Stuart Wright:
A Life In Collecting

September 7, 2011
A Message from the Dean

Like Tom Douglass, I first met Stuart Wright when I stepped off the train with my wife Sue in Ludlow, England—the English country squire waiting for us soon proved to be a Southern Gentleman in exile. In fact, I think this was confirmed the night Sue prepared “southern fried chicken” and mashed potatoes. Stuart asked for the recipe after his first helping, feasted on the leftovers for several days, and said it stirred memories in him from long ago.

On our short visit to 28 Old Street, Stuart showed and told us as much as we could absorb about the extraordinary collection of southern American literature that he hoped would eventually come to East Carolina University and Joyner Library. I was delighted with what I saw and heard and carefully calculated how much space we would need to house the collection if we could agree on price and terms. Being only acquainted with the work of some of the authors like Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, and Eudora Welty, I could not truly appreciate the importance of the book collection or the exceptional quality of the many boxes of letters, journals, and manuscripts that comprised the collection.

Fortunately, Tom Douglass could and he and Stuart spent many hours poring over the materials and discussing their significance while I could only listen in amazement. My amazement and delight have only increased markedly since the collection has come to Joyner Library. After another visit with Stuart in Ludlow, this time accompanied by Maury York, Assistant Director for Special Collections, our enthusiasm for the collection and admiration for Stuart have increased tremendously.

Joyner Library has been extraordinarily fortunate in acquiring the Stuart Wright Collection. Without Stuart’s patience, his desire to keep the collection together, and his willingness to part with it for far less than its actual value, literary researchers would not be making their way to our university and library to work amongst this treasure trove of southern American literature. I am so thankful to Stuart for his commitment to literature and bibliography, to Tom for his unselfish dedication to this endeavor, and to Maury and our Special Collections team for their skill in cataloging and preserving this remarkable collection.

Sincerely,
Larry Boyer, Dean
Academic Library and Learning Resources

East Carolina University

STUART WRIGHT:
The Badger of Old Street

Stuart Wright Nowhere near Coldstream (2010) [Photo by Linda Fox]
I first met Stuart Wright on a September day in 2007 after stepping off the train in the medieval town of Ludlow in the west of England. Dressed in a tweed sport jacket, corduroy pants, a driving cap, tattersall shirt with ascot, some comfortable but durable walking shoes, a jaunty pipe packed with Rattray’s tobacco askew in his mouth, he was the picture of the perfect Englishman—or so I imagined. But I soon discovered in his gruff but matter-of-fact politeness, that he was a genuinely unreconstructed North Carolinian, not unlike the ones I knew back home.

We immediately fell into talking about my half-day’s train journey from London to Ludlow and the layout of the walled town, with its gate houses still standing and a 12th century castle at its center. We walked through the streets, past the shops, the butcher’s, the bakery, the fine bookbinder’s shop of Trevor Lloyd, on our way to 28 Old Street, a cozy 3-story brick-and-beam abode with a walled and wild English garden stretching away at some length from the kitchen window. His dark green front door with iron latch overlooked a telltale welcome mat that said “Go Away!” The church tower and castle in the center of Ludlow town, the train ride through the rolling Shropshire countryside, it was like a fairy tale, or some green and leafy warren in high summer nearby The Wind in the Willows. It wasn’t long before the small talk ended and books were turned open, the tea kettle on the stove.

All I knew about Stuart Wright then was that he had amassed an amazing collection of literary material, much of it from writers of the American South; I had been sent here on a mission by East Carolina University to assess its scholarly value. Much of this material had never been seen by scholars in the states except for those who ventured a visit to Old Street in Ludlow, like Faulkner’s biographer Joseph Blotner, who completed his Robert Penn Warren biography in 1997. I knew Wright was a collector of rare books and manuscripts, but it soon became clear that he was also a collector with a purpose.

Over the next six days, an amazing parade of books, galleys, manuscripts, and letters passed before my eyes—Robert Penn Warren’s heavily annotated ex-libris collection of all of William Faulkner; John Crowe Ransom’s personal copy of I’ll Take My Stand; Eudora Welty’s A Curtain of Green presented...
Eudora Welty

Eudora Welty (1909-2001), Pulitzer Prize-winning author and protégé of Katherine Anne Porter, received critical support and friendship from Robert Penn Warren, who wrote an influential review of her 1943 collection *The Wide Net*. Along with Porter, Caroline Gordon, and Flannery O’Connor, she made a significant contribution to 20th century American literature. Her close relationships with “Red” Warren and Katherine Anne Porter are clearly on display in the SWC.

