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Selected Letters of Martha Gellhorn Ed. by Caroline Moorehead

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Selected Letters of Martha Gellhorn Ed. by Caroline Moorehead (2006, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 544 pages, \$32.50). Reviewed by Kevin Ostoyich, Valparaiso University, Department of History.

She was a hack writer. Martha Gellhorn – novelist, war correspondent, and onetime wife of Ernest Hemingway – described herself as such. It turns out in addition to “bilging” (her term) *The Trouble I’ve Seen*, *The Wine of Astonishment*, *The Weather in Africa*, and *Travels with Myself and Another*, Gellhorn also penned a mountain of letters. She corresponded with a veritable Who’s Who of art, literature, journalism, and politics: including among others, Bernard Berenson, Leonard Bernstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, H.G. Wells, and, of course, Hemingway. Caroline Moorehead, author of *Gellhorn: A Twentieth-Century Life*, presents over five hundred pages of Gellhorn’s letters. The letters date from 1930 (as Gellhorn, fresh out of Bryn Mawr, began her literary career in France) to 1996 (when she was an octogenarian living in London). The collection provides a clear window into the life of a writer. The author’s pain and frustration are on display as Gellhorn recounts chucking draft after draft of “cement” prose into the wastebasket. The letters are not solely about the writing process, however, but cover the gamut of the human condition in times of war and peace. Life is presented in microcosmic detail: the laundry (often dirty) of domestic life, the wear of social hobnobbing, the excitement of love, and bitterness of the love lost. Life is also presented on a macrocosmic scale – often through the prism of war. The broadness of theme is equaled by geographic swathe. The reader is whisked on a world tour of sorts, as the intrepid Gellhorn visits China, Cuba, England, France, Israel, Kenya, Mexico, and the Soviet Union among other destinations. Moorehead writes that in the early 1970s Gellhorn “calculated that she had been to fifty-five countries, twenty-four of them more than once, and had established eleven permanent homes” (372). Martha Gellhorn was a tourist in the century of violence. As a war correspondent Gellhorn often saw countries in times of horror: Czechoslovakia, Finland, Spain, and Vietnam, for example. She recorded her intimate relationship with war in her letters. She wrote to understand why humans are so intent on killing one another. Inundated with scenes of horror (such as those she saw at the concentration camp at Dachau days after its liberation), she clung to any sliver of hope for the “little man” in history. It was only the

dignity of the oppressed, the wronged, and the battered that enabled her to survive in a world full of hypocrisy and brute force.

In the 1930s and 1940s the brash, young Gellhorn threw herself into war. She wrote articles for Collier's and had a knack for finding conflict. In 1939, for example, Collier's sent her to Finland. Naturally, the day after her arrival, the Russo-Finnish War broke out. She thrived on war. Not that she had a passion for blood – she condemned anyone who found meaning in war – but rather, she yearned for the noble spirit of average people who defended their freedom against predators. One war above all others defined her life: the Spanish Civil War. This war represented to Gellhorn the primary struggle of human experience: Democracy and all that was good against Fascism and all that was evil. Her lifelong hatred of fascists was matched only by that which she felt for their appeasers. Neville Chamberlain, for example, had “a face like a nutcracker and a soul like a weasel.” “How long,” she asked H.G. Wells in 1938, “are the English going to put up with these bastards who run the country?” (64). Later she wrote again to Wells,

Gellhorn is renouncing England....I detest your ruling class, really thoroughly and seriously. I despise them as mercenary and without any desires except those concerned with holding on to what they've got....Spain is a paradise of reason and generosity and the finer things of the spirit compared to that green isle. (66- 67)

During the 1930s in Spain and Czechoslovakia she witnessed firsthand the major Western powers give in to fascism. In October 1938 she wrote to the editor of Collier's:

The story of Czechoslovakia is, really and finally, the story of the dishonesty of the Chamberlain government and the cowardice of Daladier: but I am writing you a picture of a destroyed state, practically calling the lost sugar beet fields and coal mines and railroads by name, practically naming the refugees who are homeless and in desperate danger. It is the grimmest and most complicated story I ever saw: and worst of all, the war is now certain, and when it comes it will be a far worse war. (68).

