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FALL 1988

- Dorothy Thompson: Withstanding the Storm
By Michael J. Kirkhorn, Associate Professor of Journalism,
New York University 3
- Dear Kit, Dear Skinny: The Letters of Erskine Caldwell
and Margaret Bourke-White
By William L. Howard, Assistant Professor of English,
Chicago State University 23
- Ted Key, Creator of "Hazel"
By George L. Beiswinger, author and free-lance writer,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 45
- Five Renaissance Chronicles in Leopold von Ranke's Library
By Raymond Paul Schrodtt, Ambrose Swasey Library,
Colgate Rochester Divinity School 57
- The Punctator's World: A Discursion
By Gwen G. Robinson, Editor, *Syracuse University
Library Associates Courier* 73
- News of the Syracuse University Library and the
Library Associates 105

Dear Kit, Dear Skinny: The Letters of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White

BY WILLIAM L. HOWARD

Complementing the substantial Margaret Bourke-White Papers at the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University is a smaller collection of Erskine Caldwell material from the years when he and Bourke-White were lovers and, subsequently, during 1939–42, husband and wife. The collection includes letters, financial records, notes for the books they did together, book contracts, photographs of Bourke-White, Caldwell, and their Darien, Connecticut home, and newspaper clippings about *The Road to Smolensk*, the American Folkways series, *Say, Is This the U.S.A.?*, *Trouble in July*, and the play “Tobacco Road”. There are some short-story typescripts, including “My Old Man”, as well as a copy of the impassioned pamphlet “In Defense of Myself” that Caldwell printed and distributed after the city of Portland, Maine censored his first novel and threatened to throw his first wife, Helen, into jail for selling it in their bookshop.

The correspondence is particularly interesting. Two letters from 1940 attest to Caldwell’s stature as a writer at that time. In one, Caldwell’s secretary is thanking Ernest Hemingway for an autographed copy of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In the other, Alfred Knopf thanks Caldwell for “your line about Langston Hughes’ book [*The Big Sea*]”. There are also letters from Bennett Cerf; Maurice Coindreau; Duell, Sloan and Pearce Publishers; the League of American Writers; and two artistic friends of Caldwell, Richard Johns and Alfred Morang. The bulk of the correspondence in the collection, however, was exchanged between Caldwell and Bourke-White beginning in 1936 and, except for two brief notes from 1959, ending in 1942. There are some 300 or so letters and telegrams, the majority of them exchanged in 1939 and 1940, during the time that Margaret Bourke-White was in Europe on assignment for *Life* magazine. They provide

indispensable documentation of the artists' personal lives in the years 1936 through 1942.

By 1936, Caldwell had already completed what many would argue were his finest works: *Tobacco Road*, *God's Little Acre*, *Journeyman*, and most of his short stories. The famous stage adaptation of *Tobacco Road* had premiered on Broadway, 4 December 1933, and made him a celebrity. Its success was both a major reason for the publicity he attracted and a major cause of his distraction from writing. Over the seven years of its run, he spent considerable time—time which might well have been spent on fiction writing—defending and substantiating the story with facts. He protested censorship in cities where the play was banned, published a treatise on tenant farming in 1935, and in 1938 taught a course at the New School for Social Research.

He was irked by those who refused to acknowledge Southern poverty, and in 1935 he decided to return South, this time armed not only with pen and paper, but also with camera. To validate his fiction with factual documentation, he agreed to do a series of articles on the conditions of sharecroppers for the *New York Post*. His father, Ira Sylvester Caldwell, a Reformed Presbyterian minister long familiar with the plight of the Southern poor, accompanied him. Caldwell took his own photographs for the series. Aware that they were “decidedly the work of an amateur” and thinking that he would like to devote an entire book to the sharecropper's plight, he determined to enlist the help of a professional photographer on his next trip South.¹

By 1936 Margaret Bourke-White was a highly successful photographer. After the failure of her first marriage (1924–28) to Everett Chapman, a fellow student at the University of Michigan, she embarked on a career as free-lance photographer in Cleveland, determined to prove herself. She began by taking pictures for architectural firms, then pioneered the field of industrial photography. In 1929 a book of her photographs for a steel company caught the eye of Henry Luce of *Time* magazine, who invited her to New York to interview for a position with his new *Fortune* magazine. Driven by desire to succeed, in less than four years she had progressed from selling pictures to Cleveland architects for fifty cents apiece to a half-time job at *Fortune* for \$1000 a month and her own studio in New York City.

1. Erskine Caldwell, *Call It Experience* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1951), 162–63.



Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell, probably in 1937.

For the public, Caldwell and Bourke-White wrote retrospective descriptions of each other as they were about this time. Margaret was “a spirited young woman with an engaging personality”, Caldwell wrote in *With All My Might* (p. 145). Of him, Bourke-White wrote in *Portrait of Myself*: “I could hardly believe this large shy man with the enormous wrestler’s shoulders and quiet coloring could be the fiery Mr. Caldwell” (p. 114).