Presentation copies of *The Eye of the Story* (1978) and *The Collected Stories* (1980) to Warren contain lengthy typed letters. Another Welty letter to Peter Taylor (16 February 1947) is tipped inside her signed copy of Taylor’s *A Long Fourth and Other Stories*.

Twenty-two Welty unpublished black-and-white snapshots include one of three young Mississippi girls tipped into her copy of *The Plays of Anton Chekhov* translated by Constance Garnett (1933); five photos of Henry Miller and friends at Windsor Ruins from the early 1940s are not the images published in *Some Notes on River Country* (2003); two photos depict Welty and friends at a picnic, 1940; six photos of Porter and friends, c.1940-41; and eight photos are from Lavenham, England, with unidentified companions on the River Brett, c.1950-51. Catching the photo bug from her father, Welty was a snapshot enthusiast from the 1930s, when she began her work with the Works Progress Administration, to the 1950s when she lost her camera on a train. In time her photography became famous, and several collections of her photographs have been published: *One Time, One Place* (1971), *Photographs* (1989), and Wright’s *Palaemon Press limited edition of Twenty Photographs* (1980), prints of previously published photographs from 1936-42.

Her story “Why I Live at the PO” was inspired by a woman she photographed ironing in the back of a small post office.

Ex-libris books include Welty’s copy of William Alexander Percy’s *Lanterns on the Levee*; *The Poems of Charles Baudelaire* signed “Eudora Welty, New Orleans, March 15, 1936”; a signed, limited edition copy of e.e. cummings’ untitled book of poems published by Covici Friede (1930); and Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel* signed “Eudora Welty New York 1935.” Several of the personal library books from her college days at the University of Wisconsin, such as Chekhov’s *Short Stories*, have significant underlining or comment.

Of biographical interest are several gift books between mother and daughter—a first edition of Welty’s *The Bride of Innisfallen* and *Other Stories* (1955) to her mother and Margaret Sydney’s *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew* (1909); “To Eudora from Mother, Christmas, 1916.” Welty’s childhood copy of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses* includes doodles and sketches throughout.

In 1984, at the urging of Wake Forest University President Thomas Hearn, Jr., Wright invited Welty along with Robert Penn Warren to receive an honorary degree, and both were hooded that spring in Winston-Salem.

I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition by Twelve Southerners (Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, et al.) is a collection of essays published in 1930 which served as one of the cornerstones of the Southern Renaissance.

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Katherine Anne Porter

Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980), Pulitzer Prize-winning author of short fiction for *The Collected Stories* (1966) and three times nominated for the Nobel Prize, was a familiar face and friend to many of the writers represented in the SWC—Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Andrew Lytle, Allen Tate, and others. The collection provides a rare glimpse into the close relationships between these writers.

For example, six photographs of Porter, dating from about 1940-41, were taken by Eudora Welty (probably at Yaddo). A photograph of Porter with Warren in Manhattan in 1962 shortly after the publication of her novel *Ship of Fools* bears this handwritten caption: “Party for Ship of Fools at ‘21.” Many presentation copies of her work have long inscriptions and some with letters tipped in, several to Warren, including *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (1935), “The Days Before” (1952), *A Christmas Story* (1958), originally published by Mademoiselle, and *Ship of Fools* (1962). Her 1967 limited edition of *A Christmas Story*, illustrated by Ben Shahn, is inscribed to Andrew Lytle, and a very rare edition of Katherine Anne Porter’s *French Song-Book* (1935), the last publication of Harrison of Paris, is inscribed to Monroe Wheeler, who was instrumental in publishing fine art from the Museum of Modern Art during the first half of the 20th century.

Other letters in the SWC from Eudora Welty to Robert Penn Warren refer to Porter and her well-being.

Alexander Percy, and the Agrarians—Andrew Lytle, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Merrill Moore, Donald Davidson, and more from the libraries of their students Randall Jarrell and Peter Taylor.

Who could own such books? I wondered, unless they came as an inheritance! But that, I finally realized, was exactly what the Stuart Wright Collection was— an inheritance that I hoped might come to rest in the west of England so far away from home?

Pieces of the how and why would come to me only in brief glimpses. Slowly, after days of tea and nonstop reading, and nights of walking the bridge over the River Teme for a pint or two at the Charlton Arms, Wright’s favorite pub, and after long talks of the writers Wright had come to know and love (writers I had only encountered on the page), I began to understand the enormity of Wright’s accomplishment as a collector.

