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"I Want to Do This Job": More Margaret Bourke-White Letters to Erskine Caldwell

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“I Want to Do This Job”: More Margaret Bourke-White Letters to Erskine Caldwell

BY WILLIAM L. HOWARD

Eleven letters have recently been added to the George Arents Research Library's collection of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White correspondence. In the possession of Caldwell's first wife, Helen Caldwell Cushman, until her death in 1986, these letters were bought from a North Carolina bookdealer acting on behalf of Helen and Erskine's granddaughter. The entire group was written by Bourke-White in 1936, just prior to and immediately after her first tour of the South with Caldwell, during which they gathered material for *You Have Seen Their Faces*. A page of unsigned journal entries chronicling Bourke-White's behavior on the trip accompanies the letters.

The first of the letters was an attempt to salvage the Southern trip. From the Richmond Hotel in Augusta, Georgia, Bourke-White anxiously urged an exasperated Caldwell, who was visiting his parents in Wrens, to go forward with their plans to tour the South, after her requests for extensions had finally provoked him to cancel. The letter is two pages in length, in Bourke-White's handwriting, dated "Saturday morning" and addressed to "Dear Mr. Caldwell". Scrawled along the edge in someone else's hand is the date 18 July 1936. There is no envelope, but on the second page is Bourke-White's complete signature followed by "Richmond Hotel, Augusta".¹

Interestingly, a typed draft of this letter, somewhat different from the letter actually sent but clearly written for the same purpose, had been earlier deposited in the Arents Library by Bourke-White her-

1. Bourke-White to Erskine Caldwell, 18 July 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.

self. Vicki Goldberg (in her biography of Bourke-White) and I (in a previous article for the *Courier*) have cited this draft in our efforts to piece together what happened that day.² In *Portrait of Myself*, Bourke-White states that she wrote the letter at breakfast in the hotel and then sent it in the care of a boy on a bicycle to Caldwell in Wrens, thirty miles away. Caldwell appeared that evening, and the argument was resolved by “wordless communication” as the two drank a cup of coffee together.³ Although Caldwell’s autobiographies do not contradict Bourke-White’s account, a letter to his wife, written two days later, describes a very different scene. There, he reports

2. Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 164; William Howard, “Dear Kit, Dear Skinny: The Letters of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White”, *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 23 (Fall 1988): 27.

Knowing the project’s importance to her, one can understand her revising the letter, perhaps several times—thus the survival of different drafts. However, it is puzzling that the unsent draft was typed and the sent letter handwritten. Recognizing the importance of saying just the right thing, she may have composed a version of the letter and had it typed while still in New York—this being the draft long held at the Arents Library. Then, once in Georgia, she may have decided to revise it, and, not having access to a typewriter, written it longhand—this being the newly acquired letter under consideration in this article. The content of the letters tends to undermine this theory, however, because both state that she is writing from the hotel in Augusta.

Another possible solution to the puzzle suggests itself if one considers the third actor in the *You Have Seen Their Faces* drama. A letter from Caldwell to his wife in Maine states that in the hotel at the time of Bourke-White’s arrival was Ruth Carnall, Caldwell’s Hollywood secretary, whom he had hired to keep records of the trip (Erskine Caldwell to Helen Caldwell, 17 July 1936, Erskine Caldwell Collection, Baker Library, Dartmouth College). We are aware that Bourke-White knew of Carnall’s presence because in her letter to Peggy Sargent, composed on that Saturday of her arrival, she explained that she was negotiating with Caldwell through Carnall by telephone from the hotel. Having enlisted Carnall’s help then, she might also have consulted Carnall before sending her missive. It is even possible that the Arents draft—the unsent draft—was typed on Carnall’s typewriter. The typewriting of the letter and that of Carnall’s journal entries (discussed later in this article) match. Advice from Carnall on how to approach Caldwell may then have suggested ways that Bourke-White could improve the letter, prompting a spontaneous decision to compose a different draft by hand at the breakfast table.