She was also able to expand her intellectual horizons through travel. In the early 1930s she had been sent by *Fortune* to Europe, where she photographed Russian industry, as well as Stalin’s mother and birthplace. In the summer of 1934, her political consciousness was aroused when she was assigned to cover the American dustbowl. Moved by the plight of the drought-stricken farmers and probably also influenced by the depression and the rise of Fascism in Europe, she began actively supporting leftist causes.²

2. Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 33–160.

In 1936 Bourke-White made an important resolution about her career. Turning down a job paying \$1000 per picture, she vowed not to accept any more advertising work. Rather than photographing shiny automobiles “stuffed with vapid smiles”, she wanted to do more work like the dustbowl assignment. She wanted to do an in-depth study, a book, about “everyday” Americans. And it was not enough just to photograph them. She wanted someone to interpret what she photographed in written words, someone she could learn from. She sought to collaborate with a writer who was “really in earnest about understanding America”.³

In their interests and abilities, the two artists seemed perfectly matched. After they were introduced early in 1936, it did not take long for them to begin planning for the summer tour South that would eventually produce *You Have Seen Their Faces*. The Syracuse collection contains the first letters exchanged between them.

In March 1936, soon after this meeting, Bourke-White wrote Caldwell that she was “happier about the book I am to do with you than anything I have had a chance to work on for the last two years. I have felt keenly for some time that I was turning my camera too often to advertising subjects and too little in the direction of something that might have some social significance.” She went on exuberantly: “If I had a chance to choose from every living writer in America I would choose you first as the person I would like to do such a book with. And to have you drop out of a clear sky—just when I have decided that I want to take pictures that are closer to life—seems almost too good to be true.”⁴

After this auspicious start, however, the road became rocky. When Bourke-White directed her attention towards a project, she brought a remarkable intellectual vitality. But she had many varied interests, which she was used to handling with self-assurance and charm. Caldwell was far more single-minded, even obsessive about his goals. Once he had his mind set on a project, he was compulsive about finishing it. Moreover, deadlines were important to him, and he felt irked by

3. Margaret Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 112–13.

4. Bourke-White to Erskine Caldwell, 9 March 1936, Margaret Bourke-White Papers, Syracuse University Library. All other references to the Bourke-White/Caldwell correspondence (cited by date within the text) are from the Margaret Bourke-White Papers.

delays, no matter how graciously they were requested. Unable to finish all of her business in New York in time to drive South with Caldwell and his assistant Ruth Carnall in the summer of 1936, Bourke-White asked for an extension. Caldwell was not pleased but accommodated her. He suggested that he drive to Georgia, visit his parents in Wrens, and that Bourke-White fly into Augusta, where he and Carnall would meet her. A few days later when Bourke-White wired asking for yet another day's postponement, Caldwell became furious, convinced that she was slighting him and the project. He cancelled the trip indefinitely.⁵

Unwilling to let the project die, Bourke-White responded by flying to Augusta anyway. From there, she sent a letter by messenger to nearby Wrens asking Caldwell to reconsider. She appealed to his reasonableness, to his sense of the social importance of the project, and to his sympathy for those who work for a living: "It seemed to me that this work that you and I had planned is so important that I couldn't bear to see it hopelessly lost". She had needed to get her affairs in order, she wrote, because "I have to earn my living and it is these jobs (which are now finished) that make it possible for me to carry the overhead while doing a really creative and socially important job like the book with you. . . . If I had an independent income it would be different. . . ." She concluded by repeating her "deep desire to use my photography in ways that are more socially useful". It was a masterful letter, and it worked. A few hours later Caldwell appeared at the hotel, and they were soon on their way across the South.

For information about the trip itself, one must study not only the materials in the Syracuse collection but also Caldwell's letters (located at Dartmouth College Library) to his first wife, Helen; Vicki Goldberg's biography of Bourke-White; Harvey Klevar's unpublished biography of Caldwell; and Bourke-White's and Caldwell's autobiographies.⁶ Documented in these sources are the contest of wills be-

5. Harvey Klevar, "Erskine Caldwell, Solitary Puritan: A Biography". Unpublished biography of Erskine Caldwell. To protect her identity, *Call It Experience* and *Portrait of Myself* refer to Carnall as "Sally". The Klevar biography and Caldwell's second autobiography, *With All My Might* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1987), identify her as Ruth Carnall.

6. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*; Klevar, "Erskine Caldwell, Solitary Puritan"; Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*; Caldwell, *Call It Experience* and *With All My Might*.

tween the two artists, the conflicts between Bourke-White and Ruth Carnall, Caldwell's decision to return home early, Bourke-White's successful attempt to charm him into continuing, Carnall's sudden departure, and, finally, Caldwell's falling in love with Bourke-White.