One photograph hanging in Wright’s home, in a second story hallway, gave but a small hint at the eccentricities of my host. In it, Wright is hooding the professor who had signed Warren’s diploma from Oxford. Then there was Aaron Copland’s baby grand piano sitting in the alcove of Wright’s book-lined living room, where a formidable collection of CDs comparable to Philip Larkin’s *All That Jazz*. In the bathroom, a photo of John Updike raising Wright’s Confederate stars-and-bars up the flag pole at the Updike home in Beverly, Massachusetts, and along the second floor stair balcony a stunning array of autographed photos with dedications “to Stuart” from Ammons, Welty, and Warren; Chappell, Garrett, Styron and Updike; Peter Taylor, James Salter, Harry Crews, Barry Hannah, Mary Lee Settle, Shelby Foote, and Walker Percy.
mutual connections, tales of Faulkner’s pipe. But I was always anxious to get back to Old Street and Wright’s study to see what else might appear before me. Throughout my days there, he would offer tea and inquire if I had found “anything interesting,” all ears, though pretending not to listen as he paused to light his pipe. I would often utter unbelievable while reading through the stacks he had put out each morning for me to see.

One day, he showed me Caroline Gordon’s short story manuscript “The Fiddles and the Flutes” sent to Peter Taylor for comment and suggestion—a story that would eventually be published in The Sewanee Review as “The Waterfall” in 1950, and that would reflect much of Taylor’s input. But I was not prepared for what followed, dizzying as the variety already was: on the table in the study waiting for me one morning was a large box of envelopes, handwritten letters, telegrams, and photographs. These were Peter Taylor’s wartime letters to his soon-to-be-wife, Eleanor Ross Taylor, from 1943-1945—hundreds of them are in the SWC. His letters are beautiful to read, affectionate but also quite literary in a Jamesian sense, his style the same as in his fiction: elegant, precise, Proustian in its reflection.

Peter and Eleanor Ross Taylor met at Vanderbilt in 1943, shortly before his military tour began, and the letters trace his military experience on a near-daily basis from his stateside training to England, where he was stationed near Devon in preparation for the Normandy invasion. As he waited for orders, he wrote letters recounting his impressions of Ireland and England. He comments “the countryside which is so like Middle Tennessee” that “I am reminded constantly of my childhood on Franklin Pike, and of my days at Vanderbilt.”

Not so far from where I sat, but nearly 60 years prior, Taylor had written on April 1, 1945, to his future bride, just short of her 25th birthday:

> My life here would be relatively comfortable if I could only stop trying to write but I cannot. The only compromise I can make is that of being satisfied with making notes on stories instead of writing them. Heaven knows if I shall ever go back and write all the things I make notes on, and I suppose it doesn’t matter as long as I get it off my chest. But will I ever, ever, ever be able to really write something again? I must have a year after this war is over in which to do nothing but write. I intend to read no book, listen to no music, regard no painting. That, at least, is how full I feel of things. I am unable to write in a place where there is always a radio or chatter. I don’t dislike those or any other sociable past time for themselves, but it’s a real nuisance never to be able to escape them. Only in Salisbury on an occasional pass can I really get to myself in the library there and what writing can I, the slowest of mortals, accomplish in one day?

Other letters recount his almost meeting with T.S. Eliot and then meeting Gertrude Stein in Paris: “I was with her for more than two hours, and it was one of the most exciting two hours I’ve ever known, and when I had left her apartment and started down the stair she opened her door again and called to me with a smile, ‘Remember, face the facts.’” Because these letters are written so frequently, they also tell the day-to-day story of his friendship with the English gentleman, Mr. Abbott of Devon, and of his membership in the Churchill Club for which he was invited to give an informal talk about “the Agrarians and regional writers.” And the letters explore story ideas and discuss short stories he had submitted—“Edward, Edward,” “Rain in the Heart,” “A Sentimental Romance,” “Charcoal: Early,” and “A Notice of Death,” among others. As with many of the books in the SWC, the letters often held surprise bonuses, photos tucked inside their envelopes. Wyatt Prunty, John Casey, Ross Taylor, Daniel O’Neill, and Steven John would read excerpts from these letters at Peter Taylor’s funeral in Charlottesville in November 1994.

On day five came the Randall Jarrell manuscripts—his wartime notebooks with photos laid in and two of his poetry notebooks with entries from his last weeks in Chapel Hill before his death in 1965. The material is lucid and full of creativity—a table of contents for a new book of poetry and many unpublished fragments. Jarrell’s own copies of his published work with margin emendations and corrections lay before me to see. Especially fascinating was Jarrell’s copy of his second
James Dickey

In his sophomore year at Wake Forest University, 1967-68, Stuart Wright met James Dickey (1923-1997), who came to campus to give a reading and attend a party held by English professor, Lee Potter. Wright admired Dickey’s charm, his guitar playing poetry bravado, his success with women, especially Dickey’s success with the girl Wright himself had taken to the party. Wright then began to collect books by Dickey. Later when Wright became a faculty member at Wake Forest, he would follow Lee Potter’s example by extending invitations to contemporary writers to visit campus and read from their work, even without university authority. From his interaction with Dickey, Wright became aware of first editions and first appearances of an author’s work.