3. Margaret Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 120–21.

that Margaret “begged and cried, and promised to behave”, until he reluctantly agreed to resume plans for the trip.⁴

Although the newly acquired letter and the Arents draft are the same in their predominant sentiment, the letter as sent is simpler, more straightforward, and less plaintive. More persuasive as well, it was very likely composed after the typed version—after she had arrived at a clearer view of the problem and a simpler and more effective strategy for solving it. Six paragraphs have become three. A hesitant, indirect opening—“It seemed to me that this work you and I had planned is so important that I couldn’t bear to see it hopelessly lost”—is replaced with a more positive, active beginning in which she shoulders responsibility for the situation and then seeks to resolve it: “Forgive me, but I can’t abandon this book without an effort to rectify the damage done by my postponements”. Instead of qualifying her availability, as she did in the Arents draft—“I am free now for at least a month”—the sent letter assures him that she has “the time we would need for the book”. His reservations about resuming their plans are addressed directly and early in the letter:⁵ “I am afraid that you have concluded that there would be more delays, and interruptions by other affairs, if we finally started. It was to eliminate this possibility that I stayed on in New York.” She must have felt that identifying with his point of view in this way was a more effective strategy than she had displayed, for example, in this sentence from the earlier, typed draft: “If you judge the future by these last several days it isn’t fair to me or fair to this important thing we plan to do”. Finally, she retains in the second letter the shrewd appeal to Caldwell’s well-publicized sense of economic justice, depicting herself as hampered by the economic pressures of a capitalistic system and explaining that her commercial work, as much as she deplored it, gave her the “freedom for creative and socially significant work”. (7-18-36)

Ultimately, the differences in the two 18 July letters are less im-

4. Erskine Caldwell to Helen Caldwell, 20 July 1936, Erskine Caldwell Collection, Baker Library, Dartmouth College.

5. Carnall, who was in communication with Caldwell by phone, may have articulated those reservations to her, providing another reason for her to revise the letter as she did.

portant than the fact that the content was revised and considered very carefully. Bourke-White spent time reworking it because the project meant a great deal to her. Indeed, the collaboration changed the course of her career.

Also among the newly deposited materials and also related to that first Southern trip in the summer of 1936 is a single page of typed journal entries by an unsigned author that records Margaret's behavior on the trip and the early stages of her love affair with Erskine:

- 7-17 Called on telephone and asked for another postponement. Hysterics over phone.
- 7-18 Appeared at Hotel Richmond, Augusta, after having received wire trip was off. Another outburst.
- 7-22 At Jefferson Davis Hotel, Montgomery, Ala. 1½ hour session. Another outburst. Sat on his lap.
- 7-23 At Walthall Hotel, Jackson, Miss. About 10 p.m. Another outburst. About 2 p.m. [sic] Came to door after had retired and had hysterics and made scene until taken in. Took her to bed with him for the night.
- 7-24 She called after he had gone to bed. He dressed and went to her. . . . stayed all night. Hysterics diminishing. . . .
- 7-25 Reached hotel at 8:30—had dinner and she received him in her bed (without clothes) for the night.
She hadn't enough money to pay her expenses and he said she probably expected to pay for them with favours. But he ordered that she be reminded until she paid up. . . .

The bookdealer who sold these new letters to Syracuse speculates that these entries were written by Erskine and that his use of the third person raises the possibility that they were notes for an autobiographical novel or story. Although not the most obvious solution, there is some justification for this position: the details of Margaret's attire (or lack of it) suggest a firsthand observer. Furthermore, Cald-

well's autobiography mentions that he did keep a notebook during the trip.⁶

But it must be remembered that there was a third person present on the trip, Ruth Carnall, Caldwell's Hollywood secretary. William A. Sutton, author of an unpublished Caldwell biography, identifies her as the writer of the journal entries, and Vicki Goldberg, citing Sutton's work and her own interview with Helen Caldwell Cushman, agrees.⁷

Carnall was hired by Caldwell to join them because of Bourke-White's reputation for being "unscrupulous financially", for allowing others to pick up the tab.⁸ He wanted Carnall to keep records of the trip and to ensure that expenses were shared equally. Another reason for Carnall's presence was that Bourke-White had a reputation for seducing married men. Harvey Klevar, one of Caldwell's biographers, suggests that Helen Caldwell favored hiring the secretary, a known quantity, to deter Bourke-White, an unknown quantity, from developing anything other than a professional relationship with her husband.⁹ Even Margaret sensed that sexual dynamics had more to do with Carnall's presence than recordkeeping. As she put it, Caldwell "planned to hedge himself in with a second woman".¹⁰

The specificity of dates and times in the journal entries suggests Carnall as the author. It was, after all, her job as cost accountant to attend to and record the particulars of the trip, while the artists did their work. That the way they went about their business did not meet with her approval did not stop her from fulfilling her function. Her records, if they are indeed hers, are neatly typed and carefully tabulated by day in the manner of a secretary. But would a secretary have felt compelled to record the progression of her boss's affair in

6. Erskine Caldwell, *With All My Might* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1987), 148–49.

7. William Sutton, "Lover's Quarrel: A Biography of Erskine Caldwell". Unpublished biography of Erskine Caldwell, Sutton Collection, Rare Book Room, University of Illinois Library. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 165, 167, 391–92.