The Syracuse collection has much to offer about Caldwell's subsequent reactions to the Southern trip. A married man with a wife and three children, he was under a great deal of emotional stress. Several undated letters and telegrams show him obsessed with love but haunted by the possibility of losing security. In one undated letter, he informs Bourke-White that his wife knows of the affair, and he asks for an answer about their future together: "I miss living. I've found that I do not do any of that without you any more. I need you to live for and with. Is there any hope?" In a second letter, from his home in Maine, Caldwell chivalrously pledges his loyalty to his mistress. He has not "even touched" his wife since he has been home. "I feel that I belong 100% to you." Another undated letter, probably from a New York hotel, demonstrates his confusion and his desperate desire for Bourke-White to act as a stabilizing force. Having just gone through "hell" after meeting with his wife and afraid that Bourke-White has "dropped" him, he thinks he is "cracking up". "Help me", he writes. "Can't you hurry home and take me away to live with [you] until we know we love each other and that nothing can ever separate our hearts?"

All through the fall and winter of 1936-37, Caldwell was tortured by uncertainty over the extent of Bourke-White's commitment. He had a deep fear of being unable to replace the love and security that his wife would most certainly withhold. After Helen had discovered one of his love letters to Margaret and ordered him to leave their Maine home, he wrote to Bourke-White in an undated letter, "I don't blame her any. But I hate not having anything. I hope you will give it to me. You are the only person in the world who can." In February, pressured by the destabilizing situation, he wrote: "Please let me know when you get this if I can count on your sticking to me no matter what happens". (2-8-37) A week later he wrote, "What we have means everything in the world to me if anything should go wrong Ill [sic] never recover". (2-15-37) It was a burden she was apparently not always willing to carry. He complained that she seemed "always so anxious to change the subject, that I never am able to tell you how and why I love you. As if you cared, I guess." He argued

that he was biologically driven, as was the Lester family of "Tobacco Road". "What else is there to live for, if a person has an animal-like instinct to love someone as I do you?" (No date)

Unfortunately, few of Bourke-White's replies from this period are represented in the collection, and one wonders whether they were simply lost over time or whether she destroyed them. Was she ashamed of her role in luring him away from his wife and children? Were they erotic letters which embarrassed her? One would assume that she replied, but there are no answers in the collection. It is, of course, possible that, having had one unsuccessful marriage, Bourke-White did not respond to Caldwell's impassioned letters because she was fearful of becoming too involved. In her autobiography she states that from the beginning their relationship had been "strewn with danger signals".⁷ One of those danger signals must have been his consuming need for her and his wish to merge their individual personalities into one. He wrote, "I think of you as a part of us; never of you alone". (No date) Although this may have been flattering at the time, ultimately his jealousy of that portion of her career that did not include him contributed heavily to their eventual divorce. He could not think of her "alone", even though Bourke-White insisted on reserving a good portion of herself for her work only.

This is not to say that Bourke-White did not love him. Contrary to the cool self-portrait she paints in her autobiography, she was not distant when expressing her affections. Although the lack of her early letters makes it difficult to gauge her attitude accurately, one telegram sent in the summer of 1937, when she was covering Lord Tweedsmuir's trip to northern Canada, does give some indication that she needed him too. Not having heard from him, she wired, "You must not—must not—sweetheart—leave me without hearing from you like this again". Her autobiography suggests that his subsequent cables to "Honeychile, Arctic Region" asking her to hurry home and marry him hindered and embarrassed her, for they greeted her at practically every stop and were a source of humor for radio operators all over Northern Canada. This particular telegram, however, along with several of the missives she wrote after their marriage, points to a stronger longing for him than she later admits. Her contention that she married him because "finally a time comes when

7. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 170.

it is just too troublesome to remain unmarried”⁸ seems more of a pose than an accurate reflection of her feelings at the time. It can safely be assumed that she had a genuine need that marriage helped satisfy.

Unlike Caldwell, however, Bourke-White kept her need in perspective. In an undated letter written aboard the Canadian ship during the same Tweedsmuir assignment, she expresses her love in one half of the letter, then talks about her adventures in the other half: the captain’s stopping his ship so that she could take pictures of her butterflies hatching; the mission schools along the way; the Eskimos’ fascination with her flashbulbs. Caldwell’s early letters to her, on the contrary, are almost solely about his consuming love for her and their relationship.

