Guide to the Maurice Lesemann Papers, 1918-1986

Collection number: M0375

Department of Special Collections and University Archives
Stanford University Libraries
Stanford, California

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Descriptive Summary
Title: Maurice Lesemann Papers,
Date (inclusive): 1918-1986
Collection number: Special Collections M0375
Creator: Lesemann, Maurice, 1899-1981.
Extent: .75 linear ft.
Repository: Stanford University. Libraries. Dept. of Special Collections and University Archives.
Language: English.

Access Restrictions
None.

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Provenance

Preferred Citation:
[Identification of item] Maurice Lesemann Papers, M0375, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

Biographical Note: Maurice Lesemann
Maurice Lesemann was born on November 28, 1899, in Chicago, Illinois, the son of Dr. Louis F. W. Lesemann, a Methodist clergyman and educator with the position of Dean at the Garrett Biblical Institute of Northwestern University.

Educated in the public schools of Chicago and Evanston, Lesemann subsequently attended the University of Chicago, earning his B.A. in 1923. At the University he was active in and served as president of the University of Chicago Poetry Club. The group affiliated with the Club, mostly students, included Yvor Winters, Janet Lewis, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, novelist and poet Glenway Wescott, poet Pearl Andelson Sherry, poet Kathleen Foster Campbell, Curator of the Museum of Modern Art Monroe Wheeler. Several of the Poetry Club members were contributors to Poetry Magazine, published and edited by Harriet Monroe with the help of her assistant Alice Corbin Henderson, who later became a central figure in the literary life of Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico.
Lesemann was in New Mexico from 1920-1922, taking two years away from college in order to visit Winters and Glenway Wescott, who had gone to New Mexico in response to Winters’ enthusiastic description of the mountains and desert. After his arrival, Lesemann taught school at Cerrillos, at that time a small, mostly Hispanic, coal camp near Santa Fe. In 1922, Winters was teaching high school at Madrid, another coal camp not far away.

A promising member of the Chicago Poetry Club, Lesemann was a perfectionist whose finished work, in his eyes, was never worthy of publication. He did contribute a number of poems to Poetry Magazine, winning that magazine's Young Poet's Prize in 1920 and later the Witter Bynner Prize and the Levinson Prize in 1927. Although never collected together in one book, Lesemann's verse has appeared in various magazines and anthologies over the years.

After graduation, Lesemann entered the advertising profession and was associated with it until his retirement in 1959. He was married in 1926 and shortly thereafter moved to Southern California where he lived for the rest of his life. His widow, Marjorie, resides in La Crescenta. One son, Dr. Frederick Lesemann, is a composer and professor in the School of Music at the University of Southern California.

In addition to a considerable collection of verse, he left behind a large work, a poem, which he called The Odd Planet. The last years of his life were devoted to writing a novel, Stranger at Saddlerock, as yet unpublished, about life in Northern New Mexico, that area which has had such an enormous influence on the lives of many writers, a number of them Lesemann’s friends -- Witter Bynner, Alice Corbin Henderson, Yvor Winters, Janet Lewis, and Lynn Riggs, among others.

After several years of frail health, he died on October 2, 1981, from heart failure, at La Crescenta, California.

May 1984

Biographical Note: Elizabeth Madox Roberts

Elizabeth Madox Roberts was born on October 30, 1881, in Perryville, Kentucky, to Simpson and Mary Brent Roberts, descendants of Kentucky pioneers who had trekked into Kentucky through Boone’s Trace in the 18th century. Her father was a combination of scholar, schoolteacher, farmer, and surveyor whose enthusiasm for classical culture and the philosophical idealism of Berkeley, along with his awareness of the family’s involvement in Kentucky and American history, strongly affected the intellectual framework of his daughter in her formative years.

She spent her high school years in Covington, Kentucky, living at her grandmother Brent's between 1896-1900, then six more years in Colorado for her health, before entering the University of Chicago in 1917. While at Chicago she became attached to a group of writers in the Poetry club, among them Yvor Winters, Janet Lewis, Maurice Lesemann, Glenway Wescott, and Monroe Wheeler, and was accepted as a contributing poet in Harriet Monroe's magazine, Poetry. A member of Phi Beta Kappa, she was awarded the Fiske Prize of the University of Chicago in 1921, graduating from the University that same year. The Fiske Prize poems were later gathered into one of her first volumes of poetry. She won the John Reed Memorial Prize of Poetry in 1928 and the Poetry Society of South Carolina Prize in 1931. In addition to her gifts in poetry, she had exceptional talent in the shorter forms of fiction and, in 1930, won the O. Henry Memorial Volume short-short story prize.

Occasionally criticized as mystical and obscure, she maintained, nevertheless, the integrity of a subtle and rhythmic style, feminine and lyrical, rich in the power of suggestion. A poet in her early years, Roberts later developed into a mature and effective prose writer. The Time of Man, her first novel (1926), is a story of poor whites in Kentucky possessed by the pioneer urge and is considered by many critics to be her finest novel. The second novel, My Heart and My Flesh (1927), set against a pastoral background, is a tragic story of a woman driven to the verge of madness. The Great Meadow (1930), a historical novel, depicts the terror and beauty of pioneer life in Kentucky.

Elizabeth Madox Roberts was essentially a Kentuckian, although she lived for long periods in New York and California. She never married. Her instinct for the folk speech of her native state and her talent for the precise and effective description of Kentucky’s folk customs have made her a writer of authentic regional power with an international reputation.