8. Harvey L. Klevar, "Interview with Helen Caldwell Cushman", *Southern Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1989): 95. See also Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 163.

9. Harvey L. Klevar, "Erskine Caldwell, Solitary Puritan: A Biography". Unpublished, unpaginated biography of Erskine Caldwell, in the possession of Professor Klevar, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.

10. Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 115.

such acidic terms?—in any terms at all? Indeed, it is not until the final paragraph that mention is made of the expenses that she was hired to keep track of, and even there the cynical assessment of Margaret is more than a dispassionate balancing of accounts: “She hadn’t enough money to pay her expenses and he said she probably expected to pay for them with favours”.

That the journal entries suggest more than a secretary’s interest in the affair does not, however, disqualify Carnall. Helen Caldwell Cushman states in interviews that Carnall had been Erskine’s mistress,¹¹ a fact which, if true, explains the rancor of the entries. Caldwell’s wry account of the tour reveals the two women’s disagreement and fighting, and somewhat smugly suggests that the fighting was more than a little over him.¹² Such rivalry would support the notion of a prior relationship with Carnall, who undoubtedly resented the other woman’s encroachment on her territory. The degree of detail in the journal entries can be accounted for by Caldwell’s tendency to confide in women with whom he had been intimate the stories of new conquests. He had shared similar confidences with Helen, without considering the extent to which they might have hurt her.¹³ Having been his mistress, Carnall may well have qualified as a confidant, and that is how she learned the details of his affair with Margaret. That Caldwell was the source of Carnall’s information also raises the possibility that what he told her was exaggerated, even boastful. In his autobiography, for example, Caldwell describes a much more modest opening love scene than that implied by the journal, and dates it two or three days later. In that account, Bourke-White invites him to lie by her side in bed but forbids him to remove his clothes. His response—“Can’t I even take off my necktie?”—evoked laughter. At midnight, according to Caldwell, he returned to his own room. This scene does not portray the ‘hysterical’ and rashly brazen Bourke-White described by the journal.

There is an interesting footnote to the story. Helen Caldwell Cushman states in an interview that Carnall wrote her “a blow-by-blow account of the affair before she left [the Southern tour]. She wrote me about Margaret’s appearing without any clothes on in Er-

11. Sutton, “Lover’s Quarrel”; Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 167.

12. Caldwell, *With All My Might*, 147–51.

13. Sutton, “Lover’s Quarrel”; Klevar, “Interview”, 96.

skine's room and losing her temper and pulling all of the fixtures out of the wall." Again, one wonders if Caldwell might have stretched the details somewhat in his telling. When asked Carnall's motive for writing her, Helen answered, "She was a friend of mine. I knew her after she was his mistress."¹⁴ Whether the "blow-by-blow account" included the page of quite possibly exaggerated journal entries or whether they were provided later, Helen used the entries for evidence when she filed for divorce two years later.¹⁵ Interestingly, Helen's talent for winning the friendship of her husband's former mistresses applied not only to Carnall but also to Bourke-White. As she states, "When I first met Margaret, I liked her immediately."¹⁶ They had a friendship that lasted a good many more years than either of their marriages with Caldwell.¹⁷

One of the difficulties of accurately assessing the pair's early relationship has been the scarcity of letters from Bourke-White,¹⁸ and the absence of her replies has up to now tempted one to conclude that Caldwell's early impassioned appeals received little encouragement. But the ten newly acquired letters that were written just after the Southern trip affirm that Margaret wrote him back, although she rarely wrote him with the passion that he was craving. As with her later love letters, these incorporate details of her work. They are more balanced than his letters of the same period. Part of her control may be attributable to an understandable restraint caused by the situation itself. Caldwell was addressing his amorous letters to a single woman living alone in New York City, while Margaret was addressing hers to Mt. Vernon, Maine, where Caldwell lived with his wife and their three children. The reality of this situation must certainly have constrained her. Beyond that, however, was the quality of her personality. For her, work was paramount, and by nature she was not as possessive as Caldwell.

Four of the letters written after their 1936 trip are written from New York City on the Bourke-White Studio letterhead. The first of these is two and one-half pages long and dated 20 August. Its envelope is addressed to Mr. Erskine Caldwell, Mount Vernon, Maine.