Helen Caldwell, convinced finally that her husband’s involvement with Bourke-White was more than just a casual affair, filed for divorce early in 1938. In March, Bourke-White, who had joined *Life* in the fall of 1936 shortly after her and Caldwell’s trip South, was sent to Spain and Czechoslovakia, to report on troubled Europe. Caldwell went along. They spent five months abroad, most of it in Czechoslovakia working on what would become their second collaborative book, *North of the Danube*.⁹

In the fall of 1938, after their return to the United States, they bought Horseplay Hill, the Darien home they named together. After they began living there, the tone of Caldwell’s letters changed radically from those written in 1936 and 1937 when he was in the throes of a divorce and an uncertain love. From a man torn by the demons of love, insecurity, and guilt, he became calm and affectionate even though Bourke-White continued to be absent from him on various assignments. Alone in Darien with her praying mantises, he good-humoredly telegraphed in October, “All fourteen of us miss you. . . . All our love, Skinny Johnny Suzy Mantise.” (10-5-38)

Caldwell and Bourke-White married on 27 February 1939. In an undated letter addressed to “Sweet Leilani”, presumably written after or in anticipation of their Hawaii honeymoon in March, Caldwell writes blissfully, “You *are* my dream of paradise, and if there is none, so much the better, because *you* are my paradise”. At this point, her

8. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 169.

9. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 204–14.



Horseplay Hill, the Darien, Connecticut home that they shared from 1938 to 1942 and that Bourke-White retained until the end of her life. They split the cost of the house and gave it its name, perhaps in mockery of genteel Darien estates.

frequent trips and his lack of a say in them scarcely dims his contentment: “You are such a funny girl that when you left you did not say whether you would be gone a day, a week, or a year”. Apparently, because of her new commitment to him, being left behind did not fill him with the despair that he had felt when they were lovers.

Yet even in the joyous Leilani letter one finds attempts to manipulate Bourke-White’s independence away from her. It must have been disturbing to her, for example, when he wrote, “What am I to do, take charge of you, or let you go your own way? If you thought you could trust me with your life, I think it would be a very good thing for us if you would let me take charge of you. But if you are not sure you wish to trust me, then it would be better to keep on as you have.” Though expressed affectionately during a time of contentment, the choice he gave her—trust me and give up your freedom or mistrust me and retain it—demonstrates undercurrents of the anxiety he felt about her independence.

The bulk of the Bourke-White/Caldwell correspondence at Syra-

cuse was written during the six-month period from October 1939 to March 1940, when Bourke-White covered the outbreak of World War II in Europe for *Life*. During this time, Caldwell stayed behind in Darien. The letters from this separation are particularly rich because they were written on an average of every other day and because there are as many letters from Bourke-White as from Caldwell.

From Bourke-White's first letters aboard the S. S. Washington, it is clear that the relationship is primarily a happy one, resting contentedly on their mutual admiration and love. On 16 October 1939 she wrote: "I have the sweetest memory of you, holding up your hands to catch those flowers. You looked so young and boyish and tall and eager and adorable. I love you so much." The next day she wrote a more balanced letter, devoting part to expressions of love and part to the adventures she was having. She writes of the hurricane ahead, the French, English, and Canadian officers aboard returning to Europe to join in the fight against Hitler, the possibility of being stopped by a submarine and searched. "I have the camera loaded and ready of course. If it happens I hope the light is good." (10-17-39) Less obsessed than in his early letters, Caldwell also writes about subjects other than his love for her: the garden, the kittens, the praying mantises. (10-17-39)

During this time, both express a regard for the other's career. For example, Bourke-White writes on 18 October that she is learning French by reading Maurice Coindreau's introduction to one of Caldwell's works: "But the sweetest part about it is for a wife to be studying French by reading such darling things about her husband" (10-18-39). Learning that Caldwell's books were being sold in Europe, she wrote, "Am glad that Norway is getting the benefit of Semon Dye's religion, and Tobacco Road running through Italy should help a lot of Italians very much". (11-5-39) Likewise, Caldwell writes of his eagerness to see her European work, proclaiming their artistic solidarity: "I'm all agog waiting to hear the first story of the new series—a story that will filter across the Atlantic, so marvelous that it will confound all our critics and enemies. Hurry and start it in this direction!" (10-26-39)

Besides lavishing affection on her husband, Bourke-White's letters from Europe often create for him the exciting aura of history in the making. In a 25 October letter, for example, she describes London blackouts, which she had photographed over several sleepless nights: "London in a blackout is beyond belief. *Not a light visible* [sic]. Taxis



Caldwell reading galleys in their Darien home. The alphabet wallpaper was a gift from Bourke-White.

go with faint blue lights—street lights—red and green—are masked to show only a slit like a cross. All windows are heavily curtained in black so lights in hotels and apt’s may be lighted inside.” (10-25-39) The next day, she mentions going to the House of Commons to hear Neville Chamberlain reply to Ribbentrop. Chamberlain had “a squeaky little voice”, and the Speaker “sits on a throne and wears a wig and

shoes with silver buckles". (10-26-39) A few weeks later she took Haile Selassie's, Churchill's, and the Archbishop of Canterbury's portraits. Of Selassie she remarked, "Poor thing, he's in a hotel room that a travelling drummer might use". (12-2-39)