The memory of the Spanish Civil War embedded itself in Gellhorn's heart and mind. The War had given her a blueprint for understanding the world. In later years, as she covered other wars, she would return to Spain in her letters. This was especially the case with Vietnam. For Gellhorn, Vietnam was the Spanish Civil War of the 1960s: “In entirely different ways, Spain and Vietnam are the same for me – it's as if my intestines were twined around those wars” (323). As she witnessed the destruction of Vietnam, She lost all respect for a United States that now resembled Nazi Germany:

Two things are unendurable, both happened in our lifetime: the indescribable horror of the Nazis, and what we are doing to Vietnam, and have done. And the righteousness of both the Nazis and ourselves is beyond my powers to condemn, an abomination on the earth (331).

What she hated most about the United States was the hypocrisy of the country's actions: “Yes, the

Vietnam war would be better if those turds who govern us (all four of them) said simply: America Uber Alles, and were honest turds” (321). By the early 1970s her assessment could not have been more bleak: “Democracy needs to be re-invented in the United States” (375).

As the Spanish Civil War set her moral compass of the world, closer to home she came to know two individuals who would set this compass for her personal life. First she was introduced to Eleanor Roosevelt, who according to Moorehead, was a “college friend of [Gellhorn’s] mother’s” (29). Martha corresponded with “Mrs. R.” until the latter’s death in November 1962. In Roosevelt, Martha saw all that was dignified in mankind. Just like the embattled and deserted Republicans in Spain, Mrs. R was a lonely, noble spirit surrounded by brutality. On the day after Mrs. R.’s death, Martha wrote candidly to Adlai Stevenson:

I always thought she was the loneliest human being I ever knew in my life; and so used to bad treatment, beginning with her mother (she spoke of her mother with love; I hated her mother) and going right on that it did not occur to her to ask for anything for herself. Not ever. I’ve wept for her often; and been shaken with anger for her too; and I never liked the President, nor trusted him as a man, because of how he treated her. (296).

In Mrs. R. Martha Gellhorn found her “saint” (296), in Ernest Hemingway she found her sinner.

Gellhorn met Ernest Hemingway when he was married to his second wife Pauline. It was not long before Hemingway and Gellhorn were living together in Cuba. At this time Gellhorn struggled as a novelist and found that she could only make money writing as a war correspondent (again, the “hack” writing). Gellhorn, never one to puff up her own work, frequently voiced her frustration with her prose. Gellhorn’s surfeit of difficulty and lack of confidence made a poor fit with the extreme bravado of Hemingway. He, too, wrote with great strain and effort, but possessed a self-assuredness as pronounced as Gellhorn’s self-deprecation: “He likewise believes in himself and his writing as if it were the tablets of stone or the true God...” (85). Martha Gellhorn submitted herself while Hemingway wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Afterwards Gellhorn married Hemingway in November 1940. They lived in Cuba but were often apart, Gellhorn’s work taking her to war-torn Europe. The marriage burned quickly but the wounds healed slowly. Later she would confess that He had become a “maniac” during their marriage. (210). Her view of his work soured noticeably, to the point that years later she claimed, “I do not even think *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, dedicated to me, written on top of my slavery, is good” (210).

Her memories of Hemingway were painful and ugly: “I left him because he became contemptible, apart from me; and I could not stop him nor protect anyone and I despised him....Ernest had a theory that brutality was all women understood; if they seemed recalcitrant (like me) they only needed to be beaten more” (210). Given Hemingway’s celebrity and expanding aura after suicide, Gellhorn would always have to wear their brief marriage as an albatross. She was frequently asked by scholars to

comment on Hemingway and she usually refused to do so. Especially irksome was her discovery in 1977 that many letters addressed to her from friends had wound up in the Hemingway collection in Massachusetts. Her response: "I want it all buried. I cannot bear the past" (424). The bird weighed so heavily that when Carl Rollyson wrote an unauthorized biography of Gellhorn, she furiously chalked it up to yet another attempt "to cash in on the bottomless Hemingway market." She scowled that "if I hadn't been married (4 years) to E.H., this creep would have left me alone. Hell hath no fury like E.H. scorned and I'll never escape from him and it really is bitterly unfair" (488).