Troubled in her last years by chronic anemia and Hodgkin's disease, Roberts was denied both critical and commercial success. She died in Orlando, Florida, on March 13, 1941, and was buried in Springfield, Kentucky.

Her books include: In the Great Steep's Garden, 1915 (poetry); Under the Tree 1922 (poetry); The Time of Man 1926; My Heart and My Flesh, 1927; Jingling in the Wind, 1928; The Great Meadow, 1930; A Buried Treasure, 1931; The Haunted Mirror, 1931 (short stories); He Sent Forth a Raven 1935; Black is My True Love's Hair, 1938; Song in the Meadow, 1940 (poetry); Not by Strange Gods, 1941.

Scope and Content Notes

The Maurice Lesemann papers are composed primarily of letters from the poet-novelist Elizabeth Madox Roberts, letters from the poet-critic Yvor Winters, a letter from Janet Lewis, and poems by Winters and Roberts. The correspondence takes place between 1919 and 1933, with most of the Winters letters being written in 1919 and the Roberts letters between 1919 and 1933. The collection is arranged alphabetically by the author.
While Winters was recovering from tuberculosis in Santa Fe, New Mexico, he was kept informed by Lesemann, in Chicago, of the writing activities of their mutual friends in Chicago and of the Poetry Club to which several of them belonged. Despite his illness, Winters was intensely interested in the new publications, and experiments, of Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and H.D., among others, comparing them favorably with some of the greats in his own memory: Chaucer, Hawthorne, James, Hardy. Many of Winters' letters contain informal commentary on the writers of the day, and their writing styles, with strong advice from Winters on whom to read and whom to avoid. Winters demanded lucidity and integrity from American literary artists, particularly those of his acquaintance. A sensitive artist, he was also a discerning critic who was strongly moved to share his views. He shares many of them in these letters to Lesemann. He thought highly of Yeats, for example, thinking his recently published Wild Swans at Coole to be first-rate. Yet Conrad, in his eyes, did not have nearly the power of Joyce or Lewis.

Elizabeth Madox Roberts, writing many of her letters from Springfield, Kentucky, also kept in touch with the Chicago group through Lesemann. Several of her poems accompany the letters, in addition to a few critical reviews of her work and the contents arrangement for a proposed volume of her poetry. She included with her letters several poems written by Pearl Andelson (another member of the Poetry Club) which she wished to share with Lesemann. Roberts was one of Kentucky's great writers and in many of her letters she describes the frustrations she encountered with critics and publishers as well as the creative impulses generating her work. She frequently refers to her poems as butterbeans.

The papers also include two letters from Elizabeth Madox Roberts to Wilbur Lesemann, the nephew of Maurice Lesemann, and one letter from Janet Lewis to Maurice Lesemann.

For additional biographical material, see
Campbell, Harry Modean; and Foster, Ruel E. *Elizabeth Madox Roberts*. Norman, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press. 1956.

Hicks, G. *The Great Tradition*


Rovit, Earl H. *Herald to Chaos; The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts*. Lexington, Kentucky, University of Kentucky Press. 1960. (Includes Bibliography.)


**Box 1, Folder 1**

*Janet Lewis to Maurice Lesemann, letters ca. 1926*

Physical Description: (1 letter)

**Box 1, Folder 2**

*Elizabeth Madox Roberts to Maurice Lesemann; letters and manuscripts*

1919

Physical Description: (1 letter and 4 poems)

**Box 1, Folder 3**

1920

Physical Description: (10 letters)

**Box 1, Folder 4**

1921, Jan-Feb

Physical Description: (9 letters and 3 poems)

**Box 1, Folder 5**

1921, Mar-Oct

Physical Description: (9 letters and 2 poems)

**Box 1, Folder 6**

1921, Oct-Dec

Physical Description: (4 letters and 3 poems)

**Box 1, Folder 7**

1922

Physical Description: (10 letters and 6 poems)

**Box 1, Folder 8**

1923, Jan-Aug

Physical Description: (7 letters)
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<thead>
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<th>Container</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Physical Description</th>
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</thead>
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<td>1923, Aug-Dec</td>
<td>(6 letters)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 10</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>(3 letters)</td>
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<td>1932-33</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Madox Roberts to Wilbur Lesemann, 1927.</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Madox Roberts,</td>
<td>29 poems.</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Madox Roberts,</td>
<td>5 book reviews.</td>
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<td>Arthur Yvor Winters to Maurice Lesemann, 1918-1919.</td>
<td>(21 letters, 2 poems)</td>
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<td>Box 1, Folder 21</td>
<td>Arthur Yvor Winters to Maurice Lesemann, 1920</td>
<td>(2 letters)</td>
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<td>Arthur Yvor Winters to Maurice Lesemann, 1921-1922</td>
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<td>Yvor Winters, Six-Syllable Poems, n.d.</td>
<td>(7 poems)</td>
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| Box 2 | Gift of Marjorie Lesemann 20 February 1992 | Scope and Content Note
An addition of 5 linear feet to the papers of Maurice Lesemann including incoming correspondence, 1918 - 1986, and an unpublished typescript of the novel, Stranger at Saddlerock, n.d.
Correspondents include Kathleen Foster Campbell, 1918 - 1986 (8 letters and 1 poem); Glenway Wescott, 1918 - 1920 and n.d. (52 letters and 1 poem); and Monroe Wheeler, 1918 - 1968 (19 letters).