-jacket, that Dr. Williams had presented to Charles Demuth. In 1968, Thirlwall turned over some thirty-one manuscripts, typescripts and letters by or relating to Williams, and in 1969 and 1970 added the correspondence he had received in connection with his editing of the *Selected Letters* (1957). His own "William Carlos Williams and John C. Thirlwall: Record of a Ten-Year Relationship" was printed in the *Yale University Library Gazette* for July 1970. In 1972 James Laughlin kindly allowed us to make photo-copies of his important correspondence with Dr. Williams, covering the long years of their relationship, 1934–62.

Williams letters and cards, given and purchased over the years for the Williams and other collections at Yale, include ones to R.P. Blackmur (1), Keith Botsford (6), Edmund G. Brown (82), Paul Brown (1), Charles Demuth (1), Richard Eberhart (1), Charles-Henri Ford (15), Edith Heal (3), Josephine Herbst (22), *Hound & Horn* (7), Viola S. B. Jordan (62), Robert McAlmon (83), David McDowell (2), Frank McMullan (1), Louis Martz (4), Fred Millett (1), Gorham Munson (1), Henry Niese (24), Dorothy Norman (2), Donald J. Paquette (22), John K. Pearce (7), Norman Holmes Pearson (133), Ezra Pound (136), Homer L. Pound (1), Henry Roskolenko (14), Gertrude Stein (3), Ruth Stephan (11), Pauline F. Stephens (2), Alfred Stieglitz (7), John C. Thirlwall (82), Byron Vazakas (50), José Garcia Villa (8), Ben Weber (8), Theodore Weiss (1), Henry W. Wells (10), Oscar Williams (2), Mrs. W. G. Williams (30), T. C. Wilson (24), *Yale Poetry Review* (5) and Louis Zukofsky (225).

In the early years of their correspondence, on November 7, 1940, NHP had written to Dr. Williams:

So help me God—and I say this with dead seriousness—I know that your stuff stands strong and secure. You have your audience; you will always have your audience. You'll see it grow before you kick off; and I'll see it grow (and help to nurse it) for a little while longer than that (given normal, non-insurance, expectancy. . . .).

Dr. Williams did indeed see his audience grow, especially in the years from 1955 to 1963, and NHP saw it mushroom before he died in 1975. From 1955 the Williams materials at Yale have been widely used by an ever-increasing number of scholars working on American literature of the contemporary period. Writings of Williams have been published for the first time from manuscripts at Yale in the collected *Paterson* (1963), *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (1974), *A Recognizable Image* (1978), and other books, as well as in almost countless articles. There have been few serious books and essays written about Williams during the past twenty years that have not made use of the Yale collection. Now that the importance of Williams's contribution has been generally recognized—even in England—it seems reasonable to expect that these manuscripts, letters, books and periodicals will continue to be of great value, both documentary and inspirational, to future scholars.