14. Klevar, "Interview", 95.

15. Sutton, "Lover's Quarrel".

16. Klevar, "Interview", 95.

17. Sutton, "Lover's Quarrel".

18. Howard, "Dear Kit, Dear Skinny", 29.

Beginning affectionately with “Dear Skinny”, it recalls their work together and describes the difficulties she met upon her return: “Camp meetings and chain gangs seem very peaceful in retrospect now. When I walked into the studio the sky began crashing.” (8-20-36)

As Goldberg’s biography has explained, Bourke-White was trying to repair her relationship with the Newspaper Enterprise Association (NEA), one of her chief sources of income. She had an agreement with the NEA to devote forty-eight days a year to work assigned by it and Acme Newspictures. But before the Southern trip with Caldwell, she had done an uncommissioned photograph of Earl Browder, Communist Party candidate for president, and it had appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*.¹⁹ As Margaret puts it, NEA was trying to fire her over the picture “not because it was red, they insist, but because it cut into their exclusive rights on my newspaper work”. (8-20-36) Eventually she would lose her contract with NEA over the matter.

At the time, the loss of the NEA contract was a tremendous blow to Bourke-White: first, because the NEA work helped pay the bills so that she could stay self-employed and, second, because “with the exception of a rare thing like a chance to work on a book ranging from convicts to evangelists”, the NEA work was her “favorite” kind of assignment. (8-20-36) In a retrospective interview, however, Peggy Sargent, the secretary in the Bourke-White studio, noted that the loss of the NEA contract was a blessing in disguise because it freed Margaret to sign a contract with *Life* less than a month later.²⁰

The 20 August letter is a good example of Bourke-White’s poise under pressure and successful balancing of the diverse parts of her life. In the midst of losing the NEA contract, she maintained her professional aplomb and her sense of humor. She wrote that she was developing the Southern photos and asked that Caldwell confirm dates when they might meet to coordinate the photos with his notes. She closes with a playful allusion to “a certain delayed reaction exposure which shows a writer and a photographer very obviously not preparing to meet their god”. The letter is signed “Kit”, his nickname for her. (8-20-36)

The next letter is postmarked 2 September 1936, and by now the

19. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 149–51.

20. *Ibid.*, 175.



Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell in August 1936.

c. 2 Sept. 1936

Bourke-White Studio
FIVE HUNDRED TWENTY-ONE FIFTH AVENUE
THE PEPPY HOUSE
NEW YORK

Wednesday

Dear Skinning:

That was very high praise,
probably as high praise as you ever give.
I can't tell you how happy it made
me. I read those sentences over a great
many times today. If there are
nine-hundred sentences that you like that well
I consider it a good haul out of a
month's work. I am so happy that you
wrote me so you did.

If you should decide, after you
had seen everything, that we ought to go back
for a while it could probably be arranged.
But I feel as you do, that it is a subject

One of the early letters to Caldwell written on Bourke-White Studio stationery.

“Mr.” on the envelope has been dropped. Bourke-White writes that she is extremely pleased with Caldwell’s “high praise” for the photographs from the Southern trip. “I read those sentences over a great many times today.” And she is open to the possibility of returning

to the South for more pictures, although “it is a subject on which we could spend months and still feel that we had only scratched the surface”. (9-2-36)

Pleased by his compliments on her pictures, she is nevertheless “acutely distressed” about another aspect of his letter, although she hastens to add, “that doesn’t mean that you should stop writing me what you think about it”. Apparently, Caldwell objected to Bourke-White’s signing a contract with *Life*. This is an early manifestation of his tendency to want to “take charge of” her career, a tendency that will cause problems later in their relationship.²¹ She reassures him that there will be “a cancelation [sic] clause in it, or something that keeps me from getting too tied up”. Then she explains the importance of the alternative that *Life* presents to her. Working on advertising jobs, “a photographer’s main means of support”, leaves her “paralyzed”. *Life* magazine presents the opportunity of escaping from advertising work and feeling creative again. “If I’m given new problems to solve, and something that I think is close to reality, it acts on me like rain falling on the grass”. She admits candidly that she is “a little frightened by my recent experience of being fired” and that she might have made a “better bargain”, but she does not think the job as bad as Caldwell thinks. “I think there’s a lot to be said for starting with a new magazine—that’s something that I like.” (9-2-36)

