

Selected Letters of Rebecca West.

Edited, Annotated and Introduced by Bonnie Kime Scott. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000. 546 pp. \$35.00.

This selection of letters from Rebecca West, the “novelist-newshen” (335) whose writing career spanned from 1907 to 1983, presents keen glimpses into not only her own biography but also into the political concerns of liberal thinkers through much of the twentieth century, as well as the consolidation of literary modernism. As a journalist for more than half a century and a fiction writer from the years of naturalism and modernism to post-World War II realism, West was acquainted with scores of writers, intellectuals, and political figures in England, the United States, and elsewhere and seemed to correspond with almost all of them. The volume’s editor, Bonnie Kime Scott, estimates that West wrote 10,000 letters in her lifetime, and she has done scholarship a fine service in collecting these representative 203 from multiple and distant archives. West wrote to everyone from Anaïs Nin, whom she calls in a letter to George Orwell “the only real genius I have ever known in my life” (208), to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., with whom she had such a violent dispute about the extent of her anti-Communism that she compares him to Goebbels (273). Scott has given us letters that demonstrate West’s renowned wit, as well as her melodramatic streak, her irritability, her incisive political mind, her literary critical assumptions, and her ability to write crackling prose. The collection covers disparate topics, presenting an idiosyncratic but intriguing portrait of this writer and her era.

West sums up her family’s connections to writing thus:

I write because all my family do, it is in the blood. My father [Charles Fairfield] was an Army officer...who became a follower of Herbert Spencer and thus drifted into political journalism and the writing of books. Both my elder sisters write—my eldest sister Letitia Fairfield is a doctor of medicine and a lawyer, who...is making her mark as a writer on crime. My other sister [Winifred] is a poet of great distinction who hardly ever bothers to publish anything. I started writing in my teens in Feminist publications, and have gone on and on. (289)

This family sketch neglects West's mother, Isabella, whose talent was music rather than writing. West grew up among cultured family members in London and Edinburgh but in often deep poverty because of her father's gambling; he left the family when West was eight years old and died, alone and destitute, when she was thirteen. Some of the letters in this volume rehearse West's struggles with her family of origin, with particularly pointed and poignant representations of sister Lettie. To her West wrote: "Because of Papa's shortcomings, you were given a degree of authority over Winnie and myself that wasn't usual or wholesome, and...that has given you a tendency to behave with a kind of fussiness and bossiness" (83). To her nephew, Norman Macleod, Winnie's son, West wrote that Lettie: "has always talked indiscreetly...gone to see my lawyer and my doctors and my friends and my employees without telling me to talk about my affairs behind my back, and has never, never done anything to help me in any difficulty...I cannot tell you how much trouble she has been to me" (330-31). Letters to multiple recipients on the same topic such as these reveal how much West shaped her comments to her audience; the last excerpt above also indicates the level of self-pity and self-dramatization of which West was capable.

This volume presents many more letters about the families that West herself created than about her family of origin. Some correspondence with H.G. Wells charts the drama of their 10-year relationship and their continuing affection and squabbles after this time. (It does not give as full a portrait as Gordon Ray's *H.G. Wells and Rebecca West*, which is largely composed of Wells's letters to West; he destroyed most of hers to him.) A typescript of a letter from early in their relationship, 1913, indicates West's deep attachment and pain: "I always knew that you would hurt me to the death some day, but I hoped to choose the time and place.... You've literally ruined me. I'm burned down to my foundations" (21). Upon his death in 1946, West summed up her grief to a friend, Emanie Arling: "Dear H.G., he was a devil, he ruined my life, he starved me, he was an inexhaustible source of love and friendship to me for thirty-four years, we should never have met, I was the one person he cared to see to the end, I feel desolate because he has gone" (214). One of the reasons they remained connected, of course, was their son Anthony West, who is the recipient and subject of a significant portion of the letters in this volume. A more vexed mother-son relationship could hardly be found, and one wonders if Scott chose to include primarily letters "temperate" in tone (306), although a few venture toward more torrid territory. Letters to and about Max Aitken, the press baron Lord Beaverbrook, from their failed romance of 1923 through the end of her life, illustrate West's obsession with what she perceived as

his rejection and also a solid and enduring friendship. Many letters describe West's marriage to the banker Henry Andrews; we receive glimpses of their initial romance but hear more frequently complaints about his loss of hearing and memory, his disastrous driving, and her repeated assessments of their less-than-perfect relationship after his death.