The fact that they had been touring Eastern Europe together the previous year allows their correspondence a dimension—a kind of professional intimacy—possible only because she was writing to both husband and colleague. She describes London, for example, as a "dreary" wartime country, "not like Spain as we knew it". Likewise, from the Roumanian countryside she writes a sketchy description which she knows Caldwell will appreciate: "Very primitive, like parts of Centr. Europe we knew". Complaining of nuisances that hinder her work, she evokes their shared experiences: "You know the kind of thing I mean. Ev. one afraid of tiny bit of authority—stopped ev. [minute?] while papers examined—by the time everything is straightened up light is gone." (12-29-39)

Caldwell too describes career matters, although sparingly. In a 31 October letter, he mentions editing for his new publisher (Duell, Sloan and Pearce) the American Folkways Series, a project towards which Viking, his previous publisher, had been cool. He calls *Journeyman* his favorite novel and notes that it was translated into Danish. He also describes the attempt of Sam Byrd, one of the actors in the Broadway production of "Tobacco Road", to salvage a production of "Journeyman" by raising \$50,000. (10-31-39) Caldwell himself, believing that the play could become another "Tobacco Road", contributed his savings account to the doomed production, losing it all.¹⁰ In one of the rare instances in which Bourke-White offered her husband advice about his career (Caldwell was more inclined to "take charge" of hers), she requested, "Do please leave Sam Byrd alone. His choices may be in the right direction, but hes [sic] just not good enuf." (2-19-40)

When Caldwell left his first wife Helen, he lost his best editor. Some critics have even suggested that his divorce effectively ended his chance to continue producing first-rate fiction on the order of *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*. We have already seen evidence to suggest that he needed Bourke-White to take over Helen's role as provider of love and comfort. There is also evidence that he hoped

10. Caldwell, *Call It Experience*, 175.

Bourke-White would take over Helen's role as editor. Rather fond of his reputation for being a quick and inspired writer, he told the *New Orleans Tribune* that Bourke-White picked up manuscript pages from the floor after he typed them, checked the spelling, and sent them off to the publisher without his giving a final review (11-14-39; clipping included in 11-16-39 letter to Bourke-White). Presumably, he was describing their work on one or both of their collaborations, *You Have Seen Their Faces* and *North of the Danube*.

At any rate, in November 1939 Caldwell wrote Bourke-White in London to request that she read the galleys of *Trouble in July* and suggest changes. It was his first novel since 1935, and he describes it to her as "Your book! The first novel I've done under your spell." (11-21-39) Two weeks later he complains that she has not offered any comments. "It would be a much better novel with your advice. . . . Naturally I consider you my best friend and severest critic, and I had looked forward to your help." (12-4-39) Although there is an undated supportive telegram from her ("Everything but trouble from *Trouble in July* for my dearest"), nothing in the collection indicates that she helped in any specific way with the editing. She may have felt that he was justified in asking for her editorial help on their collaborations, but perhaps she drew the line on work he did himself.

Despite the preponderately blissful tone of most of the letters from 1939-40, they are darkened occasionally by some of the elements that had haunted the relationship from the beginning and that eventually ended it. There was, first of all, Caldwell's moodiness. From the time of the Southern trip and again on their trip to Czechoslovakia in 1938, Bourke-White had worried over his "unpredictable, frozen moods" and his "unfathomable silences". When they were together in public, he embarrassed her several times by clamming up and creating awkward silences. Bourke-White felt that his behavior had even interfered with their work, preventing them from getting close to the Czechs and hurting the quality of *North of the Danube*.¹¹

As a consequence, she had decided upon a psychological improvement plan for him, about which she periodically inquired in her letters. He was to make regular visits to a psychiatrist and practise modifying his behavior by visiting friends of hers. "Keep in practice, so when I come back I'll find a very sociable husband", she wrote from

11. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 170.

London, 25 October 1939. This agenda for improving his sociability was clearly of the utmost importance to her:

You must do these important things about those sides of yourself you don't know about. You must, must must!

I love you so much. But I love the good sides of my husband. (I must love the other sides too, or I could not have put up with them so long.) But the image of my husband in my mind is my big adorable sweetheart whose life I share, and who shares mine.