Postmarked the very next day is a five-page letter that not only proves to be an invaluable source for our understanding of Bourke-White’s character and her sense of her profession, but also anticipates the benefits and the drawbacks of a relationship with Erskine Caldwell. Responding to another letter from Erskine that has raised doubts about her decision to join *Life*, she further develops her rationale for taking the job and writes: “I’ve had terrific ups and downs, on getting your letters. And don’t let the fact that what you write may upset me ever stop you from expressing an opinion when you want to. I pay more attention to it than you probably believe.” (9-3-36) One suspects that Caldwell offered more in his letters than just impartial professional advice. Judging from the impassioned correspondence already part of the Bourke-White collection, one can easily imagine his tying her vocational decision to the practicalities of

21. Howard, “Dear Kit, Dear Skinny”, 31, 41-44.

their personal relationship.²² He wanted her to preserve her independence so that there would be more time for their work together—and complementary to that, more time for him to persuade her to marry him.

Bourke-White, however, was able to disconnect her personal relationships from her professional decisions. She firmly draws the conversation away from the personal to the professional: “But I keep coming back to the fact that I want to do this job”. Although she has her own doubts about tying herself to an employer, she distinguishes them from Caldwell’s. “I’m not at all afraid of being kept to the common garden-variety of picture. . . . I believe the assignments will be extremely varied, which I find very stimulating as a photographer.” Of far more concern to her are the political uses to which her photos will be put. “I am much less afraid of the kind of pictures that they’ll send me out to take than I am of the kind of captions they’ll [pen?] under them.” Yet, she notes that that is a problem with all jobs. She had had little control over the uses to which her NEA photos were put and could not object when her advertising photos were used “to prove that when a small child on rollerskates darts in front of a fast moving automobile the car stops miraculously because it is equipped with Goodyear tires”. (9-3-36)

To Caldwell’s argument that she needed to keep the independence that self-employment assured her, Bourke-White answered that self-employment offered only a “theoretical freedom”. She spent two-thirds of her time “making business arrangements” and only one-third engaged in photography. Even then, the opportunities for doing work she liked and then actually seeing it published were rare. Her current arrangement was “destructive”. She did not want to develop as a business woman. “It’s another kind of development I want, and I’ve had conspicuously little time for it.” (9-3-36)

The letter closes by gratefully acknowledging Caldwell’s suggestion that she demand two months a year free (with pay) to pursue her own interests as long as they did not compete with Time, Inc. publications. “I never would have thought of asking for it if you had not suggested it.” (9-3-36) As Goldberg notes, the contract ultimately did include the two-month clause.²³

22. Howard, “Dear Kit, Dear Skinny”, 41.

23. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 175.

The last of the New York letters is undated and written just prior to an assignment in the South to photograph textile mills, a “funny coincidence . . . to be retracing our territory”. The letter shows Bourke-White’s easy sense of humor. She begins by describing herself under a Saks Fifth Avenue hairdryer: “I am seated under one of those great hot helmets that men need have no experience with”—and ends: “I look like an antelope”. By this time, Caldwell and she had met in New York several times to plan their book, and presumably they had carried their personal relationship forward, as well. The tone of the letter suggests a new intimacy to which she is more committed. She affectionately addresses him as “My dear Canoe Carrier”, an unknown allusion, and eagerly looks forward to his “precious letters”. (No date)

The other six letters of the new acquisition were written on the road while Bourke-White was on her first important assignment for *Life*. From this trip came her Fort Peck Dam photo that appeared on the cover of the premier issue of the magazine and her photographs of night life among the relief workers in New Deal, Montana, the boom town that arose from the dam project. According to Goldberg, this was “the first true photographic essay in America”.²⁴ Although these letters do not contain the substance of some of the New York letters, they do give an idea of the hectic, exciting, and often lonely life on the road. They are written from various places in the Pacific Northwest: the Grand Coulee Dam, Spokane and Yakima, Washington; Bonneville and Corvallis, Oregon. They mix reassurances of her love with discussions of her work.

She left New York in late October of 1936. The first letter is postmarked 31 October from Spokane. Writing on stationery with the Davenport Hotel letterhead, she anticipates taking a bus early the next morning for the Grand Coulee Dam. As with the last of the New York letters, there are indications of the deepening intimacy of their relationship. Her use of “darling” and endearments such as “the sweet freckle faced country boy that you are” are more frequent—a long way from the “Mr. Caldwell” of her first letter. (10-31-36)

Another letter, dated simply Sunday, responds to a complaint aired often in their subsequent correspondence: that Caldwell wasn’t get-

24. *Ibid.*, 180.

ting her letters and was consequently beset with anxiety. Most likely they were simply slow in getting all the way across the country and into the backwoods of Maine. Yet, given the fact that these letters were in the possession of Helen Caldwell Cushman, rather than in the hands of Erskine or Margaret, it is possible that they had been intercepted. Perhaps Helen contemplated using them, with the journal entries, as evidence in the divorce proceedings. However it was, Margaret reassured Erskine that she was writing regularly.