Henry received many letters from West; those Scott chooses to include are primarily long letters chronicling her travels to France, the United States, Yugoslavia, South Africa. One can read them as preparatory material for her journalism and her encyclopedic masterwork, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), on Yugoslavia. West was involved in many of the major political and cultural events and trends of the century and had an opinion, usually a strong one, about each. The first piece in the volume is West's letter to the editor of *The Scotsman* in 1907 on the "profound national effects of the subjugation of women," written at fourteen years of age. A few of the letters document the suffrage movement; one is sent from the Fabian Summer School. By 1912, West reports to Dora Marsden, "The *Daily Herald* has seduced me into editing their Woman's Page. They are tired of baby-clothes they say, and want 'non-Gospel' talks to women" (13). During this period, West was also writing for the *Freewoman*, *The Clarion*, *The Daily News*, *The Daily Chronicle*, the *Manchester Daily Dispatch*, and other periodicals. She continued journalistic work on both sides of the Atlantic for the rest of her life, publishing in the *Evening Standard*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Bookman*, *Time and Tide*, *Ladies' Home Journal* and many other magazines and newspapers. Some of the more touching letters in the volume are addressed to Harold Ross, who published much of West's work in *The New Yorker*. He was one editor she seemed to respect and love.

Throughout these many years and publications, West tended to espouse a basic set of liberal principles. In her long and defensive rebuttal to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. after he accused her of supporting Senator McCarthy in a series of articles on Communism in the US, she quotes one of her own book reviews to outline her "creed." The passage ends: "it is the aim of liberalism to grant each individual the fullest degree of liberty which can be enjoyed without damage to the claims of liberty justly presented by other individuals" (274). Even during her early years writing as a socialist-feminist, West's thinking rested on an individualist base, as in the uproarious piece of 1912, "A New Woman's Movement: The Need for Riotous Living" in which she counsels "selfishness" among women as a possible "source of danger to the State" (133). As early as 1924, she describes Emma Goldman to Beaverbrook as "the most powerful anti-Bolsh eyewitness I have yet encountered" (78), signaling her rejection

of the Soviet experiment, and the beginning of the anti-communism that would surge after World War II. Many long letters attest to this point of view, and also demonstrate West's increasingly conspiratorial imagination. Betrayal was one of her great themes, the political variety forming the subject of her studies *The Meaning of Treason* (1947) and *The New Meaning of Treason* (1964) as well as the novel she claims to like best of all her fiction, *The Birds Fall Down* (1966) (440). Her liberal principles also had made her a staunch anti-fascist. Scott summarizes some of West's concerns of 1930-45—"differences among the factions in the Spanish Civil War, Ireland's position during the war, the Italianization of Albania, a long series of accommodations to Hitler, and wartime conditions in Britain" (129)—but with the exception of the latter, these issues are not very well represented in the selection of letters in this volume. We do learn of West's efforts to help Walter Landau, a Jewish medical specialist, flee Nazi Germany, and her continuing engagement with Yugoslavia, including aiding Balkan refugees. Later in her life, her travels took West to South Africa, where she investigated the "injustice of life" under apartheid (353), and to Mexico, about which she planned to write a study on the order of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, but which she never completed. Of the Yucatan she says: "I love the people, they keep so cheerful and derisive and independent on ghastly land," and confirms her sense of the absurdity of governments to provide for the real needs of their citizens (428). Like many intellectuals of her generation, West migrated over the decades from Left to Right, in part due to the horrors of World War II, and espoused what appeared to be contradictory political positions. What she termed her "obstinate liberalism" (297) resolved these contradictions in her own mind if not in others'.

In her fiction as in her journalism West was deeply engaged with many forms of "reality." Some of her fictional works could be classed as experimental modernism—*Harriet Hume*, *The Return of the Soldier*, *The Judge*—but although she was interested in the world of the spirit, she never broke with a mimeticist aesthetic. This put her at odds with some of the writers who came to be known as the High Modernists. We do not learn very much from this collection of letters directly about West's fiction or her writing process, except that writing was often arduous and complicated by many illnesses, but we do gain insights about her aesthetic assumptions and sense of her position among her contemporaries. One of the modernists West strongly and repeatedly censures is T. S. Eliot. In 1973, writing to the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Arthur Crook, about why her writing has been less successful than she wished it to be, she says: "you are right, I do care above all for reality. What chance did that give me in a world dominated by Eliot, who did not care for reality, who only cared to give out passes that certified the holder to be respectful

of reality. I couldn't bear him or his work" (440). Writing to H. D. scholar Norman Holmes Pearson in 1956, she gives an explanation for the critical neglect of Bryher, but could be speaking of herself: "Bryher was ignored because the influence of T. S. Eliot has been to make people distrust writers who have any substance to their work—who have anything to say. If a critic is as unsure of himself as Eliot he dislikes work that is different from other recognized work and cannot therefore be judged by reference to some handy precedent" (313).