For the 1973-74 academic year, Wright secured a teaching position at Pamlico Community School. He moved to Greenville and lived at 145 Tar River Estates, frequently dining out at Darryl’s (now a parking lot) next to the Greenville Post Office on Tenth Street. In the evenings, his book habit would take him to the North Carolina Collection at ECU where librarian Minnie Marguerite Wiggins guided him through the material that most interested him, Civil War history, and all things North Carolinian and Southern.

In November of 1973, Dickey came to ECU during his bookstomring for poetry tour. Wright, then 25, served as Dickey’s “minder” and brought along his collection of Dickey first editions and other articles for Dickey to book, *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945) - heavily amended by the author. The Jarrell material makes clear his many connections to the literary world. His life-long friendships with Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor, Robie Macauley, and his admiration of Elizabeth Bishop, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom are also apparent in the Jarrell manuscripts, notebooks, and ex-libris books collected by Stuart Wright.

Jarrell’s interest in illustration and children’s books is represented by sketches, self-portraits, and correspondence with Maurice Sendak, with whom he collaborated on three books. In addition to presentation copies of two of these, *The Bat Poet* and *The Animal Family*, there is also in the SWC a presentation copy of the first edition of Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, inscribed to Randall and Mary Jarrell, with an original drawing of the book’s main character, Max.

Also remarkable is the Robert Lowell material in the SWC. Lowell, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner and former Poet Laureate (like Jarrell and Warren), was a roommate and friend of Jarrell and Taylor at Kenyon College, where they all would study under John Crowe Ransom. I held in my hands a copy of Lowell’s famous *Life Studies* inscribed to his student W.D. “Dee” Snodgrass, another future Pulitzer-winning poet. I read correspondence between the two (1957-1977) about literary and personal matters. I saw a copy of Lowell’s *Old Glory* inscribed to Randall and Mary Jarrell and a typed letter by Lowell, tipped in, a tribute to the poet written after Jarrell’s death. Other gems that had me muttering unbelievable were Lowell’s *Land of Unlikeliness* inscribed to his friend Peter Taylor; Lowell’s most anthologized poem, “For the Union Dead,” dedicated to “Red” Warren; four photographic prints of Lowell and Ransom from the mid-1960s; and a long letter from Jean Stafford Lowell in 1944 to the newly married Eleanor Ross Taylor about Lowell and their mutual friends.

Lowell’s connection to yet another Pulitzer-winning poet, Richard Eberhart, yields an extensive collection of books and manuscripts in the SWC. It was Eberhart, another Poet Laureate, who discovered the Beat poets for the rest of America in his 1957 seminal review in *The New York Times Book Review*. The collection related to him includes working manuscripts, ex-libris books, and presentation copies and letters from Frost, Warren, Lowell, John Ciardi, and Allen Ginsberg, among others.

The web of connections represented in the SWC is stunning. All of these literary treasures made me aware of Wright’s uncanny networking ability, his collegial demeanor that invited friendship and trust – “how way leads on to way” as Frost described it. In a letter from the Southern writer Barry Hannah to Wright, for example, Hannah writes, “The air is clear with you and I like it like that.” Karl Shapiro, another Pulitzer poet, dedicated his poem “Poet in Residence” to Wright: “The poet shy and bold as a bullet / Arrives at his residence / Booted and spurred / To some that man is patently impossible. / To others potentiality in person.”
Richard Eberhart

Richard Eberhart (1904-2005) was the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress immediately following Randall Jarrell and Robert Frost. He won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1966 and the National Book Award in 1977. His many literary associations include his student Robert Lowell and his mentor Robert Frost. The SWC includes 14 poems by Eberhart with holograph comments by Frost, several manuscript versions of published Eberhart essays about Frost, correspondence with John Ciardi, W.H. Auden, and T.S. Eliot, and three typescript poems sent by May Sarton to Eberhart for comment. His literary associations also include John Crowe Ransom, who encouraged Eberhart early in his career, and Robert Penn Warren, who frequently accepted Eberhart poems for The Southern Review. Of particular note in the SWC are the items associated with the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997).