She reassures him again in a subsequent letter from Corvallis, Oregon, postmarked 9 November 1936. This time she is feeling pressed both to explain that the paucity of her letters has nothing to do with the quantity of her love and to account for the “coldness” of her letters. “There is only one reason why my letters may sometimes seem cold and that has nothing to do with loving you. You are in my thoughts all the time, and I wait so for your letters.” Although she does not actually specify the “one reason” for her letters’ matter-of-factness, she does imply that her situation was complex. Her telegram to him, for example, had been written in public and sent by “my host”. She could not very well pour all her passion into it. As for the infrequency of her letters, she speculates that air mail in the Northwest must travel by “dog sledge”. (11-9-36)

But this is an interesting letter for more reasons. Her hosts in Corvallis were an old boyfriend, F. A. (Gil) Gilfillan, and his wife,²⁵ an arrangement that might well have made passionate communicating with Caldwell more complicated. Also, the Corvallis letter anticipates later occasions in the correspondence when Bourke-White’s attention to both the professional and personal aspects of her life, as well as her restrained manner, aggravated Caldwell’s sense of loneliness. Occasionally he would urge her to concentrate only on him. At such times, she might devote an entire letter to bolstering him, as she does in the 9 November letter.

The Corvallis letter also reveals that Bourke-White became upset when Caldwell’s demands grew too great. She writes, “I love you smiling, and you frighten me when you’re stern”. (11-9-36) This “sternness” will bother her later in their relationship and one day contribute to their divorce.²⁶ At this point, however, she tries to

25. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White*, 178.

26. Howard, “Dear Kit, Dear Skinny”, 35–36; Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself*, 170–71.

resolve the problem by playing his little Kit and charming back the happy face.

Near the end of her sojourn in the West, her letters express more longing for home and for him. As with her letters from Europe in 1939 and 1940, she became more affectionate and loving the wearier she grew of a long assignment. For example, a letter dated 10 November 1936 from Bonneville, Oregon, states, "I want to get home so badly. I'm tired and I've been away so long and I miss you so terribly." She tells him that she "can't get along without letters" from him and that she is happy to be saving an unread one in her pocket because it makes her feel closer to him. (11-10-36, noon) That night, eating dinner "in a miserable little place", she wrote another letter on the back of counter checks describing his last letter as "darling" and ending with, "Heavens I miss you". (11-10-36, evening)

The newly acquired correspondence ends with this wistful yearning. Although there were other separations during the formative stage of their relationship, few of Bourke-White's letters have been recovered. Caldwell's, pursuing Margaret around the globe, are less rare than hers. Helen, who knew of the affair essentially from its beginning, finally became fed up and divorced Caldwell in 1938. In that same year, he and Bourke-White travelled to Czechoslovakia and then lived together in Darien, Connecticut. They were married in February 1939. It is not until late 1939 and early 1940, when Bourke-White travelled to Europe to cover the outbreak of the war, that we see a sustained correspondence between them.²⁷

Compared with the more than 300 items already in the Bourke-White-Caldwell correspondence, the twelve items of this new acquisition seem relatively few; yet, they provide significant insight into Bourke-White's professional self and into the pair's relationship in its early stages. There is still much of that early correspondence missing—still many letters from Bourke-White that must have been written. In view of the rarity of her extant responses, this newly acquired addition to the George Arents Research Library collection is particularly valuable. It gives glimpses of their lives and indicates some of the patterns that emerged later in their relationship.

As to why Helen Caldwell Cushman and not Margaret Bourke-

27. Howard, "Dear Kit, Dear Skinny", 31-40.

White or Erskine Caldwell had custody of the letters, the answer may never be known. Though it is a possibility that Helen deliberately gathered them to use as evidence for the divorce, it is well to remember that Caldwell, when he left Bourke-White in 1942, left letters and manuscripts behind in the Darien home. Perhaps he did the same when he left Mt. Vernon. Now, many years later, from the heirs of his first marriage come love letters from the woman who would be his second wife. They make an important addition to our knowledge of that extraordinary woman and of the love affair of two American celebrities.