Hemingway was by no means the only man in Gellhorn's life. She gravitated to influential (and married) men. She joked to one of them (David Gurewitsch) that "I tend to collect kings" (208). In 1987 she wrote to her trusted friend Betsy Drake:

I had one lifelong rule, though being a specialist in married men. I never knew the wives, I was never a friend of the wives; the same applied to any woman who was a friend – her man was hers (471).

In fact, Gellhorn always felt more comfortable in the company of males than females. She noted to Drake:

One thing you always forget about me: I grew up with 3 brothers, I was treated like a second class male, by them, I got used to being one of the boys very early. Mainly I like the society of men because I'm interested in what they do; women's work – with exceptions – isn't my bag. (472)

Gellhorn refused to play the "woman's" role. Nor did she bother much with etiquette and propriety. Given her trailblazer status in the history of female journalists, one may be surprised by her views on the sexes:

What breaks my heart...is that all the good young writers are men, every damn one. As if women were wilting back or out; or maybe honestly women never had a chance, due to their inescapable biology. I would have died rather than admit this, twenty years ago; but I'm beginning to fear it. There can never be equality; and only the very rarest women, in a sui generis way, can ever match the vitality and courage and humor and inventiveness of the best men. (325)

Above all, Gellhorn stressed the importance of the individual, regardless of gender. She respected those who, like herself, carved out their own path and she detested anyone whom she deemed "dependant." Thus, it did not concern her that she was one of the first female war correspondents. She thought of herself as a war correspondent, period.

The letters reveal – as only private letters can – the individual mind with all its quirks and blemishes. Gellhorn had a penchant for "colorful" language (Moorehead informs us that Ernest Hemingway's son John (or "Bumby") claimed that Martha Gellhorn was the first lady he ever heard "use the 'f' word") (44). She often makes statements that reveal an element of class and racial condescension – especially

present when referring in her letters to her African servants. These statements, however jarring to the twenty-first-century reader, should be read within the context of Gellhorn's time and social milieu. She always kept at least one foot out of this milieu, however. For although born into the comfortable household of the "distinguished gynecologist and obstetrician" George Gellhorn, educated at Bryn Mawr, and acquainted with members of high society throughout her life, Gellhorn was no society girl. Gellhorn did not have kind words for Bryn Mawr, used "Yale" as code for preposterous pretension, loathed high society stuffiness, and much preferred the noble spirit of ordinary people. Gellhorn, it should also be noted, thought that there was nothing special about whites or Western Civilization. Her work as a war correspondent in Europe and Vietnam provided ample evidence of Western barbarism.

Caroline Moorehead has performed a Herculean task in gathering Gellhorn's correspondence from ten repositories in three countries and six states. Gellhorn, herself, once quipped that her correspondence would span as many volumes as Dickens' oeuvre (321). Moorehead has thankfully spared us from the repetition that would no doubt result from Dickensian comprehensiveness. Moreover, she has edited the text of the letters themselves in order to keep things moving along. Academic purists will cry foul over such prunings. Let them cry. The result is effective. The collection is very readable; despite its five hundred-page girth, the collection is neither leaden nor ponderous. Most readers (myself included) will appreciate the job Moorehead has done to make the letters read with a fluidity approaching that of a novel. As editor, she is present throughout the volume without being meddlesome. She provides a chronology, introductions for sections, and identifies persons and cryptic allusions in footnotes.

However, this editorial skill is lacking in the three-page preface. Although it will be sufficient for some readers, I believe that most will lament the lack of a broader contextual commentary, historiographical overview, and bibliographical information. For such material, readers will have to seek out Moorehead's *Gellhorn: A Twentieth-Century Life*. Fair enough. However, some more preliminary guidance would have been helpful. As it stands, the preface forces the reader to connect too many of the dots in the five hundred pages that follow. Readers are assisted in this endeavor, however, by an excellent index.