Please, sweet, see how earnest I am about this, because getting these things fixed, and realizing that they have to be fixed, will make all the difference in the kind of a future life we want to have, with Patricia, and all those things. (11-11-39)

At times Bourke-White's agenda for his psychological and social improvement must have irked Caldwell. Years after his relationship with Bourke-White, he recalls that he had felt counseling sessions were simply a fad and that he had not been serious about them.¹² In an October 1939 letter written from Darien, he seems to be reciprocating with some psychologizing about her. He had heard from a perfect stranger about an interview she had made before her departure to Europe. In that interview she said that she had forbidden Caldwell to accompany her because she did not want to be bothered by him. He writes, "I wish you felt differently so that our private life would be something sacred and personal. It's awfully difficult to have to live in fear of things like that breaking upon you unexpectedly. I know you really don't feel that way, that it is another self that feels it has to say those things, and I wish you would try to set the world straight about us before it gains the wrong impression. I know you love me, Kit—let the world know it, too." (10-26-39)

Although later she denied making any statement at all (11-6-39), it was not the first time an account of her obduracy towards marriage with him had reached the gossip columns. Upon their return from Czechoslovakia in August 1938 before their marriage, badgering New

12. William Sutton, "Lover's Quarrel: A Biography of Erskine Caldwell". Unpublished biography of Erskine Caldwell, Sutton Collection, Rare Book Room, University of Illinois Library.

York reporters had measured the distance between their ship cabins and questioned her about an impending marriage. Irritated, she responded, "I'm not going to marry him, no matter how many photographers and reporters want me to".¹³ Bourke-White valued her independence, and sometimes Caldwell felt hurt that she would not show her affection publicly. He apparently thought that, if she felt his unpleasant behavior was psychotic, he had a right to interpret hers that way as well.

When Bourke-White mentions "Patricia, and all those things", she is referring to their plans to have a girl child. The unborn Patricia, to whom *You Have Seen Their Faces* was dedicated, became both the embodiment of their love and a symbol over which they argued their causes with each other. Although Bourke-White seems to have wanted a child, she had at least one reservation—Caldwell's moods—and she used the child as an inducement for him to obtain counseling. Both Bourke-White's and Caldwell's biographers raise the possibility that Bourke-White was actually pregnant with Caldwell's child possibly in 1940 or in 1942 and either miscarried or, realizing that he was not serious about counseling, obtained an abortion so as to avoid making herself dependent on him.¹⁴ Indeed, Caldwell's letters to her often make plain that he was chiefly interested in her presence at home. He knew that a child would root her there. However, there is no mention in either Bourke-White's or Caldwell's letters of an actual pregnancy, miscarriage, or abortion.

Although Caldwell seems to have handled Bourke-White's long 1939–40 absence in Europe well at first, the six months of separation eventually became tiresome. Caldwell was not above using subterfuge to induce her return to the States. Enclosing a clipping of a woman photographer, Marion Post, who had done some photos of the South, Caldwell wrote on 2 December 1939 that he hated to see Bourke-White lose her status as a photographic authority on the South. He felt that she should return and work on books like those they had done before together—or perhaps a book on insects (her hobby)—because her fame would probably rest on publications like these rather than on transitory war journalism: ". . . books . . . are not thrown away like the morning paper".

13. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 169.

14. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 222–24; Klevar, "Erskine Caldwell, Solitary Puritan".

Furthermore, he argued in the same letter, it was important to both of them and to their relationship as collaborative artists that she do “this creative kind of work. It hurts me to see others doing the things you by right should do. I want my wife to be the one to produce these things of permanency.” He argued that she had “that God-given element of scientific inquiry. . . . Not to use it is a sacrilege.” He added rather pontifically, “The world is going to be here a long, long time, but a person has only a few short years in which to contribute his talent to it”. As a final appeal, he stated that she should devote herself to these kinds of projects “for Patricia’s sake—she will expect it of you”. (12-2-39)

Ultimately, one gets the impression from this letter that Caldwell was less interested in Bourke-White’s or Patricia’s welfare or in the high ideals of aesthetics than in solving the problem of his loneliness. His need to settle this problem far outweighed any other consideration. Putting together scientific books or collaborative books with him or raising their child would bring Bourke-White home. This letter of December 1939, ending with its blunt command “Hurry!”, seems a transparent attempt to regain Bourke-White’s presence in any way possible. Until he could have her at his side, he would be in a state of unproductive unrest and unhappiness. It was as he had written two weeks earlier, “I just have to share life with you, otherwise I’m just a transient”. (11-16-39)

Other tactics he used to induce her to return home from this long European tour ranged from periodic announcements of various surprises (one of them worth \$2000) awaiting her return, to his negotiating for promising assignments in America for her. He writes of his publisher’s interest in having them collaborate again on a book about America, though he may very well have put the suggestion into the publisher’s mind. (11-3-39)

Eventually, Bourke-White herself grew tired of Europe and her work for *Life* and decided to quit the magazine to become part of *PM*, an experimental New York daily newspaper that used many photographs. She wrote in February 1940, “I am bitterly dissatisfied with how much good work never reaches the light of day with *Life*. So much wasted. Even that London at night series. The trouble is they’re too rich and can afford to be wasteful of someone whos [sic] supposed to be their ace, but the socalled ace has only so many years to live and doesn’t want to see pix taken in any one of them buried forever.” (2-5-40)



While Caldwell house-sat in Darien, Bourke-White was on a six-month assignment in Europe for *Life* magazine. In this photograph she is with a group of Turkish men who were trying to get a truck out of the mud.