Ezra Pound is another writer portrayed unfavorably in West's later reminiscences. In a letter to a biographer of Harriet Shaw Weaver, Jane Lidderdale, West spells out at length what she perceived to be Pound's machinations in undermining her authority at the *Freewoman*, on the staff of which she had secured him a position (400-04). In a letter to biographer and scholar Richard Ellmann, West recounts some of the intrigue surrounding her essay on James Joyce, "The Strange Necessity," about which Joyce and William Carlos Williams were full of "resentment." West claims that she held "reverence" for Joyce, but says, "I neither think that *Ulysses* is the only book in the world or believe that the hope of literature lies in the adoption of its form. (He is perhaps the one genius who invented a form and exhausted its possibilities at the same time.) It is simply a work of genius, and that is surely enough" (327). Other controversies involve Arnold Bennett and Evelyn Waugh. Letters to many other authors and cultural figures appear in this volume, including: Ford Madox Ford, Sinclair Lewis, Dora Marsden, Jill Craigie, Nancy Cunard, John Gunther, Janet Flanner, Emily Hahn, Dorothy Thompson, Winifred Holtby, J. B. Priestley, Viscountess Rhondda, Bertrand Russell, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, George Bernard Shaw, and Lionel Trilling. There exist references and discussions of many more.

Part of the pleasure of this volume of letters is similar to that derived from reading West's journalism; audacity, impertinence, and wit appear in letters to just about everyone: to Ingrid Bergman about Roberto Rossellini, "You may love your husband very much, but you should face the fact that he has no talent" (268); to a Mr. Pribicevic in response to his review of *Black Lamb*, "The trouble about you, my lad, is that you are beautiful but dumb. Your review shows that you did not understand a page of my book" (189); to Colonel Bridge of the British Council, "I am not at all happy about the tour in Austria, Jugoslavia, and Greece from which I have just returned. It was in great part a waste of your money and my time" (154). This last she spells out in a letter of 6000 words (not all of which Scott reproduces, sensibly). West was brilliant, irascible, outspoken, empathetic, caring, sensitive, and scornful. These qualities appear in abundance in the selection of letters Scott has chosen.

The volume itself is well-edited but has some unfortunate problems. The apparatus includes a useful set of biographical sketches, a chronology of West's life, and a less useful genealogical tree. The biographical introductions to the six sections are brief but adequate. Victoria Glendinning's *Rebecca West: A Life* and Carl Rollyson's *Rebecca West: A Saga of the Century* are useful to have handy while reading the letters to gain a sense of the contexts for many of the events recounted. Given that West's range of references are extremely broad, the letters call for many footnotes, and Scott does an admirable job attempting to supply the reader with needed information. These footnotes are often wonderfully scholarly; at other times they seem insufficient and occasionally simply odd, as if scribbles toward a footnote made their way into the text. For example, West refers in an early letter to an excursion with a friend named "Nelly." The footnote not only identifies her as "Nelly Porter" who had studied with West's sister Lettie, which is useful, but adds: "After her marriage she went to live in the Outer Hebrides" (7). It is difficult to imagine a circumstance in which a scholar, or even an interested general reader, might like to know where Nelly, who is mentioned in only one other letter in the volume, resided in her married years. Two letters appear about the controversy with Arnold Bennett, at the end of the second of which appears a cryptic footnote: "Bennett was unperturbed in his reply." One wishes for at least a flavor of his response to West (105). The index is frustratingly flawed with transpositions and inaccuracies. And more minor spelling and other errors exist in the volume than ought to exist. One of the principal characters in West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Gerda appears in a footnote as "Greta" (178); William Butler Yeats's name is spelled "Years" in another footnote (406). One does not expect such errors in a volume from Yale University Press. On the whole, however, Scott is to be commended for having made accessible quite a few of West's letters on key topics of her life and the twentieth century, in a collection that will be enjoyed by scholars and interested readers alike.

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