In 1956, the New York Times Book Review commissioned Eberhart to assess the West Coast beat poetry scene. His article “West Coast Rhythms” (Sept. 2, 1957) helped focus national attention on this new movement in poetry, especially on the work of Ginsberg. Eberhart wrote: “The West Coast is the liveliest spot in the country in poetry today. … San Francisco teems with young poets. … The most remarkable poet of the young group, written during the past year is ‘Howl’ by Allen Ginsberg. …” The SWC includes Ginsberg’s presentation copies to Eberhart of The Fall of America with a hand drawing depicting the outline of America crying “Help!” and Collected Poems 1947-1980.

Other items in the SWC associated with Ginsberg and the Beats include an autographed copy of Howl and a double-sided single-spaced City Lights Bookstore postcard (July 11, 1959) from Ginsberg to John Ciardi. Ciardi was a columnist and poetry editor for The Saturday Review of Literature who protested the seizure of the Beat magazine Big Table founded by Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, et al. The U.S. Post Office seized the edition because of the printed excerpt from Burroughs’s Naked Lunch. Ciardi defended Big Table, calling both the University of Chicago and the U.S. Post Office “book burners.” In his column, Ciardi described Burroughs as “a writer of great power and artistic integrity engaged in a profoundly meaningful search for true values” and described the excerpt as “a masterpiece of its own genre.” On the postcard Ginsberg wrote: “…I read your editorial on Big Table and was overjoyed … your article is the first & classic.”

Eberhart portion of the SWC contains over 1200 catalog entries listing 3600 items.

Robert Eberhart

George Garrett’s dedication of Luck’s Shining Child to Wright is also a testament to Wright’s steadfast and steady work as a bibliographer, publisher, collector, university professor, and friend. Stuart Wright’s career as a littérature began soon after he earned his graduate degree at Wake Forest University. At 28, Wright was already a published historian of the Civil War and of North Carolina state history. Then he met A.R. Ammons in 1976 and thus began an association with many of the great writers of the 20th century. That year, he also established commemorative broadside folios in limited editions for Warren, Welty, Garrett, Reynolds Price, and Aaron Copland. Palaemon’s Northern Light broadside folios included new poems by W.D. Snodgrass, John Updike, James Merrill, John Ciardi, Richard Wilbur, Donald Davie, Mark Strand, Howard Nemerov, Howard Moss and Louis Simpson. Other Palaemon editions focused critical attention on the works of George Garrett, Eleanor Ross Taylor, Barry Hannah, Harry Crews, and William Goyen.

Beginning in 1978 and for the next 15 years, Wright compiled bibliographic checklists and descriptive bibliographies for Ammons, James Dickey, Eberhart, Garrett, William Goyen, Jarrell, Andrew Lytle, Robert Morgan, Walker Percy, Reynolds Price, Henry Taylor, Peter Taylor, John Updike, and Charles Wright for university presses, The Bulletin of Bibliography, and The American Book Collector. It was in these processes that he would come to own most of the titles he was listing in his published bibliographies.

While a faculty member at Wake Forest University, Wright invited many of these writers to stay at his home on Faculty Drive and to give readings at the university – Eberhart, Garrett, Updike, Price, Wilbur, Dickey, Ammons, Chappell, they all came. His office in the cupola in Wait Chapel
Some four years later I returned to Ludlow over the New Year’s holiday. Stuart and I sat before the fire, drinking wine and pints of ale, reading Larkin poems out loud, toasting to auld lang syne, and I asked my friend if he had any regrets about certain books that had gotten away, the missed opportunities of a collector, pieces he could have had. Several instances came immediately to his mind. Ruefully, he mentioned the manuscript letters from James Agee to Father Flye that was his for the asking, and two books he had owned only for a short time—the dedication copy of Lucky Jim by Kingsley Amis for his friend Philip Larkin; and the presentation copy of Red Warren’s novel All the King’s Men to his friend Lon Cheney. “I should have never let them go,” he said.

True it is, there are books that are read and admired and put back on the shelf, but then there are books that one never forgets and can never hold tight. That one man could have collected so many of these literary treasures is remarkable. Thank you, Stuart Wright, for both your life in collecting and for this unbelievable collection that has found its last home here, at ECU, to be kept in trust for all time.

Thomas Douglass
September 7, 2011
Published Work by Stuart Wright (by date)

BIBLIOGRAPHIES


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"The Stuart Wright Collection (SWC) at ECU provides a rare opportunity for the American scholar to explore the richness of our literary past. There is no doubt that much of the manuscript material will result in revised editions of previously published biographies and criticism, and provide scholars with a more complete assessment of the imaginative accomplishment of the Twentieth century. For the lucky student, who ventures forth into this vast collection, there will be connections made in the classroom and in print that will last a lifetime."