For their personal life, the most important consequence of her quitting *Life* was that she could cut short her assignment in Europe and return home. It is not clear whether she was finally succumbing to Caldwell's urgings and her own desire to return to him or whether her decision was strictly a professional one. Caldwell did monitor the negotiations with *PM* through their lawyer Julius Weiss, and he was undoubtedly pleased that her new job would bring her home. Although the pressure he had already put on her to return may have contributed to her decision, there is also clear evidence that she

wanted to come home and was tired of the assignment. Her letters convey genuine pleasure as she anticipates both their next collaboration together and a more domestic life: "I'm full of thoughts about our book [*Say, Is This the U.S.A.?*]. . . . I want to help you with many more books." (2-23-40) "I have so many ideas about how to be a good wife to you. I want to make you very happy and do good things for you always." (2-1-40) Was her eagerness that of an artistic co-equal or that of a contrite wife anxious to soothe his frustration with her for abandoning him so long? It is difficult to determine to what extent Caldwell demanded this response and to what extent she willingly offered it.

It creates something of a distortion to isolate disturbing elements of their correspondence in an effort to determine the causes of their eventual breakup. Given the frustrations of separation, it is remarkable how good-humored and loving the letters through 1940 are. Although they do contain intimations of trouble, far more typical of them is playfulness and exhilaration, epitomized by Bourke-White's note to him probably written towards the end of her European tour: ". . . the most important discovery I have made in Italy is that I love you in it. I also love you in England France & Switzerland, and I shall go on loving you in Bessarabia, Rumania, Jugoslavia, also Syria, if I get there, and certainly in Bulgaria. But when I get back to Connecticut, then is the time that I'll love you and squeeze you and kiss you till you cry out for a rest." (No date)

After she came back to Connecticut, Bourke-White worked for *PM* for four months, then returned to *Life*, whose first assignment was to report on the state of America. In November 1940 she and Caldwell set out on a tour of the United States. Although *Life* used none of the photography she sent in, Caldwell and she capitalized on the trip by gathering material for the documentary *Say, Is This the U.S.A.?* Their Christmas card from that year pictured them on top of a boxcar, he with typewriter and she with camera.

In March 1941, *Life* sent her to Russia, and Caldwell accompanied her. They were two of the few Western journalists on hand for the German invasion. Caldwell used some of her pictures in *Russia at War*, but they did not actually collaborate on the book. She preferred to do her own book, which may very well have been a source of irritation to him. Whether this decision was symptomatic of a falling out or not, Bourke-White noted a fundamental difference between them on the Russian trip. She could not understand how,

with history happening all around them, he could sit in his Moscow hotel room writing about his Georgia childhood (he was working on *Georgia Boy*).¹⁵ She complains in her autobiography that he “barricaded” himself from new experiences, and that that contributed to his decline as a writer.¹⁶ In fact, *Georgia Boy* was one of his last high-quality pieces of fiction and was successful partly because he rigorously screened out present events and devoted himself to reconstructing the images of his Southern past. What to her seemed stagnation was his creative lifeblood.

They returned to the United States in October 1941. Just over a year later, they were divorced. Many of the reasons for the failure of their marriage had been inherent in the relationship from the beginning. Goldberg argues that they were engaged in a “struggle for dominance” throughout their time together.¹⁷ Caldwell was attracted to her because she was independent, and yet he divorced her because he could not make her dependent. A more concrete cause of the separation was a home in Arizona which they had found when working on *Say, Is This the U.S.A?* and into which, before the war broke out, they had planned to settle. Despite the war, Caldwell still had a desire to settle in it and raise a family. Bourke-White did not. He secured a four-figure-a-week salary in Hollywood for each of them so that they could be in the proximity of the new house, but she refused what she called “another set of golden chains”.¹⁸ Eventually, she returned to Europe to cover the war.

The Syracuse collection contains little correspondence between them during the period of their break-up, and all of it is from Caldwell’s side. His notes to her are both plaintive and impatient. In July 1942 he telegraphed her on the East Coast, where she was involved with speaking engagements and her work with *Life*: “Whats use hanging around there? Why dont you come out three four days and make life amount to something. Five thousand month job waiting for you but cant hold it w/o your setting time. Wish you would be definite about many things. Among them no provision for little Kit. That hurts more than you will ever know.” (7-20-42) The Arizona house was

15. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 239.

16. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 196.

17. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 251.

18. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 197.

but with sq whie nose spots inqplce of tri s78 toes

th4

MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE

it opened up a human w.
i had not known existed
pd much att to

Dear Skinny:

I cannot let '59 roll to a close without letting you know how ~~much~~ much it meant to me to hear from you when the story of my malady came out. One rewarding aspect of my otherwise boring ailment was the unexpected way it tightened human bonds in many directions//

have been hearing fom friends,
and people whqFhave meant something in ones life

The experiance went very deep with me.
some how, in human

In wasy i find it difficult to put into words the experiance went very deep with me, and i would not shear (dismiss) it out of my life even if i hqd the power to do so.

Today happens to be th

and i am still making

I suppose i am happiest from finding i acould still keep the helm of my own ship, source of inner strength

In the course of all the therapy,
i dev some surprisinf accomplishments,
back shoulder rolls and walking on all fours

Do you have coon cats/ I have wonderful ones just now -they look much like Fluffy except that in place of her itriangular white spots ehirs are square as dice. and are increadibly gallant and brave & insist on accompanying me on my long wLks. Even at nite they do not panic in the face of oncoming cars but stand quietly behind ne touchin q a tail to my alegs so i will know they are there.

After twenty years, Caldwell congratulated Bourke-White on a transitory recovery from Parkinson's disease. Her response, apparently never sent, shows not only the debilitating effect of the disease, but also her irrepressible and enthusiastic spirit.

apparently not the only set of golden chains by which Caldwell hoped to keep her nearby. Bourke-White must have realized that a "little Kit", like housekeeping in Arizona, would have prevented her from covering the biggest story of the century: World War II.

By the time Caldwell sent this telegram, she had already applied to return to Europe as a war correspondent. October 1942 finds him again writing as house-sitter from Darien, but this time with a weariness not present in his letters from 1939 and 1940: "I seem to do better books when you are here, so I guess if you want me to do a good one, you should come home". (10-9-42) The tone is less persuasive than tired.

Ironically, the divorce was handled long distance just as the marriage often was. From Arizona, Caldwell telegraphed her at the American Embassy in London, 10 November 1942, to announce: "Have reached most difficult decision of lifetime. Decided that partnership must dissolve immediately since present and future contain no promise of ultimate manifest. No single factor or combination could rectify untenable situation. Believe me when I say I am truly sorry and unconsolable. Please notify Weiss steps you wish taken." Given his disappointment over her lack of interest in "a little Kit" just four months before, the phrase "ultimate manifest" may very well refer to the child Bourke-White chose not to bear. Whether or not she had been pregnant (as Klevar and Goldberg suggest she was) and however that possible pregnancy may have ended, the lack of children, or more precisely, the lack of an inclination in Bourke-White to settle into a maternal role, apparently played an important part in the divorce.

Bourke-White's answer raised the suspicion of an affair: "Explain reasons more fully and please tell me honestly if anyone else involved". Caldwell replied, "I have waited four years for something better than this and the present and future have become dismal apparitions. Such is loneliness." Bourke-White felt that his response was evasive. Her last communication with him until some twenty years later was: "Such is loneliness and such is poetry but such is not answer to direct question. Therefore can draw only one conclusion and sorry you could not tell me openly." Her letter to Julius Weiss, however, does not raise the matter of infidelity at all. The issues put there are Caldwell's moods and Bourke-White's feeling of relief at not having to worry about them any longer.

Caldwell *had* met someone else. He had learned from his break-up with Helen how lonely being in unmarried limbo could be, and one suspects that he would not have given up Bourke-White without a replacement in mind. Indeed, in October he had met a twenty-year-old senior at the University of Arizona, June Johnson. They married on 22 December 1942, a month after Caldwell informed Margaret of his wish to divorce. At the time, ironically, Margaret was floating in the Mediterranean Sea, her ship having been torpedoed by a German U-boat. She was rescued on 23 December when Caldwell was on his honeymoon.

The break-up was abrupt, so abrupt that Caldwell left behind in the Darien house many of the papers that Bourke-White later deposited at Syracuse. But despite the inevitable ill will, there is a moving postscript to the relationship. In June 1959, Caldwell sent Bourke-White respectful congratulations for having successfully survived a dangerous new operation for Parkinson's disease. He congratulated her on her "fortitude and recovery", then went on to say that he had followed the news of her "travail from time to time, and I am glad it is now all in the past". (6-30-59) Her typed response is illustrative of the physical devastation of the disease and gives proof of her indomitable spirit. Her letter, which so effortlessly resumes their relationship with its references to their cat Fluffy of twenty years before and its "Dear Skinny" greeting, is full of the Bourke-White zest for living to which Caldwell had once found himself attracted. On the letter in her cramped script is written "For EC" and below it "Not sent". It is not clear whether the typing caused her not to send the letter, whether she simply forgot to revise it, or whether she found it psychologically more difficult to resume their correspondence than she had anticipated. At any rate, the letter succeeds in recapturing the same eager, joyous desire to share living with another sensitive soul.